



Photo courtesy of the author

Who gets to tell the story of American History?

A column by Niles Mattier

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“**W**OW, HE HAS WAVES! Is that my teacher?” is a phrase etched into my memory from my first day of teaching. This student, whom we’ll call Jaz for privacy, revealed to me that she had never seen a teacher with waves before. For those of you who might not know what waves are, it is a hairstyle that some men of color with short hair wear in which the curls are brushed down in order to create a ripple-like pattern. I never expected to make an instant connection with a student based on my hairstyle. I had not thought much of my hair that day. I had simply brushed my hair that morning like any other morning—but my outfit? That was “fire,” as the kids would say. I wore slim fitting khaki pants, matte black Chelsea boots, a beaming yellow crew-neck sweater and

underneath, a zebra printed button-down shirt in which the collar and sleeves peeked out in order to add just the right amount of flair. I thought to myself: How had she not noticed my outfit, and just my hair? After getting to know Jaz, I understood that it was not “just my hair.” She had never had a Black man as a teacher before. I had hair like her father, like her uncle, like her brother. They had hair like me.

It’s no secret that Black men make up a microscopic percentage of those employed as classroom teachers. Throughout my K-12 education, I had a total of two. I noticed that there weren’t many teachers that looked like me, talked like me, or that came from the same neighborhood that I called home. However, I did not fully understand why this was the case until

late in high school. At that point in time, conversations surrounding systemic oppression and institutionalized racism began to consume my world. History class became a portal between my past and my present. I began to ask myself questions like: Why had no one told me this history earlier? Had I been lied to this whole time? Why had no one told me the true story of American history? Those pivotal years propelled me into a new world. I began to think like a historian. I became a historian.

At Syracuse University, I often sat in Education courses where I was the only Black man in the room. While others were just being introduced to the inequities that plagued our education systems and the country as a whole, I had lived through them. Throughout my time as an undergrad, a common question that was asked of me was “What is your ‘why,’ or why do you want to be a teacher?” I didn’t get this feeling of wanting to be a teacher, but instead a feeling that I needed to be one.

Many people might say that as a U.S. History teacher, you have two options: teach history how it’s always been taught, from a perspective which reinforces White supremacy, upholds the patriarchy and teaches students to participate in maintaining these systems. Or you can expose students to the true history and give them tools to be agents of change who will dismantle these systems. For me, there is no option. As a History teacher, I frame my class with three essential questions: Whose perspective is valued and whose is overlooked? Who has power, and what factors led to that? Who gets to tell the story of American history? I often have people tell me that 5th graders are too young to grapple with this, too young to

talk about race, and too young to understand concepts surrounding power and privilege. I could not disagree with this more. How could someone be too young to talk about their own lived experiences? Kids who are “too young” become adults who claim they are “too busy” and that it’s “too painful.”

We need people in the classrooms who are going to tell the story of American history in new ways, ways in which the perspectives that are too often silenced are finally the loudest in the room. All too often, the people whose perspectives are at the forefront are those which were recorded, while the stories of those whose perspectives are not valued are often intentionally destroyed or never had the chance to be written. I write for this purpose. I write to leave my legacy. I write to ensure my voice and perspective is heard. In an article that I wrote for *Man Repeller* (now named *Repeller*) entitled “[How I am Teaching A New Way of Looking at U.S. History](#),” I explain how I am changing the way we should approach history education. If we continue to do things the way we always have, then change will not occur. We must actively disrupt, dismantle, and destroy. Additionally, in my role as a content writer for PBS Education, I create a curriculum that is free for teachers anywhere to use. I’ve always been told to wait for new resources to come out, wait for new books to be written, wait for those in positions of power to change. Our students can’t wait, and I won’t wait for someone to write my history for me. The revolution is now. Who gets to tell the story of American history? I do.