

00:00

[TAYLOR KING] Hello and thank you for joining us today. Welcome to today's first special Black History month episode of *Unwritten* where expert authors join student hosts for discussions on the most important current events our day. I'm Taylor King, a sophomore at North Carolina A&T, majoring in business administration and a Campus Ambassador for Pearson.

00:22

[MYKEL BROADY] And I'm Mykel Broady, a sophomore at the University of Nevada Reno, double majoring in marketing and management. I'm also a Pearson Campus Ambassador. Now I hope you have a paper and pen, maybe your favorite beverage, maybe your favorite snack because we have a lot in store for you today. Today we'll explore three main theme, super important to us as Black students, from a historical perspective – perceptions of race and social, mental health, and disparities in education. Now of course these are all disparate topics but all have a profound influence on our experiences.

01:01

[TAYLOR KING] We're excited to be joined by Dr. Clayborne Carson, founder of the Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute and Professor Emeritus of History at Stanford University. He's devoted much of his professional life to the study of Martin Luther King Jr. And the movements that he inspired. Dr. Carson joined in episode nine of *Unwritten* focusing on the history of protest movements and is co-author of the Pearson book *The Struggle for Freedom: A History of African Americans*.

01:32

[MYKEL BROADY] So we'd actually like to start with you, Dr. Carson, on your unique perspective of Black History Month and why it's important.

01:41

[DR. CARSON] Well I think the best way of describing why it's important is to try to imagine American history without Black history you know, i don't think it's possible. Although for many years the Black presence in more American history textbooks was rather minimal, um, and I think that led to very bad history textbooks. I think it's vital for Americans to understand the central role of African Americans.

As we were writing the textbook, we understood that the same topics that are in standard American history books are going to be in ours. We're discussing the American Revolution, the Civil War, Industrialization, you know – all of the New Deal. All of these things are central in our textbook. But for some reason, which we can understand, there was a blind spot in many of these textbooks that authors tried to either minimize or simply didn't know about, uh, how central African Americans were in terms of the major events in American history.

And so our job is to correct that and, uh, our job is to make it clear to all people that an African-American history textbook is actually closer to the reality of American history, uh, than the history books that, you know, previous generations of Americans read in their high schools and colleges.

03:34

[MYKEL BROADY] Yeah, well we appreciate your perspective Dr Carson. I can assure you it's only been about two minutes of you talking and my mind is already blown. I see Taylor smiling. She's probably feeling the same but we're looking forward to hearing more and we have a bunch of questions in store for you, so let's get started, shall we?

How would you characterize the evolution of the perception of blackness? Or other words what was it like in the 1960s and 70s at the height of the Civil Rights Movement compared to a more modern history?

04:09

[DR. CARSON] Well, I think when you think about the conceptions of blackness, you know, that has been a theme in African American history.

W.E.B Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* was about how Black people perceive themselves. He talked about that duality of seeing yourself through the eyes of others as well as your own conception. You know, the 1920s, you know, all of the, um, rise of the New Negro – what was the new Negro? Well, it was a new conception of how Black people perceive themselves.

uh you know when we talk about the literature of Black America, it's all about trying to develop a conception of how we are different, but also how we are central to the American narrative. And uh, I think that's a continuing process that we're still in. Now every social movement is also a movement about reconceiving oneself. Are we simply an oppressed people or are we a people that are undergoing a liberation process? Because the latter leads to, is always associated with a sense of pride, a sense of empowerment. You know, and these are ideas that are very, very important in terms of understanding the why history is important in the first place. It helps shape one's sense of who we are and what is our role – not simply in the United State, but in the world.

06:00

[MYKEL BROADY] so also, you know, kind of, you hear the thing ignorance, you know, breeds fear. At the time when a lot of us were desegregated, do you feel like integration efforts force people to get to actually know, you know, a black person and say hey this isn't the person I heard about on the news, or this is not who so-and-so told me this is. So have our integration efforts been helpful in the perception of the black individual?

06:30

[DR. CARSON] Well, it depends on who you're talking about in terms of the perception. Is it the white perception of black people? Black people perceiving themselves? And, you know, in the integration process, you know, when we look back at the *Brown versus The Board of Education* decision, part of it was based on psychological reasoning. That if you purposefully segregate someone, that that can in itself affect their perception of their own importance and their own role in society.

07:08

You know, that as Kenneth Clark, the psychologist who wrote a lot of literature on the impact of segregation – he said that it imposes a sense of inferiority. Now that wasn't necessarily because of segregation but the way in which segregation was imposed was not, was not black people making a

choice to go to Howard University as opposed to Stanford University. It was imposed by whites because of the sense that this was the badge of inferiority. And what Kenneth Clark and his studies found out is that that is internalized in many black people. You know, that, why am I segregated? And sometimes that got mixed up, you know.

08:04

One of things I talk about in the book is that the first real challenge to segregation came from people who felt that the way you counter it is to improve the quality of black education. And, you know, for example Barbara Johns, who led a walkout in 1951 from her segregated school in Virginia. Her goal was not to integrate into the white school. Her goal was to make her black school equal, at least, to the quality of the white school.

08:41

And that, you know, when she led that walkout, which was a remarkable event – here's a 16-year-old convincing all of her fellow students to walk out of class and not go back until the school board improved the quality of the black school and made it equal in every respect that you could do with the white school. And the NAACP lawyers came there and said, you know, look you've got to go back to school, your parents are going to be trouble, all these sorts of things. And she finally gave in and said okay, if you take our case. And the NAACP made the decision that they were going to add it to these other cases.

09:29

So, there were five cases. One of them this Barbara John's in Virginia and that's called Brown versus Board of Education. That is the case that led to the desegregation of schools. Even though that was not her objective. Her objective was to make her school equal in every way it could be made equal.

09:54

[TAYLOR KING] And so, when we talk about Black-led movements, how would you say that those perceptions of blackness have historically impacted those movements that we've seen in history?

10:08

[DR. CARSON] Well, I think that when we talk about Black-led movements, they've been, they've happened throughout American history. And, you know, there was a Black-led anti-slavery movement. There were Black-led movements against the Jim Crow system through the history of the United States. There are Black-led movements to build political power. So, all of these movements have really shaped the African American experience in America. And all these movements, by the way, have been affected by international issues. Black people understood the importance of the Haitian Revolution. Haiti became the first nation to abolish slavery. And that was one of the reasons why white slave holders in the South were so intent in preventing black people from reading books or newspapers. They might be inspired by that and many of them were.

11:21

So, all of this is part of, I guess, the truism that you would have. That no one really accepts being oppressed. Sometimes they might be complacent in the sense of what can I do it about, the people who

are oppressing me are more powerful than I am. But throughout history there's also been the counter-argument – well we have to develop ways of confronting that power. And the tactics and strategies have changed over time but that's a constant. There's always been a freedom struggle going on. There's always been a civil rights struggle going on.

12:08

That's why I'm kind of taken aback sometimes when students talk about "back in civil rights days." My question is when did civil rights days start? When did they end? They're still going on, unless you have not been reading the newspaper. You know, the civil right to a vote – that's still in contention right here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A Supreme Court decision can gut the Voting Rights Act. So, civil rights are never completely won. And more importantly, the notion of what is a civil right or what is a human right is constantly changing. Do we have a right to decent healthcare? Do we have a right to decent education opportunity? Do we have the right to be treated decently as employees? All of these are civil rights issues and there's always a struggle over that. There are those who want to expand that notion of civil rights and we have seen that over the years. And then, there's also those who resist that change and are fighting that change and are frightened by that.

13:38

One of the things we've learned from struggles is that many white Americans have an investment in being superior and acting superior and assuming that they are superior, that they are ones in control. And so, whenever you have a Black movement to expand our freedom, there's always going to be a response to that – a white backlash against that. The Southern strategy that developed in the 1960s which still dominates American politics, you know, that drove tens of millions of white Americans, who had been loyal Democrats, to say I'm going to move over to the Republican party now, especially in the South. And that reshaped American politics in ways that we're still living with today, you know. Even today I would argue there's aspects of the Southern strategy that are still there. And what that is, is just reassuring white Americans, yeah, you're still in charge. Don't be frightened, these changes are not going to happen too fast. And on the other side, you have Black Americans saying, I want my freedom now, I don't want to wait.

15:09

[MYKEL BROADY] Yeah, and that's a great point. So why do you believe that ideology exists if we've gone past the civil rights movement, and we've already discovered and made equality for, and it's equal why do you believe the ideology exists?

15:26

[DR. CARSON] Which ideology?

15:29

[MYKEL BROADY] The ideology that we are good as a society, that things are equal as a society.

15:35

[DR. CARSON] Well, I think that America was a colonized place. It was a part of the British empire at the beginning, and then we have the American empire. Throughout all this history you have white people,

Europeans, who in various parts of the world came in as the dominant group. They had the technology, and the military might to expand their empires. I think that that history is embedded in the notion of white supremacy. You are a dominant force in the world and that's why you have colonies. That's why the colonies ultimately had to rebel, in order to make it clear that we're not going to accept colonization. That is why African Americans had to rebel. In order to say, we're not going to accept being enslaved, and having no rights that a white person needs to respect. That's connected with things like the domination of the native people of this continent. There was that assumption that this small group of white people who arrive in the 17th century on the east of North America. North America, when you look at the map of the aboriginal colonies, it's a relatively small part of a large continent.

17:42

[DR. CARSON] How did that grow to become the United States today, which goes all the way to Alaska, Hawaii, and reaches the Pacific Ocean. How did that happen? Was it simply that the small group of white people who arrived on the east coast just kind of walked across the continent and found some empty land and decided to settle here and there until the land filled up the continent? Or did they do that by conquest. Which story do you tell and how is that related to Black Americans? Part of what causes the civil war was the question became: are free white people going to go settle the west and become farmers in Kansas and Nebraska? Or are slaveholders going to bring their slaves? That was a basic conflict, that really became heightened in the 1840's and 1850's because the one think that free whites didn't want to compete with those who were bringing their slaves. That was a basic division that provided the background for the civil war, and of course black people didn't have any choice, in the sense the way in which many black people came to the west was as slaves. Even though there were efforts, and we have that in the textbook, black people are saying well I want to go west. They wanted to be free and occupy the land also. That's what led to the Exodusters, the people who went to Kansas and the middle west and wanted to be like the white settlers. However, for them it was a much tougher road.

19:57

[MYKEL BROADY] yeah, no I hear you. Moving on, the topic of mental health recently has been losing its stigma due to a wider societal conversation. Has mental health been discussed or researched in black history as a facet of the lives of historical figures? Have you seen any changes in this area?

20:20

[DR. CARSON] Certainly, over the last 100 years there's been a lot of studies of the impact of oppression on mental health of black people. I mentioned before, the studies that were done as part of the Brown V. The Board of education. What is the mental impact of being segregated? What is the impact of being oppressed in other ways? The books that have been written about that--- you could do an entire course on black psychology, and the consequences of oppression. People like Frantz Fanon, Wretched of the Earth, James Baldwin, who also wrote about that in various ways. Martin Luther King talked a lot about the psychological impact of racism and being oppressed. That's something that I think says, yeah black people could have some of those same mental problems that white people have, just human problems that your not well functioning. Those can have many causes, but what was interesting to me is that many of these causes are affected by your racial identity. That black Americans have always had to try to find way to, I guess one way of putting it is, how do you get by when you are being oppressed. Do you

internalize that and say well there is got to be something wrong with me, or do you externalize it and say okay thus is being caused by the fact that I'm being oppressed? I think both answers—when we look at the psychological issues—when someone is telling you every day that you are inferior and powerless, that is bound to have an impact.

23:01

That is why a lot of black struggles are about changing that psychological status that you have of internalizing your oppression. That internalization of “I am being oppressed, because I am inferior.” That happens and I think also one thing about oppression is that it is always easier to turn your anger at being oppressed downward rather than upward. Now, it's almost like if your boss is treating you badly, do you take it up with the boss or do you beat your wife and child? Both responses happen. One of them has a lot of negative consequence and the other means you are involved in the struggle that you might not win. You might get fired and you might find it hard to find another job, but in either case you have to deal with it. I think that one of the aspects of African American history is we've had great leaders who have said, “no don't internalize this—deal with the problem. If you feel powerless, empower yourself. If you feel inferior, get rid of that feeling. That's been the role of black leaders since the beginning of our history. Take pride in yourself, take pride in the struggle to overcome that sense on inferiority. I think in a large measure that's one of the things that we've been largely successful in over the years. I see that in the expressions of in the outburst of the protests during my lifetime, since the time I was a teenager. I went to the march on Washington, and I saw 200000 people there. That gave me a sense that, no we are not powerless. We can demand freedom now. We've got leaders who give us a positive sense of ourselves.

25:59

I don't think I would be doing what I do today if I hadn't had the experiences of seeing black power in action, getting legislation passed, getting the civil rights act in the mid 1960's passed. I'm hoping that that's happening with young people today that are a part of Black Lives Matter. It's an expression of a new sense of pride and power. The power has always been there or at least the potential power has already been there, but sometimes even after the passage of the voting rights act—do black people vote? Or do black people find something better to do on voting day? That's an interesting notion, I think that unless they're mobilized, and able to exercise their vote—just look at the last election. There was a poster I remember seeing in John Lewis's office when I interviewed him for the first time.

27:23

The hands that once picked cotton, now pick presidents. Now, when I first saw that in the 1970's, it shocked me. The hands that once picked cotton, now pick presidents. But that is what happened. Black votes play a decisive role in many elections. Especially, when you talk about more progressive candidates getting elected. That's when you think about every election that we tend to have a more conservative candidate and a more progressive candidate. In every election since 1965, black votes have been the determining factor in terms of who wins. If only white people voted, we would have two conservative parties. The republicans would simply be the more conservative, but because the black people vote, that has pushed the democratic party to be more progressive. But I think eventually if black people keep voting, it will force the republican party to become more open to progressive change, because they will lose every election. But that is a big if, if black voting remains at a high level.

29:04

[TAYLOR KING] Right, and so switching gears here a little bit Dr. Carson. You're an educator on top of being an author and historian. So, what has your experience in the classroom teaching black history and what experience have your students brought that may have informed how you led those classes.

29:26

[DR. CARSON] Well, I would point to two things that have changed over my career as a teacher. Increasingly, I have taught in the classroom using audio visual materials. I was a Senior advisor to the making of eyes on the prize. There is that saying a picture is worth a thousand words and what I've done is incorporated visual material into what would traditionally be the print book. You can read about black history, or you can watch it. I think that that has changed the way in which many students absorb black history. It's not just about the 60s, but the entire history of black Americans. I think that's a great thing that has happened. I also have put more emphasis on online teaching during the last 12 years. I've always had an online course, and at first it was just kind of inviting the camera crew and the film crew to come into my classroom. They would set up at the back of the class, and just filmed the class. It really wasn't very well done let's put it that way. If you think about it the film crew should have been up at the front of the class. It would just make it much more immediate. I could be talking directly to the audience.

31:37

Only gradually over the years have we kind of developed the technique for online education. Even at that early stage, I remember getting letters from prisoners who were allowed to watch some of my lectures. It was like this is amazing! I am here teaching at Stanford and somebody sitting in a prison can watch my lectures and be inspired by it. Of course, it's literally a captive audience. It opened my eyes to the notion: why should only students who are able to get into Stanford have the benefit of my knowledge? Why can't I teach to a larger audience? That's happened in in other fields, look at math education with khan academy, and how online learning can be particular effective. Its immediate too you're talking to. It's like having a private tutorial session with one of the best teachers on your Subject. You have the kind of dialogue we're having right now. You can see me on the screen ask me questions and I can do a lot of prep work to try to say, "okay this is what I'm going to try to teach you now. If you didn't quite get it, you can just repeat it and then the classroom becomes a setting. Where you can discuss what you've learned, and more recently I've set it up so that we have an online office hour. I don't know about you, but at Stanford I have always offered an office hour. Many times, I would just sit in my office and maybe two students might wander by and complain about a grade or something like that.

34:00

It's not a popular thing for students to walk into, at least for most universities, a professor's office. But online, I'd get far more. I probably get a year's worth of students into an office hour because they don't feel quite as intimidated. They can hit a button to not even show their face and just listen to the office hour, and other students asking questions. Its kind if opened my eyes to the fact that education doesn't have to be this traditional elite model of a small classroom where you are listening to a lecture and then you leave. If you didn't get it, you didn't and take good notes. it's quickly out of your mind, but you try to

take good notes so that you'll get a good grade on the exam. That's been the model of higher education for several hundred years, and we're only now beginning to question that model. That maybe there's a better way, a more personalized way, where you can have this kind of intimate relationship between a teacher and a student. That student feels like that person is talking directly to me. I can learn directly as opposed to taking notes, and rather than taking notes, I just go back and listen when I am able to concentrate. I think that we're seeing changes.

35:59

[MYKEL BROADY] I'm glad to hear it. Keeping up to pace with education can you talk a bit about desegregation in higher ed? Now we have Brown V Board of Education, but we all know that desegregation just didn't happen overnight.

36:10

[DR. CARSON] No, it didn't. You know the comment I would make about that is: there have been studies that indicate that for the average black student in high school they're just as likely to go to a predominantly black school as they were 60 or 70 years ago. That's the sad thing about it. We think that because there is now not a legal barrier to a black person going to a predominantly white school, there's a practical barrier because they don't live in that neighborhood. So, segregation is alive and well. What I am hoping is that we can get to the more important thing of equal education. We should need to separate that sometimes from the notion of desegregated education. I think both are important. I think being able to go through educational experience with people of different races and backgrounds is itself an education. That's very important in terms of your consciousness of being part of a multicultural society. However, that in itself doesn't make you learn history more effectively or learn math more effectively. We kind of mix these things up and assume that that if it's a racially mixed classroom it must be better education. No, that's not true.

37:54

You can become a fine scientist and learn a lot of history in an all-black environment as well as an integrated environment. That's one of the things that a generation of students has learned. Like My son, he went to Howard University. He could have gone to Stanford or Berkeley or any of these places, and that was the choice. I think that he would say, "yeah, I got a great education there in a variety of ways." I think we need to separate out high-quality education from the question of desegregation. Both are important, we need to learn to live together with people of different backgrounds and different races-- just in the world we need that. That's why we've developed this concept at the King Institute of the World House. The King was talking about humanity has inherited a world house comprised of people with different cultures and backgrounds and religions. All of this he said we must learn to live in the world house. He poses the alternative, he said, either chaos or community. Either we build a global community, or we're going to have a very chaotic world. Both of those are real possibilities. So, I think we need to learn about differences. We need to learn that people bring to the table different qualities.

39:48

We need to learn to appreciate that, but I think we also need to get the kind of global education that allows us to build community. I would be opposed for example of just the idea that segregation, racial segregation, is a good thing. I don't think that's true. I think that there's some kind of mixture of, if you



want to have certain experiences with people of your own group so that you develop a group consciousness. However, I think you also need to understand that the world is not filled with people just like you. Just like how white Americans need to understand that the world is not predominantly white, that there are many other types of people that you have learned to get along with. If you don't get along with them it's going to be a pretty destructive world.

40:49

[TAYLOR KING] Absolutely, I think that's a great insight. I know we're running a little bit over, but I would love your input for this last one, and I think it's a great close out. With black history month being a time to reflect on America's history which is often overwhelmed by pain and trauma and negativity; how would you say black Americans can increasingly incorporate celebration into next month?

41:17

[DR. CARSON] Oh my gosh! Black Americans have learned perhaps more than most people how to celebrate. How to celebrate blackness, that that's been part of our basic education. In the sense that you think of the impact of black literature, black music and all the creativity of black communities. Also including writers and musicians, and all of that. To me black music is a celebration. When you compare the impact of black people on American music, just try to imagine what American music would be like without the contribution of black people. To me it's almost inconceivable. What would American music be like if you subtracted jazz and swing all the rhythm and blues. If you took all out, what would you be left with? We can't—to me that is impossible to conceive, most of American culture without black contribution to it. I think many white Americans at some level kind of know that they are part black. White people didn't originate the way they dance and the musical tastes that they have. That's something that I think is almost more important for white Americans to understand. For white Americans to understand the extent to which they are black in terms of their tastes and understanding of the world.

43:42

All of the contribution I think that is what is really odd is how you can develop a white national consciousness. The idea that only important things that have been developed in America and have been developed by white people. Yeah, if you go down that route you have a pretty sterile notion of what an American is. We're not same, the white American is not the same as the person who came over from England or from Europe and settled here. They were affected by what they found here and what they found has become distinctive for our culture. That culture was in part developed by black people. I would just like to challenge anyone to just turn on the radio, turn on the tv. Do anything in terms of absorbing American culture and imagine it without any black contribution. To me that is inconceivable. Gaining an appreciation for that and for black people to also gain an appreciation for that. That is a contribution to the world. When I travel the world, and I go and listen to popular music, whatever is popular music there, and understand how you know I've taken my play about Martin Luther King to China, Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories. What really resonates is they might not understand the particularities of Martin Luther King's history, but they do understand the singing they understand that that gets through.

46:19

It's a cultural communication. I'll end on this; I remember being in Beijing when the national theater did my play about King. I have a picture of young Chinese students gathering after the performance around the piano player wanted to learn freedom songs. This was a mile from Tiananmen square where the Chinese government had squashed a student rebellion. Yet here you have young Chinese students who want to learn about the African American freedom struggle and are particularly engaged with the music. Which, they had never heard before. I think that something. Sometimes, even black people don't understand is how much impact we've had on the world. Through culture and politics and ideas maybe I can't convey it as much in a textbook as I could through a documentary film but it's part of the teaching of African American history.

47:53

[MYKEL BROADY] Well as we close out today Dr. Carson I'd like to thank you for your time. I hope this conversation was as meaningful as it was to Taylor and me.

48:02

[DR. CARSON] Well, I enjoyed talking with you and this is the kind of communication that I have grown to love. Where you directly talking with one another and using the technology of our day to talk about this important topic.

48:20

[MYKEL BROADY] Just some special things special shout out to Amanda Perfet. She is the face of the unwritten series she's never on camera, but she always makes sure those on camera are prepared and are able to use their voice for change. So, thank you Amanda your work will not go unnoticed. Last but not least, thank you to everyone viewing this today. Please have a great day, stay safe, and happy Black History Month!