

Why Do We Focus on Firsts? Problems and Possibilities for Black History Teaching

William L. Smith

In the United States, there's a national infatuation with those who have broken barriers—racial, religious, gendered, and so on—and have presumably changed the rules of the game for others. News outlets and history textbooks seem unable to resist a good story of *firstness*. Researchers have speculated why this is the case: What better way to demonstrate those quintessential American qualities like the pioneer spirit and “rugged individualism” than to be the first person to break into a new frontier?¹ Others suggest that firsts serve a tokenism purpose: a handful of high-achieving women and people of color allow Whites to tell themselves that the nation has progressed beyond its prejudicial past.²

Those whom we celebrate as firsts tend to be from traditionally marginalized backgrounds, previously prevented

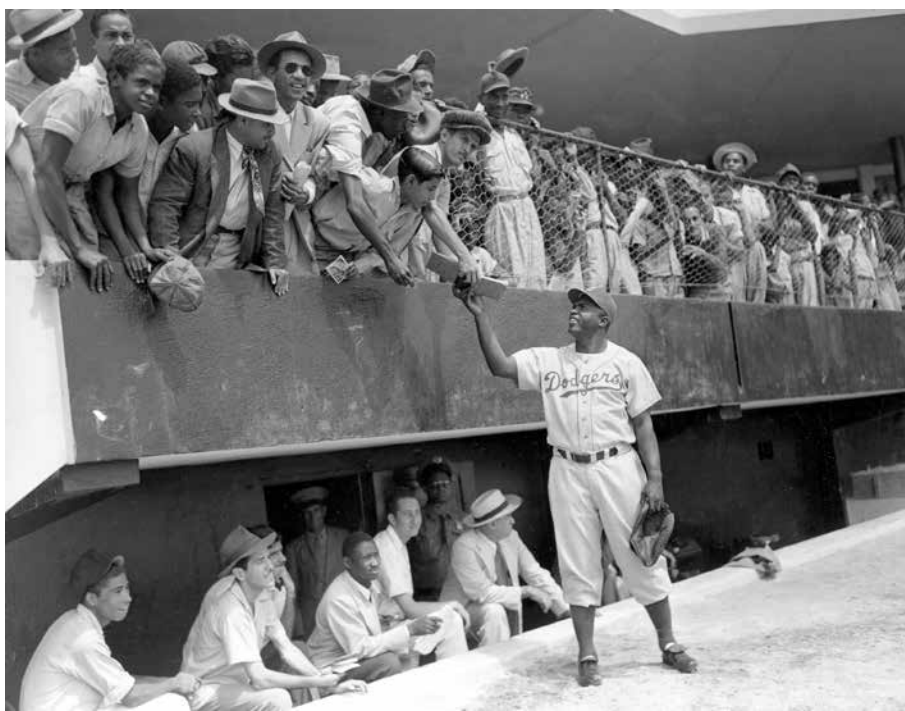
from full social and political access in the United States. In other words, a barrier had to exist for it to be broken. Thus,

firstness is a common characteristic of the Black historical figures we collectively remember. Many of the most notable figures from Black history—from Phillis Wheatley to Colin Powell, W.E.B. Du Bois to Thurgood Marshall—were themselves firsts in some important respect.

However, for teaching Black history, focusing the curriculum on African American firsts can be problematic, as I have argued elsewhere regarding Barack Obama.³ Firsts obscure important details about these barrier-breaking individuals themselves as well as about the broader historical contexts within which they lived. This is not to say that teachers should ignore these important figures entirely; including people like Shirley Chisholm and Gwendolyn Brooks into a predominantly White curriculum is both valuable and an achievement in and of itself.⁴ However, I do suggest that emphasizing firstness has its curricular pitfalls and that educators might consider an alternative, or at least more critical, approach to Black history teaching. Below, I highlight four problems with focusing on firstness, followed by recommendations for practicing more nuanced and critical Black history pedagogy.

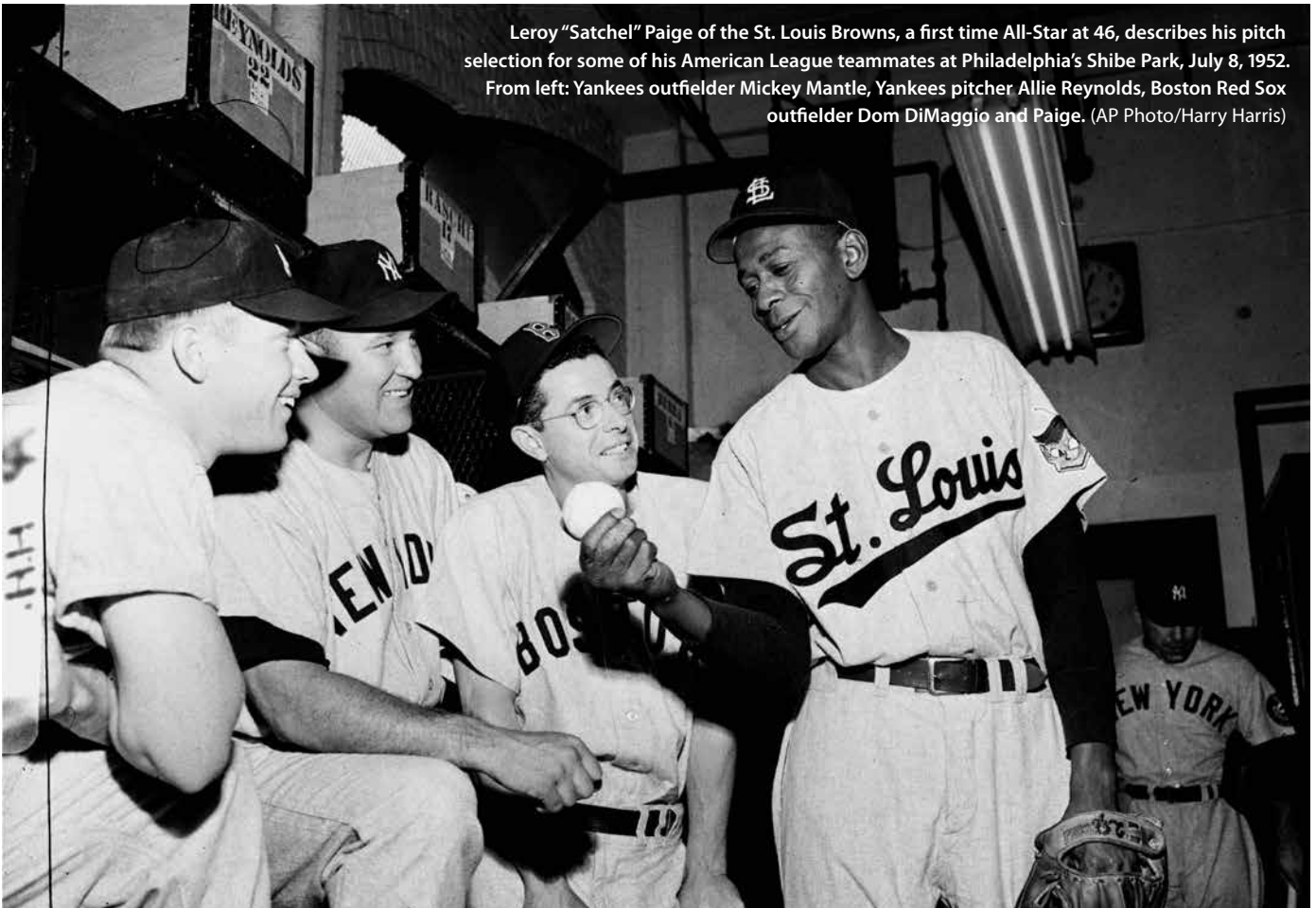
Firsts Imply Problems Have Been Solved

In 1992, Carol Moseley Braun became the first African American woman elected to the U.S. Senate. Her election marked a historic milestone in the long



Jackie Robinson, first baseman of the Brooklyn Dodgers, returns an autograph book to a fan during the Dodgers' spring training in Ciudad Trujillo, now Santo Domingo, in the Dominican Republic, March 6, 1948. (AP Photo/File)

Leroy "Satchel" Paige of the St. Louis Browns, a first time All-Star at 46, describes his pitch selection for some of his American League teammates at Philadelphia's Shibe Park, July 8, 1952. From left: Yankees outfielder Mickey Mantle, Yankees pitcher Allie Reynolds, Boston Red Sox outfielder Dom DiMaggio and Paige. (AP Photo/Harry Harris)



history of African American involvement in national politics. However, it would take 24 years before the nation elected a second Black female senator: Kamala Harris in 2016. Thus, despite Braun's breaking of this particular racial barrier, the election may have signaled more of an aberration in Black leadership than a tidal wave of change. There are currently three African American U.S. senators and zero Black governors. If these numbers were proportional to the Black population nationally (about 13%), those figures would be 13 and six or seven, respectively.⁵

Similarly, few firsts in modern Black history could rival the sheer significance of Barack Obama's presidential election. The victory held such weight that in 2008 pundits proclaimed we were in a "post-racial era," in which race was no longer a determining factor of individuals' achievements.⁶ However, a number of critics cautioned against what they saw

as premature optimism. They pointed to persistent disparities between African Americans and Whites in a range of indicators, including educational attainment, health outcomes, incarceration rates, and socioeconomic mobility.⁷

The cases of Braun and Obama highlight how notable firsts in U.S. history may not necessarily signify improvement in the underlying conditions that created the racial barrier in the first place. The complex matrix of factors limiting access for Black political candidates, such as campaign funding disparities, Black voter disenfranchisement, and racism and sexism within party machinery, have likely changed little since 1992 or 2008. Writing about the 2008 election, Bonilla-Silva noted that Obama offered "false hope" about the conditions for racial minorities in the United States; Obama, he argued, was just a token of progress that allowed White America to feel proud of its equality while ignor-

ing "the fact that most blacks are still at the bottom of the well" in all aspects of social life.⁸

By emphasizing the importance of firsts in Black history, students may form the false impression that these achievements had a trickle-down effect on African Americans' everyday lives. Historic firsts can actually have the opposite result: people's lives change very little, but it becomes more difficult to point to ongoing racism when significant racial barriers have supposedly been broken.⁹

Firsts Lead to Hero-Worshipping

Breaking through the social and legal barriers that had previously prevented African American participation undoubtedly required heroic levels of ability, determination, and emotional fortitude. In these ways, celebrating the achievements of African American firsts is fully justified. However, treating

historical figures as *heroic*, be they African American or otherwise, can prove problematic. As scholars like James Loewen have shown, history curricula often use heroic figures to promote grand themes like American Progress. Heroes demonstrate the nation's ability to overcome problems, like racial barriers, in its inevitable march toward perfection.¹⁰ However, the emphasis on heroes leaves students with an incomplete understanding of the individuals themselves. In order for heroes to be properly heroic, they must be stripped of biographical details that run counter to their heroic stature.¹¹ For example, Kohl describes how popular narratives about Rosa Parks as the “tired seamstress” who could not stand any longer for segregated busing, gloss over the complex history of Parks as a trained activist.¹² When history curricula focus on heroes, then, we end up with incomplete portraits, what Loewen calls misrepresented, oversimplified, and “whitewashed” individuals. Black history firsts can undergo this same hero's fate in curricula, stripped of complicating and humanizing details.¹³

Firsts Promote Individuals over Collectives

Similarly, focusing on firsts places (or misplaces) the onus for major social change on certain individuals rather than on the collective efforts of groups. For example, historian Robin D.G. Kelley describes the untold stories of African American resistance in the Jim Crow South. Long before the achievements of icons like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr., Black workers resisted inequitable conditions through methods like breaking dress codes, organizing work stoppages, and sabotaging production lines. Even on the streetcars of Birmingham, Alabama, the site of Parks's eventual stand against segregation, Kelley notes that there were “literally dozens of episodes of Black women sitting in the

white section, arguing with drivers or conductors, and fighting with white passengers.”¹⁴ While none of these acts individually changed the course of history per se, they collectively drew attention to the conditions of working-class African Americans in the Jim Crow South and catalyzed more formal resistance from Black civil rights leaders.

Kelley's examination of popular resistance to Jim Crow-era conditions offers one example of the power of groups in initiating broad social change. Key moments in Black history, from the abolition of slavery to the end of the Jim Crow Era, came about not just through the actions of notable firsts but also through the countless, often unheralded efforts of everyday people. For students, learning about these movements, and the roles individuals like themselves played in such collective actions, can offer lessons far more personal and profound than what results from an exclusive focus on ground-breaking firsts in African American history.

Firsts were often Firsts for a Reason

History books often lionize Jackie Robinson for breaking the color barrier in Major League Baseball. However, Robinson's narrative has two issues. The first is inaccuracy: Robinson was not the first Black player but rather the first since Whites had forced all African Americans from the league in the late 1800s.¹⁵ Second, the Robinson-as-first story omits the critical question of *why* Robinson was first. Numerous other African American ballplayers had stronger résumés at the time: more skilled, experienced, and proven than the young Robinson. But Brooklyn Dodgers President Branch Rickey chose Robinson over stronger players like Satchel Paige because, in the words of Paige biographer Larry Tye, Robinson “had the table manners whites liked.” In other words, Robinson was selected largely due to



Prepare Students for College, Career, and Civic Life

Our inquiry-based approach to global issues promotes the skills required by the C3 Framework and Common Core standards.

www.choices.edu

Textual Analysis
Critical Thinking
Multiple Perspectives
Global Awareness
Civic Literacy

DIGITAL AND PRINT
CURRICULUM RESOURCES

THE
**CHOICES
PROGRAM**
BROWN UNIVERSITY

his disposition, his appeal to White fans, and his presumed ability to withstand the harsh scrutiny of integrating baseball. Satchel Paige, on the other hand, was considered unlikely to be sufficiently deferential and silent in the face of racist acts to gain acceptance by Whites.¹⁶

The story of Jackie Robinson's firstness tells us as much about the historical time period as it does about the man himself. His may be an inspiring (if inaccurate) tale, but learning the why about figures like Jackie Robinson offers students insight into the historical conditions that made this first possible.

Teaching with, and Beyond, Black History Firsts

One could argue that ignoring firsts in Black history removes the hope and inspiration that these individuals provide. I do not advocate for ending all teaching about these important figures. The Thurgood Marshalls, Shirley Chisholms and Barack Obamas still have their place in curricula, in part as sources of personal inspiration. However, I do suggest that we delve more deeply into these individuals themselves—adding some of the messy, humanizing details of their lives—and about the complex historical contexts in which they achieved.

Teachers may consider the following ideas for fostering a critical pedagogical approach with, and beyond, Black history firsts:

- Teach contributors to movements, not just barrier-breakers. The National Archives (www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/black-history.html) has vast stores of primary sources, and links to related collections, that offer the insight into movements, from slave narratives to oral histories of Black soldiers.
- Teach about everyday people. As one example, the University of Virginia's African American Community Histories website (www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/afam/

home.html) offers a range of primary sources on the everyday lives of Black communities, a perfect way to delve into popular histories. Students could collect oral histories in their communities or listen to local guest speakers.

- Teach historical eras. Rather than focus on how Jackie Robinson integrated baseball, explore the time period in which he played. The Negro Traveler's Green Book (<http://library.sc.edu/digital/collections/greenbook.html>), a travel guide published for African American tourists around the same time period, is one example of a primary source that offers insight into an historical era rather than just its heroes.
- Deconstruct firstness. If you do include a first, have students consider the historical and political nature of that firstness. Pose questions like, Why do you think this person was first? Does the barrier still exist? What significance did that first have for the nation? For African Americans? For you personally?

Geoffrey Canada, founder of the Harlem Children's Zone, somewhat famously and regularly comments that he is tired of hearing about kids in poor neighborhoods who have beaten the odds and achieved academic and professional success. The conversation, he argues, should be about *changing the odds*. Canada's sentiments also befit the teaching of African American firsts. Rather than focus on the heroic efforts of the few, perhaps educators should address those conditions that prevent similar achievements for the many. While we celebrate Barack Obama's firstness, for instance, we should also take notice of why such an achievement was so extraordinary, and why the odds were stacked against, and continue to be stacked against, having a Black man or woman in the White House.

Notes

1. William L. Smith, "Not Stopping at First: Racial Literacy and the Teaching of Barack Obama," *Multicultural Perspectives* 16, no. 2 (2014): 65–71.
2. Jeff Duncan-Andrade, "Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete," *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 2 (2009): 181–194.
3. Smith, 65–71.
4. Dennis Carlson, "Of Rosa Parks, Multicultural Education, and Critical Pedagogy," in *Promises to Keep: Cultural Studies, Democratic Education and Public Life*, eds. Greg Dimitriadis and Dennis Carlson (New York, N.Y.: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003), 168–83.
5. Jamelle Bouie, "The Other Glass Ceiling," *The American Prospect* (March 14, 2012), online.
6. Lawrence D. Bobo, "Somewhere Between Jim Crow and Post-racialism: Reflections on the Racial Divide in America Today," *Daedalus* 140, no. 2 (2011): 11–36.
7. Enrique Alemán, Jr., Timothy Salazar, Andrea Rorrer, and Laurence Parker, "Introduction to Post-Racialism in U.S. Public School and Higher Education Settings: The Politics of Education in the Age of Obama," *Peabody Journal of Education* 86, no. 5 (2011): 479–87; Duncan-Andrade, 181–194.
8. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Victor Ray, "When Whites Love a Black Leader: Race Matters in Obamerica," *Journal of African American Studies* 13, no. 1 (2009): 176–183, 177.
9. Paul. B Adjei and Jagjeet K. Gill "What has Barack Obama's Election Victory Got to Do with Race? A Closer Look at Post-Racial Rhetoric and its Implications for Antiracism Education," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 16, no. 1 (2011): 134–153.
10. James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York, N.Y.: Touchstone, 2007).
11. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1995).
12. Herbert R. Kohl, "The Politics of Children's Literature: What's Wrong with the Rosa Parks Myth?" in *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice* Vol. 1, eds. Wayne Au, Bill E. Bigelow and Stan E. Karp (Milwaukee, Wisc.: Rethinking Schools, Ltd., 2007), 168–71.
13. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*.
14. Robin D.G. Kelley, "'We Are Not What We Seem': Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (1993): 75–112, 105.
15. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*.
16. Larry Tye, "Before Jackie: How Strikeout King Satchel Paige Struck Down Jim Crow," *History Now* (n.d.), online.

WILLIAM L. SMITH is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Teaching, Learning & Sociocultural Studies at the University of Arizona. His research and teaching interests center on issues of race, curriculum, and social studies education, particularly in how K-12 students learn about and make sense of historical and contemporary racial events. He can be reached at wsmith@email.arizona.edu.