

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host Allison Tyra and today I'm joined by historian and community impact strategist, Dr. Ramona Houston, who specializes in African-American and Mexican-American histories. So why don't we start with what are the barriers that you see in trying to tell these stories, whether it's research or getting them into the public eye?

RH: One of the biggest challenges in getting African-American and Latina history out there into the public is the lack of African-American and Latina historians. As you know, people write history. And in order for more history to be written, we need more African-American and Latina historians. But also, we need the wider group of historians to incorporate African-American women and Latina women in their histories. We're always present, but we may not always be present in the stories. And so those are the challenges is education and the lack of awareness and interest in including our stories in historical narratives.

AT: I think one of the things that we're seeing is hopefully a decrease in the empathy gap, where people have difficulty understanding and caring about stories that don't reflect their own. And so when we're talking about people like me who are white, but who still say, "yes, these are interesting stories." And it's weird that there are none of these stories in our textbooks. But the irony is that the way that you reduce the empathy gap is by telling those stories and consuming those stories. So hearing about them, whether it's in a history classroom or an Oscar-winning movie, that's how we close the empathy gap. But it's a catch-22, where if the decision-makers aren't interested in those kinds of stories, and they assume that other people aren't interested in those kinds of stories and prioritizing those narratives, then a lot of times those stories don't get made and they don't get included.

RH: Yes, you're totally correct. The lack of empathy, lack of interest, but I would also say it's ignorance too, in that a lot when you read history, when you study history, from the Eurocentric perspective, history has to be written in order for it to be valid. And in the African-American and Latina/Latino tradition, oral histories are very important to the preservation of our history and culture. And so, because the documentation is not always in the archives, the way it is preserved in certain libraries, then of course, we don't have those histories written. And we don't have the empathy because people don't know those stories. That's what I mean by the ignorance. And so, what we really have to do is have a lot more people who value oral history. I'm from a small town called Brownwood, Texas, and I had some historians, local historians, and they were lay historians, reach out to me because someone in the community, I believe it was my aunt, told them I was a historian. And so, they contacted me because they wanted some more details about African-American history in Brownwood. And I explained to them that I was not a Brownwood historian. I was a Texas historian, yes, that looked at Texas history, but not specifically in Brownwood. But I did know the history because I was fortunate enough to have some great-great-aunts who lived to be very old and they would tell us these stories, right? They were inquiring about one of the landowners that they knew was a member of my family. And this was maybe six generations back and I was very familiar with his story. And so, they were saying he was a slave from somewhere. And I was like, "no, he wasn't a slave. He was a cowboy from West Texas. And this is how he came to Brownwood," blah, blah, blah, blah. And so, about three weeks later, one of them calls, "oh my gosh, oh my gosh, you were right. We found it in the library." And so, the point is, is because it was oral history, it was like, "okay, maybe it might not be correct." And then they found out and validated it another way. So I say that to say that we have to look, when we talk about empathy and inclusion of these stories of African-American women and Latino women, that we really, really have to look at other ways that communities preserve their histories.

AT: I always find it fascinating when people try to degrade oral history compared to written history, because it's a very privileged divide, because we're talking about who was literate, who had the time and education to write things down. And more importantly, what was saved, like how many of these women's papers, if they did have

a diary or letters, how many of them were just thrown out, because they were women, particularly women of color, and therefore their papers don't matter. So, when I hear stories like, the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to acknowledge Sybil Ludington's story as true. So, this was a girl who did a night-time ride during the American Revolution. She went farther than Paul Revere. She was only a teenager at the time, and she didn't fail. Paul Revere failed, but he still got a poem about himself. But anyway, so her family, though, kept this story about her alive, and even the Daughters of the American Revolution that you would think would be celebrating a female Revolutionary War heroine were like, "no, there's not enough proof to back it up, it's just a family story." And what really gets me about that is, yes, oral traditions might evolve over time, they might not be perfectly historically accurate, there might be personal biases at play, but you can say the same thing about written sources. Like the Viking sagas that we have were actually written hundreds of years after the events in question. They were shaped by the Christian views at the time, like every source has biases. And a lot of them are not contemporaneous to the periods that they're talking about. So guess what? Those written sources were probably based on oral histories in the first place. So this is one of the things that just bugs the crap out of me, especially because when we're talking about African-American and Latina women and other groups of women, to be sure, but particularly women of color, historical documentation often just isn't there. And it feels like people are using that as an excuse for why we can't tell their stories, because we don't have enough documentation.

RH: You're so right. I mean, look at the laws that existed that actually are still very recent when you look at it. And who was allowed the opportunity to read and write in terms of American history? African-Americans didn't have the right to learn how to read and write as enslaved people. So what we know about the institution of slavery, most of what we know, is written by slaveholders or white people of that time. When you look at the number of autobiographies that we have, which are still filtered, right, because they were not the publishers of those autobiographies, there's only like a few that exist in 400 years of the institution of slavery in the United States. And when you look at the experiences of women, women were not allowed to go to college and pursue education in a lot of communities. And so you're so right about that, is because learning was prohibited among women and people of color, that that really influenced how much documentation could exist in our community. But there's always been the effort to preserve our own histories, but in very different and unique ways.

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AT: And when we're talking about how stories get framed, even when they're ostensibly in the women's own words. So this is something that came up recently in a conversation that I was having with Alison Parker about Mary Church Terrell, who was highly educated. She was the daughter of a millionaire, like one of the first African-American millionaires in the US. And so she obviously had all of these privileges. She wrote extensively about herself and her views and all that, including an autobiography. But we were talking about how Terrell would have known the audiences that she was writing for. And she definitely would have self-censored

because she is trying to persuade. She's on some level, I assume, trying to sell books. But again, when we're getting into all of these factors that impact how a person's story is told, and then that's exacerbated when you are not the one telling your own story. So when I talked with Carrie Gibson for another episode, we were discussing how formerly enslaved women's stories were shaped by white abolitionist women who were, not in a malicious way, necessarily, but they were using these Black women's stories for their own ends. And so again, when we're talking about prioritizing written sources, everything has biases. And I feel like we don't spend enough time critically unpacking the biases that different people had at play. Like if a guy says, "oh, this woman was evil." It's like, well, was she evil or was she just ambitious? Was she just smarter than you? Was she just, any number of things? Like, was she actually promiscuous or are you just projecting

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your own horniness onto her? Like there's all of these things that a lot of historians seem willing to just take for granted. They take it at face value without considering the biases that are at play.

RH: Again, I totally agree with you that all of us, even those of us who try to stay objective, we still have our biases. And there are biases in the historical record. There are biases in the way we interpret those records. When you look at the histories of African-Americans in particular, there is always this consciousness of what stories will be told and what will not. One of the interesting experiences I had in undergrad with one of my history teachers, he had us reading the WPA narratives, which were conducted during the 1930s, where FDR was wanting to preserve the histories of enslaved people for those who were living at that time. And so anyway, our teacher had us to go and read those narratives. And we came back and gave our report or whatever. And he was disappointed in us because we didn't pull out what you were just saying, the biases, that we didn't pull out what they were saying and what they were not saying because of who they were talking to. Because these are formerly enslaved people talking to white people who were conducting the interviews, could they really say everything that they experienced? Could they really talk about slavery in a way that their interviewers could receive it? So you're so correct that there are these biases in the way we tell our history and the way history is interpreted. But I would say even more so the way history is interpreted, you've also heard how history is written in the voice of the victor, so we all have to be cognizant of that.

AT: That's funny that you mentioned the voice of the victor because one of my pet peeves, which I'm sure if somebody is listening to this on a regular basis, they might be sick of me mentioning the Sojourner Truth "Ain't I a Woman" speech, where we have a woman who only spoke Dutch until she was like 9. English is not even her first language. She grew up in New York. But we have two versions of this speech. So there's the real version, which was published right after she gave the speech and which she approved and was published in a newspaper. And then we have the "Ain't I a Woman" version, which a white abolitionist woman basically rewrote her speech to give it this, like, southern, like, what she thought an enslaved person should sound like, patois to make her sound, like, less educated and therefore, I don't know, more relatable to white people? I don't know what Frances Dana Barker Gage's thinking was here, but you can actually look at the two of them side by side and it's just so ridiculous. But Frances Dana Barker Gage's version is the reason we now call it "Ain't I a Woman." Hers was the version that got saved. And I mean, thank goodness we do have the original one because it was published. But, you know, I would hope that there were people at the time who had been at the speech years earlier looking at this version and saying, "ma'am, what were *you* smoking at that event?" But hers was the one that was, I guess, prioritized or given more value and more weight.

RH: That's kind of the current struggle, the contemporary struggle, when you look at the image of Black people and you see what is promoted in media and how white people think African-Americans talk, how they think we live, how they think our relationships are. And it's nothing compared to what is put on mass media. You would assume that most Black men are criminal. You would assume that they're absentee fathers, that they are exploitive to their spouses and significant other, that sex is the top of mind, an exploitive type of sex. So it's these ideas about, that white people have in their mind about who we are. And I would say that, with that whole speech is, "hey, this is not how you really talk. *This* is how you really talk. This is not how you think. This is really how you think." And so I think if we can compare it to contemporary challenges that African-Americans and Latinos for that matter face, we can see that there's this continual projection of what white people think we are compared to who we are in reality.

AT: Yeah. So there's a movie that came out in the last couple of years called *American Fiction*. And it's about this Black academic who writes these really highly intellectual books that don't sell because, that's a tough market if you're trying to write a bestseller. And he, as a joke slash out of frustration, writes this fake thug life narrative where it's incredibly, like, uneducated and has all of the negative biases. Like when you see Black men portrayed as being misogynistic and fill in the other bigotries here. And so he just slams this out very

quickly and he sends it off to his editor as a joke between the two of them. Because, of course, he would never write this. This is in no way reflective of his quite privileged life. And the agent or someone at his company actually sends it off and a bidding war starts among publishers for this “amazing new voice.” But there's another author in the movie as well who he has previously mocked, not publicly necessarily, but who he has looked down upon because she is also a highly educated Black woman who has written, not pretending to be the character, not pretending this is an actual autobiography situation. But he's been mad at her for feeding into exactly that kind of narrative. But then because of the way that he's written it, he has to pretend to be this, like, thug character and it just devolves into insanity from there. Jeffrey Wright is amazing and I love him. But it is very much playing on exactly what we're talking about is this idea, this perception from a more privileged group of “this is what everyone in your group sounds like.” And this is actually another thing that's come up from a historical standpoint where we've talked before on the podcast about how so much historical media looks like *Friends*, where there's no Black people in New York, there's no Latinas or Latinos in freaking New York City. But in the context of we often do not see the elite of color, the people who were, like Mary Church Terrell's dad, he was a freaking millionaire. He was, I believe, formerly enslaved, but by the time she's an adult and everything, they are part of this emerging elite that we just sort of gloss over, like everyone was a slave at that time and that was the only narrative for Black people and we're just completely ignoring and not even, like, you know, Haitian slaves who were rising up and rebelling and overthrowing the French. But, like, all of these narratives that don't fit into that neat little box are particularly prone to getting erased.

RH: And that's the challenge of telling our history is that we are, and we continue to say that, we are not a monolithic community, right? And so that's why it's so important to talk about the range of the historical experiences that women face. Yes, we do have the highly educated, highly sophisticated, wealthy group of women. We also have women who are very much involved in their communities, in the uplift of their communities. However, their names are not synonymous with the men who also do that work. And so in our efforts to preserve this history, we have to consider this big range. When we look at, for example, I always try to relate history to what's going on today, right? And so it's so funny when President Obama was elected, lot of white people who would talk to me, some of my colleagues, even who would talk in public in their writings or speeches or whatever, they were just saying how these were such unique people, where did they come from? The Obamas as a couple, as a family, you know, who are they? Blah, blah, blah. They're so articulate, this and that. And that was said. And so it's so funny. I just happened to be on a campus in Texas. And one of my colleagues that the people were talking about, we were like, “what are you talking about? These people exist.” I said, “I'm from a small town. And we had people who, who fit that, that mode, highly educated, very smart, the influencers, this and that.” And so because we have this idea of who women are, who Black people are, who Latinos are, it seems weird when we see an image that is not of that same stereotype. And that's the value of history, is being able to say how many different groups of people have contributed to the development of the United States. And it's not just one group.

AT: Yeah, I had to stop myself from groaning when you said “articulate.” Ugh. But one of the things that I think we're touching on here is code switching. And I would argue that all of us code switch because all of us change how we speak depending on who we're speaking to and what the connotation is, like, what is the context of that conversation? But particularly with African-American Vernacular English, there is this framing that you are less educated. And the implication is you are less intelligent, neither of which is necessarily true. But again, because of how media has framed how we see different kinds of people, the idea that you can be just as intelligent and just as educated or more so than anyone else in the room, while also speaking in a way that perhaps comes more naturally to you, but also not all Black people talk like that. And that's how we get a dog whistle of, “oh, you're so articulate.” So one of the things that has come up in this conversation, at least on my part, is that I keep referring to African-American history, when we're meant to be talking about African-American *and* Latina history. And even within something like racism and sexism, there are always those tiers of

people who are more marginalized, less marginalized. And in this instance, I feel like Latina history is even more sidelined. Not that it's a competition, not that we're trying to pit anyone against each other, but I feel like we should acknowledge that sort of stratification. And I know when we chatted before, not on mic, you were mentioning that part of the issue here is that Latinas do not have an equivalent for Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

RH: Yes. So Historically Black Colleges and Universities, also called HBCUs, were founded as a result of the ending of the institution of slavery. And so a lot of different abolitionist groups, churches, organizations, people within the African-American community formed institutions in order to educate the formerly enslaved. And there are a little over 100, maybe 107 still in operation. So anyway, these institutions have been charged with educating African-Americans and have produced generations of educated people in the community. And what's different is that these institutions, of course understanding that they were founded in the late 19th century, most of them are over 100 years old, with the last one being formed in the 1940s. Texas Southern University was founded to keep Black people from going to the University of Texas Law School. They founded a whole other school in Texas in Houston. So those institutions have existed 100-plus years, whereas there is no equivalent in the Latino community, even though we have a designation called in the US Department of Education called Hispanic-Serving Institutions. The way you become a Hispanic-Serving Institution is by having a certain amount of the population of your student body being Latino, which is, I believe is 25%.

So unlike HBCUs, who have offered degrees from BA to terminal degrees for generations, you have produced a number of scholars who have studied and written about the African-American experience, whereas the beginnings really of the documentation of, for the most part, even though there are few that existed before the Civil Rights Movement, most of them happened as a result of the Civil Rights Movement, where you have the founding of centers and different places and different institutions that were particularly focused on the study of Latino history. So it's a recent phenomenon. And so that is one of the reasons that it's not the same, that you have this long history of historic, when I say not the same, the preservation of the history in terms of books written by scholars, is because there's a longer history of African-American scholars preserving that history than it is of Latino scholars. We know that despite these ideas about the othering of different groups, there's always a different experience in terms of whatever the situation is in the United States for people of color. And so we often use the term "American" to refer to white people when all of us are American. We may be different shades of America, but we're all American. And so we need to stop using the term that these Americans and everybody else are the other. In the preservation of Latino history, and particularly Latinas, there is one project that I'm familiar with called *The First 100: Chicanas Changing History*, and it's led by Dr. Lorena Chambers. And what is really valuable about this particular project, *The First 100*, is that it's telling the stories of the development of the study of Latinas over the last 50 years. So it's highlighting the stories, it's highlighting the historians who write this history. I think right now there is just a little over 100 Latinas who are historians. And so she's documenting this. And when you look at 100, a little over 100, that's very few compared to the number of historians that we have in the United States. And so it's very important to understand how women are changing the way history is written, how history is told, and how having the presence of African-American and Latina women in the history profession has changed the understanding of history.

AT: So fortunately we are seeing some change, not as quickly as we might like, but who are some of the pioneering historians and people who are working today that are helping to change this?

RH: Yes, Vicki Ruiz is one of the historians that stand out. Emma Perez, Deena Gonzalez, they're pioneers. They're the ones who have created spaces that have produced other Chicana historians and other women historians. And so they stand out as mentors, advisors, and people who have really paved the way.

AT: So something I think we're touching on here is, as you mentioned, there's a big difference between an

HBCU that is, I don't know the statistics, but let's say 80, 90% African-American versus a Hispanic-Serving university where it's around 25%. That's a big difference in terms of, not to be trite, but you can't be what you can't see. And I feel like when you're talking about making these spaces for other people, we're also getting into the importance of, in academia, who is mentoring the students, who are the PhD advisors, who are the professors at the front of the lecture hall, and what are their biases and what are they encouraging and who do they think is worth their time. And so I would imagine that just being able to see someone who looks like you in those positions of power and in those very influential positions of guiding students is very powerful, but also very limited, not very common, in academia today.

RH: I totally agree with you on that as well. And I think it's unfair to really compare HBCUs and HSIs because HBCUs have a tradition of having African-American professors, although it is a very diverse faculty and has always been, since the founding of these institutions. The majority of the faculty are African-American and very much in a position to encourage students to be what they can see, as your point, because they see these professors in front of them who expose them to opportunities and to people who are already in the profession that they desire to be. Whereas at HSIs, they're predominantly white institutions with predominantly white faculty. So you are correct in the fact that it does change the experience of the student when they're able to see and be taught by people who look like them. But I would say this, that you don't have to look like somebody to be a great teacher. There are teachers and professors who can inspire and bring out the best in students who are not necessarily from their same ethnicity, culture, background experience. However, I would say this, that there is a different level of expectation among professors who come from the same background, particularly in the African-American experience. And what I mean by that is, students perform to the level of expectation. I've always said that. And Black teachers, Black professors have a different level of expectation, which is the level of expectation of excellence. Whereas many white professors and teachers have this stereotypical idea of the potential of students of color. And so that makes a difference in the level of performance because students are not always expected to perform at high levels in some environments.

AT: Something else that I think we're sort of hinting at here is when these students hopefully progress and if that's their choice, go into academia, whether or not there is a place for them, whether a place has been allowed for them to occupy, and what are the added nonsense issues that they're going to have to deal with? Because if you're an African-American academic seeking a job at an HBCU, hopefully there is less racism that you would have to deal with than if you were one of these very, very few Latina historians trying to get a job in academia in predominantly white institutions.

RH: I don't want to make it seem like HBCUs are perfect for Black people. There are still other -isms that exist on the campus that people have to deal with. And so yes, you may not have to deal with racism on an HBCU campus, but there may be other types of challenges you may experience. So as we said earlier, everybody has, in every situation, has their own biases. So although they're not perfect, yes, at majority white institutions, people do have challenges getting opportunities, whether they be female, whether they be people of color, or young and inexperienced. There are all these challenges. You're too young, you're too this, you're too that. So I wouldn't say that there aren't challenges at HBCUs, but that there are definitely challenges with racism at other institutions and stereotyping people of what they think they're able to accomplish as a professor.

AT: I'm just thinking about all of the extra work that people have to do when you're coming in already being underestimated and undervalued. Another factor that is playing into this disparity is rurality. So how we don't focus as much on the histories of small towns and rural areas because we don't consider them as important as what's happening in the big cities. So how is that playing into this disparity in whose stories are getting told?

RH: Yes. So being from a rural area and having that experience, it is true that rural areas are not included so

much in histories. And it's probably a whole bunch of reasons. Our archives are in small local communities if we have libraries in those communities, right? And the archives that people usually visit are in urban areas and do they have those materials? What are the questions we're asking as historians about the experiences of women in rural areas? How is that relevant to whatever we're studying? So I think people have to really consider how the rural experience influences everything else before we can really really pique our interest on studying the rural experience. In my town, one of the things that we brag about is, Brownwood desegregated in 1955, which was a big deal which was a big deal because the Brown decision was in 1954. And they brag about it. But one of the things that is not told is why that happened. But in the African-American community, the oral history tells us why. And it was because of these influential Black men that were in different places in the community at different jobs, from my understanding, from what was told to me. Such as Mr. Hardy Reed, the husband of Rosetta Reed, worked for somebody, some person, Mr. Bocknite was the janitor at a church, and Mr. Chandler was somewhere. And these people were talking to the influential white men of Brownwood who made this decision. So how does that change the history when you know the influence of these influential Black men in the community and how they shaped the desegregation of this town? That changes the narrative, right? And I don't know what Brownwood puts out there about why it desegregated so soon, but that's one of the many places in Texas that desegregated right after the Brown decision and even San Antonio, which was one of the few major cities in the U.S. that desegregated right after the Brown decision, and that was due to State Senator Henry B. González and his influence. And so that changes the narrative when you incorporate these stories into the narrative.

What was interesting with growing up in a small town is there were some couples, I would say, like I mentioned earlier, that we considered very distinguished people. And I had my own heroes, but there's one that really stands out in my mind in the community, and her name was Rosetta Reed. She was the wife of Hardy Reed, and she was a teacher at the all-Black school when Brownwood was segregated. And I just remember how highly my parents' generation, their parents, and how highly everybody thought of her. And they would always say, "she was my teacher at that school," and "she was this and she was that." I think people like her who live in a small town, who have an immense amount of influence and affluence, when we write about women's history, women in small towns sometimes don't, most of the time they just disappear in history and not really be acknowledged by their small town. And I'm sure there are a lot of Mrs. Reeds, Rosetta Reeds, in communities throughout the country. And as historians we need to begin to explore the experiences of women in small towns a lot more in terms of showing how they influence the development of their communities.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.