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Examining Race in America: Moving Ahead

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Examining Race in America: Moving Ahead



Social Work Professor [Phyllis West](#) is passionate about healing. She has devoted her life's work to addressing the needs of the mind, body, and spirit, from a social work and public health lens.

As a young Peace Corps volunteer in West Africa, West saw the holistic impact of service on her life and that of others. At Governors State University, West continues to create spaces of wellness and service learning that go beyond the classroom. From Nicaragua to the South Side of Chicago, and throughout the metro area, West and her students work side-by-side with people of different races and backgrounds to build bridges of humanity.

These bridges include a wide-eyed walk through history, which helps explain an assault on Black people that began with the trans-Atlantic slave trade but did not end with their freedom - some of 3.9 million slaves released from one form of bondage and now entrappe by another.

"Historians trace the concept of race back to the 18th century when Europeans claimed that people with darker skin tones were not the intellectual equal to people with lighter skin tones— in fact, they were not even full humans," West said.

The practice can be seen down through the centuries as enslaved Blacks were brutalized into submission and used for free labor. These horrors continued in different forms after the abolition of slavery, as Blacks were beaten and lynched in the South as a matter of routine. Nearly 6,500 Blacks were lynched between 1865-1950, according to a 2020 Equal Justice Initiative report.

Though laws were passed granting equal rights to Blacks, hate crimes and police brutality against African Americans have persisted. In early 2020, three such instances garnered national attention.

On Feb. 23, there was the shooting death of Ahmaud Arbery. The 25-year-old Black man was unarmed when he was fatally shot while jogging in rural Georgia. Arbery's killing, by three white men, followed by a delayed investigation, and the seemingly reluctant arrests of known suspects, fueled debates about racial inequality in the United States.

Days later, on March 13, Breonna Taylor was shot and killed by Louisville police officers during a botched raid on her apartment. One police officer, Brett Hankison, was later fired for "wantonly and blindly" firing his weapon, according to his termination letter. He was charged by a grand jury in September with first-degree wanton endangerment, but not for Taylor's death. The former officer entered a plea of not guilty to the Class D felony.

In May, after a white Minneapolis police officer knelt on the neck of George Floyd and killed him, the public response was visceral. Floyd was handcuffed and face down on a busy street, as cameras recorded the last moments of his life. The images of Floyd's death ignited rage that was felt around the world. Hundreds of thousands took to the streets all over the globe in racial justice protests that lasted through the summer. The unrest continued through a national election cycle fraught with racial tension.

Again, West points to history and embraces the lessons of African American ancestors to move forward in faith.

Click [here](#) to watch Dr. Phyllis West's interpretation of Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise."

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