

The Telling of Black Stories

“Criticism of writers by readers, of government by those governed, of leaders by those led, - this is the soul of democracy and the safeguard of modern society. (Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Soul of Black Folk*).

Dr. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, the brilliant scion of Berkshire County and global intellectual giant implored us to understand in our bones that the soul and true essence of modern society is maintained through constant reflection on the shortcomings in all areas of our public life.

In alignment with Dr. Du Bois's wisdom, the following letter is an open critique against the telling of Black stories by non-Black individuals, in particular, a recent effort to pay homage to Elizabeth Freeman. Please note, the intention of this letter is not to besmirch the individuals involved in the project, but rather to shed light on problematic processes in the hope that they will not be repeated in the future.

On Saturday, January 29th, the Berkshire Eagle printed a column entitled “The woman at the center of a historic fight for freedom” which attempts to tell the story of Elizabeth Freeman, a Black woman who in suing for and winning her freedom in 1781 provided the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court with the precedent to abolish slavery. What we find in the article is the centering of whiteness in the telling of Black history. This article also references a statue project attempting to honor Elizabeth Freeman’s legacy, which in our experience suffers from the same centering of whiteness.

Every individual chosen for quotes in this article is a white voice. The only quote from Elizabeth Freeman is a two-word response to an action that a white person took against her. She is lauded as a good and obedient slave which misses the truth that obedience for her was not a choice, it was survival. The caption beneath the rendering of the statue uses a name that Elizabeth Freeman disowned when free. Concluding the article is a remark from a white elected official referring to Elizabeth Freeman as a slave, a dehumanizing label. Slavery is a condition forced upon a person, either in life or, as in this case, in death. We would be wise to learn from the folly of our ancestors and not repeat their mistakes even if only symbolically.

And the voices of the Black community are not just left out in the article mentioned above. This same elected official also began spearheading the project “celebrating” Elizabeth Freeman before connecting with Black community members. The following decisions were made surrounding the project before members of our branch's Executive Committee were brought in: to pursue a statue as the best possible way to honor Elizabeth Freeman, to choose a white sculptor instead of a Black sculptor, the statue’s location, and the celebratory events of the unveiling.

While certain members of our branch's Executive Committee were able to advocate for changes surrounding the statue, we did not have self-determination. The isolation of advisory committee members from one another made the inclusion feel performative and for the sole benefit of the organizer.

Currently, we are faced with a choice; either refuse to participate while the project moves on, amalgamating resources; or, as Elizabeth Freeman so often had to, continue to engage in a quietly disruptive way to minimize the potential harm. With our continued involvement, we aim to disrupt the problematic process that has taken place and we ask the community not to repeat this behavior.

To the white community members of Berkshire County, particularly those in leadership, when a Black community member has the grace enough to offer honest feedback - *heed it*. Honor this feedback by positioning your opinions as secondary to the advancement of Black Berkshire County citizens.

To the various local institutions asked to contribute to these efforts; grant-makers, lenders, public funders, and various organizations - we ask you to look deeper into these projects. Apprise yourself of all collaborators, as well as their roles and intentions before committing your support. Have the wherewithal to ask - *how might Elizabeth Freeman want her story to be told?*

As described above, the centering of whiteness in the telling of Black stories is a local example of a global problem. Today's citizens of Berkshire County are contributors to the history and legacy of Elizabeth Freeman, Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and so many other influential local Black leaders.

While these individuals are inspiring examples of liberatory leaders, we must not forget the others. Every single Black person in Berkshire County that suffered the trauma and horror of enslavement, whether the historical records speak of them or not, is to be revered, deemed worthy, and wholly honored. And to honor them, we must do better at embracing the current Black community. An embrace that should not only occur to support your passion projects but must be a steadfast recognition of, and commitment to, dismantling the pervasive oppression and harm that still exists today.

Going forward, projects or programs involving Black stories need Black voices before conception. Centering and amplifying Black voices will ensure that these efforts inspire pride and self-determination. In short, nothing about us, without us.

The Executive Committee of the Berkshire Branch of the NAACP
February, 7th, 2022.

