

[JHU Press](#) | [Blog](#)

[← The book as object
and edification](#)[Celebrating Black History Month](#)

BY CLAIRETAMBO | FEBRUARY 15, 2012 · 8:00 AM

[↓ Jump to Comments](#)

Writing about race, leadership, and African American history

Guest post by Marybeth Gasman

I grew up in a large Michigan farm family with a racist father. He used the “N-word” daily, often calling all of the children the word when he chastised us. I didn’t know what the word meant but I knew it was bad. My father constantly told us that Blacks were lazy and ignorant people who were not as good as us. I remember him telling me that Martin Luther King Jr. was a terrorist. The irony of my father’s hatred of Blacks and his racist attitudes is that he never met an African American in his entire life.

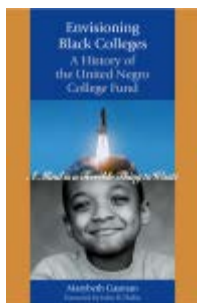
In my hometown, the schoolteachers weren’t much better. At my grade school, the teachers sponsored a slave auction. They encouraged us to buy and sell other children. In my high school, the social studies teacher told us about slavery, using pictures of happy slaves. He never once mentioned the horrors of slavery.

Telling complex stories of Black achievements is essential to moving the country forward in its understanding of African American history.

"The Author" seems intrigued.
[twitter.com/CALSPennState/...](https://twitter.com/CALSPennState/)

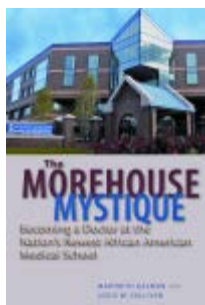
My experiences of racism at home and in school directly conflicted with my sense of right and wrong. When I arrived at college—away from my father and hometown schools—I started asking questions about race. I had always wondered how people who had never met African Americans could hate them. It didn't make sense. I remember asking my father why he hated Blacks, and, after much prodding, he told me that they were responsible for his failures in life. My father's answer sent me on a search for my own answers.

In my search, I discovered that most of the stories about African Americans that I encountered in classes and books were negative. Yes, Blacks suffered during slavery and Jim Crow, but they were also instrumental in shaping their own lives through their actions and activism. I wondered why these stories were often ignored in schools, colleges, and every day life.



My research and writing has focused on African American leadership. In my three books with the [JHU Press](#), I focus on issues of race and leadership. [Envisioning Black Colleges](#) explores how presidents of historically Black colleges and universities contributed to the funding of these institutions. I examine their ability to navigate the treacherous

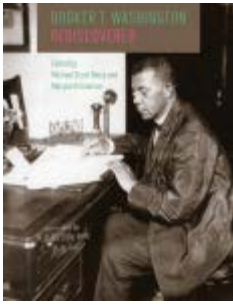
waters of White philanthropy while trying to support, and save, their own institutions. In [The Morehouse Mystique](#), I tell the story, with



the help of Louis W. Sullivan, of African American doctors who saw a need for diversity in the medical profession and created a new medical school dedicated to serving racial and ethnic minorities in urban and rural areas. And in the third book, [Booker T. Washington Rediscovered](#), Michael Scott Bieze and I present an entirely new,

multidimensional picture of a well-known African American leader who is often maligned, misunderstood, and only juxtaposed with W.E.B. Du Bois rather than considered on his own.

These contributions, as well as my other books and articles, consider the complexities of race in America, including the role of African Americans as actors in their own destiny. In the current political and racial climate of the United States, telling complex stories of Black achievements is



essential to moving the country forward in its understanding of African American history.

Before my father passed away, he befriended an African American man. Through this one friendship, and the knowledge that his daughter brought to him despite his protests, he changed. Perhaps others can change as well.

[*Marybeth Gasman*](#) is a professor of higher education at the University of Pennsylvania.

(The views expressed in this guest post belong to the author and in no way reflect the official opinion of the Johns Hopkins University Press.)