

CELEBRATING BLACK HISTORY MONTH



Dr. Yvette C. Cozier is a Boston native and an investigator on the Black Women's Health Study (BWHS) and the BWHS Sarcoidosis Study at the Slone Epidemiology Center. Her research interests include social and genetic determinants of health in African-American women — specifically the influence of psychosocial stressors (racism, neighborhood socioeconomic status) and genetics in the development of cancer, cardiometabolic, and immune-mediated diseases (sarcoidosis, lupus). Additional research interests include oral health, and the role religion/spirituality — particularly the

Black church — plays in health promotion/disease prevention in the Black community. Below are her reflections on Black History Month.

What does Black History Month mean to you?

Growing up, it was not a formalized month, but there were days of recognition of the Black community. (Black History Month became a national observance in 1986.) In high school, through the METCO program, there was something like Black Awareness Day. We didn't go to school that day, instead, they took us to a summit, where we spent the day doing enrichment activities and met students from the other METCO communities.

As we come together now, it hasn't been lost on my people that Black History Month is in the shortest month of the year. But it's certainly come a long way. It would be nicer if it were more than a month and fully integrated into U.S. history. Still, it's a month for people who don't identify as African American or Black to learn about a piece of American history. We still have a long way to go.

How has Black history influenced your professional life?

They say we stand on the shoulders of the people who came before us. The shoulders of those people for my generation were in the 50s. These individuals are more than historical figures; they are the lived experiences of American history in Black skin. They pushed for excellence and were role models.

When I trained as a medical technologist, my entry to that was through the first and only Black-owned and directed clinical laboratory, Roxbury Medical Lab. The director, Horace Shearer, would host students and professionals from other countries — such as African and Haitian immigrants who had medical degrees but were not immediately able to practice. I remember it as a workplace that was multiracial but predominantly Black, and it was quite international, with voices from everywhere. I think back to those years and all the people I met who were professionals but needed a second chance. This was something that Horace Shearer provided.

Black history is not just a month. The giants in that area are not just the ones who have a statue, or an arena named after them. It is individuals who provided a ladder to opportunity and excellence. I spoke to Horace a few weeks before he passed away, and he said he was the greatest recipient of segregation. Then I asked, "What are you talking about?" And he replied, "Segregation gave me all of those wonderful people that I got to work with. Because of the opportunities that they, unfortunately, did not have to get into places despite their training, I got to work with the greatest minds. I was able to build this space." He really looked at it as one of those unintended gifts.

What are unique ways Black women have contributed to Black History?

They are black history. We look towards the men, but it was the women taking the minutes, balancing the books of organizations, getting arrested, and collecting bail money; they were the backbone. We can't ignore that the Civil Rights Movement was a patriarchal system despite its goals to bring equality by race and class. Gender was still a big issue, as was sexual identity. Those were the sheroes. They really were the ones willing to get out there and march, knowing they would be beaten alongside the men and be at risk for sexual assault in some cases. They sat at lunch counters, took the abuse, and marched.

Like my grandmother, some of these women were educated, but still, she cleaned houses even with a master's degree because she needed to take care of her family. I don't know how many people today would have that humility in the face of injustice. Even though she became a teacher for Boston Public Schools, she never lost that feeling that it could all still go away. So, she continued cleaning houses for clients; some of them never even knew how educated and skilled she was in other areas. The women are the unsung sheroes. Without them, the movement would not have been as successful.

I heard an interview with one of the designers of the Embrace statue. Much of what they liked about the statue was how it brought Coretta into the conversation. Martin Luther King Jr. died when I was about six years old. So, I have just this minor memory of him. Coretta stayed in our vision for so much longer. For many, she was the actual face of the King legend, but we still reduce her to just being the spouse. If you look at all that has developed since his death, it happened with her leadership. Women carried the legacy and took it to a new level.

WATCH



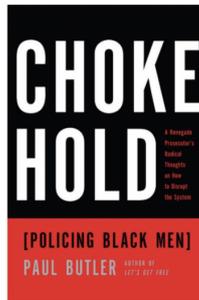
Descendant

"Descendant" is a documentary about the enslaved Africans on an illegal ship that arrived in Alabama in 1860 seek justice and healing when the craft's remains are discovered. [Watch it on Netflix.](#)

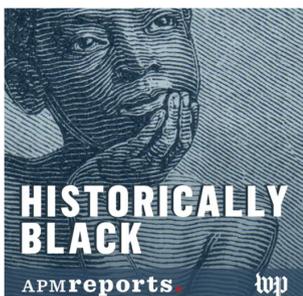
READ

Chokehold: Policing Black Men

Cops, politicians, and ordinary people are afraid of black men. The result is the Chokehold: laws and practices that treat every African American man like a thug. In this explosive new book, an African American former federal prosecutor shows that the system is working exactly the way it's supposed to. Black men are always under watch, and police violence is widespread—all with the support of judges and politicians. [Purchase the book here.](#)



LISTEN



Historically Black

As part of The Washington Post's coverage of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, people submitted dozens of objects that make up their lived experiences of black history, creating a "people's museum" of personal objects, family photos and more. The Historically Black podcast brings those objects and their stories to life through interviews, archival sound and music.