

# OPINION

Opinion articles do not necessarily represent the views of the Portland Observer. We welcome reader essays, photos and story ideas. Submit to [news@portlandobserver.com](mailto:news@portlandobserver.com).

## Remember Black History All Year Long

BY JILL RICHARDSON

As the rest of the nation celebrates Black History Month this February, I'm taking a graduate level course I call "Dead White Men."



It's actually a classic theory class that covers a number of influential thinkers, like free market theorist Adam Smith and the famous French observer of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville. It's a good class. But the thinkers we're studying are all dead white men.

In fact, they weren't just white and male. They were all members of an elite that was rich and formally educated.

There's nothing inherently wrong with that: They were all great thinkers, and their contributions to human knowledge are indisputable. But their views of the world were developed based on their unique positions in society. As a result, they had some easy-to-recognize blind spots.

What's missing in the canon of classic literature taught in the United States are the views of everyone else who built our nation: African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans,

and so on.

How would the theories we use to understand our economy, government, and society differ if we'd recorded the thoughts of marginalized people along the way?

For example, in *The Wealth of Nations* — the seminal book that defines capitalism — Adam Smith asserts that the poor fac-

point, not experiencing it himself, Smith didn't seem to think it was that bad.

Smith goes on to describe how individuals each act in their own self-interest. Without any mastermind in control, that lets the free market work as though it were steered by an "invisible hand." The role of government in aiding the capitalist economy, according to Smith, is minimal.

and sugar from colonies in the Caribbean, nearly all of it produced by enslaved Africans and their descendants. Not to mention that the original inhabitants of the New World that produced this bounty were largely driven off their land by colonial governments.

Some "invisible hand."

That doesn't necessarily nullify the conclusions Smith made,

of the non-white peoples who were marginalized, enslaved, and exploited to the same prestige enjoyed by white writers like Smith? Wouldn't we all better understand how the world works — and how to make it work better?

To some extent, of course, this is impossible. Many black and Native American contemporaries of Smith, or even poor whites, were illiterate, and they're now long dead. But surely we can begin to recognize and correct our mistakes now.

Relegating black history to just one month of the year — and treating it as if it's something separate from American history more broadly — does a disservice to us all. It reinforces the wrongheaded idea that we're a white nation, and that the history of other people is only a part of our own inasmuch as it affects whites.

It's great to have a month highlighting black history and the achievements of African Americans. But if any of us, regardless of race, wish to fully understand our own history as a people, then black history must be included on a level playing field with white history — all year long.

Jill Richardson is an author and columnist for *OtherWords*. Distributed by *OtherWords.org*.

*What's missing in the canon of classic literature taught in the United States are the views of everyone else who built our nation: African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and so on.*

tory workers living in England during the Industrial Revolution had better lives under capitalism than even a wealthy African prince.

Those factory workers, however, were living in squalor, in utter misery. From his vantage

point, he misses the enormous role of the British Empire.

During the Industrial Revolution, Great Britain exported wheat from its colony India even during famines, causing millions of Indians to starve to death. Cotton came from the United States

but it shows a hole in his theory that's never accounted for. We tend to accept Smith's ideas as they are, without noting this flaw or analyzing how it might make his ideas inaccurate in any way.

What if instead, the United States elevated the perspectives

## Connecting the Dots in the Opioids Crisis

The role race plays in the war on drugs

BY KASSANDRA FREDERIQUE

Every year, hundreds of thousands of family and friends bury loved ones because of the ongoing opioid overdose crisis happening across the United States — a crisis that could have



been largely prevented. Researchers and health professionals link today's predicament to the explosion of opioid prescriptions in the 1990s when there was an increased prescription drug usage of medications to treat pain like OxyContin and from youth experimentation.

Now, as awareness of this problem surfaces, prescription opioids become harder to access, leading addicts to turn to heroin, which is often cheaper and more readily available. But the origins of this crisis began long before the 1990s.

It existed relatively unaddressed within communities of color for at least 20 years prior with little response by way of government support or resources.

Perhaps our biggest drug policy reform failures stem from the historic, unrelenting structural racism inherent in the way our nation responds to the drugs crisis. Today, there are national and statewide taskforces with millions of dollars allocated to address and eradicate the "heroin and opiate" epidemic ravaging the middle and upper classes. Just last week, President Obama proposed \$1.1 billion to combat the problem.

Blacks and Latinos stand by, watching as public health officials rush to bring an abundance of resources in to help predominantly white communities, but we haven't forgotten how a similar amount of money was allocated to helping the police rush into our neighborhoods — not to help those of us dying from drug use — but to

arrest or remove unsightly black "junkies" from the public streets. The outpouring of sympathy we are seeing for the loss of white lives is and has been utterly absent for the black and brown lives lost due to drug overdoses.

If we had allotted a fraction of the care and capital in the 1970s

tal overdose deaths passed vehicular deaths. But why did it take so long for this shift to happen? One reason is that the people who were dying of heroin, for the most part, were perceived to be poor blacks and Latinos. And this largely unaddressed crisis is just more evidence that in the U.S., black lives

rated by decades of public health policies focused on reducing stigma and promoting treatment over punishment.

Structural and institutional racism uplifts whiteness and does so at a steep cost to those who are its intended targets. It is precisely because black lives didn't matter

*It has sparked an increase in public education and awareness, which started after accidental overdose deaths passed vehicular deaths.*

to those in the Black and Latino communities struggling with addiction, we may not have the opioid epidemic we do now. Naloxone, the opioid overdose reversal drug, is being offered over the counter in pharmacies across the country. It has sparked an increase in public education and awareness, which started after acciden-

do not matter.

If black lives mattered, our government would not have tolerated a decades-long defeat in the war against drugs. If black lives mattered, Naloxone would have been available in every urban, health clinic starting in the 1970s. If black lives mattered, today's overdose crisis would be amelio-

for decades that white upper middle class people are dying in staggering numbers today. It's time to seriously take the call to honor black lives because when our lives matter, everyone benefits, including whites.

Kassandra Frederique is the New York state director for the Drug Policy Alliance.