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OPINION

Painful Legacy of Our Collective History

Blank spots on the family tree

BY MANDISA ROUTHENI

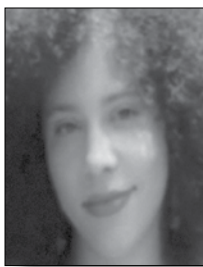
Maybe you've seen those Ancestry.com commercials pushing Americans to "discover their stories" by digging into their family histories.

Millions of Americans find meaning from these searches. My mom's one of them. She's doing a deep dive into our family history, reviving the stories of past ancestors in America.

She discovered that the German last name we had wasn't our original family name. Somewhere — perhaps Ellis Island, once a gateway for millions of European immigrants — our name was changed. That's made it hard to learn about our history before emigration.

On my father's side, though,

the fog of history hides much more than names — and it's incredibly more painful. You see, my father is African-American.



And for black Americans, searches on sites like Ancestry.com yield blank spots on the family tree.

Before the Civil War, after all, our ancestors were considered property, not people.

This means there are no marriage certificates, medical records, or school or census records. Instead, pre-Civil War family research means sifting through bills of sale, auction records, and property ledgers with uncertainty, as families were often torn apart.

Even if my family had lived in a state that abolished slavery before the Civil War, or if someone from my family was a freed person in the North, I'd still have to do extensive research to find them.

Many free blacks were kidnapped

and forced back into slavery under federal laws like the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850.

African-American genealogy is also difficult because of names.

Enslaved Africans were forced to take the last names of slave owners, which were often changed when individuals were sold to another family or institution. After the Civil War, emancipated blacks sometimes took on the names of their former masters, as is the case with part of my family, or made up new last names altogether.

Even after emancipation, black Americans continued to face persecution in the South and beyond. Many fled West or North or elsewhere, and the paper trail is non-existent or impossible to follow.

When they did make it somewhere else, they still faced lynchings, arson attacks, bombings, and theft from hostile whites. These acts of terror erased records and histories, along with families and people.

Now, however, there are some

exciting breakthroughs in the search for family history for African Americans.

The Freedmen's Bureau Project recently launched a new website, Discoverfreedmen.org, which includes the names of almost 2 million men, women, and children.

It brings together resources from various archives, museums, libraries, and digitized documents collected by the Freedmen's Bureau, which was established in 1865 to provide services to newly emancipated communities. Its archives include bank records, marriage and death certificates, military service records, migration information, and so much more.

The new site also allows a partial name search, which is a game changer.

Oral histories of formerly enslaved people are another invaluable resource — check out the Library of Congress to start. Others include records kept by African-American newspapers,

Benevolent Societies, churches, and so forth, which are available online and in public libraries.

Finally, DNA tests are another new tool for people tracing their ancestry.

But DNA can reveal a painful lineage. For example, black women were often raped by slave owners or forced to have intercourse with enslaved men to bear children into slavery. How do you deal with that in a family tree?

I'm grateful for the chance to glimpse new branches of my family tree. But ultimately, every one of my African ancestors was kidnapped from Africa. So even if I find a ship manifest or pay for a DNA test, I'll never fully know the places, stories, and families that are my ancestry.

This is the painful legacy of our collective American history.

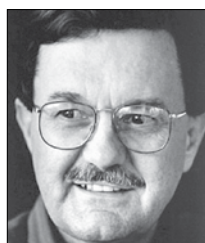
Mandisa Routheni is the New Mexico fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies. Distributed by OtherWords.org.

Trump's Magical Thinking on Health Care

Take note of the trick word 'access'

BY JIM HIGHTOWER

Donald Trump, the amazing wunderkind of global luxury living — and now our nation's phantasmagoric, fast-charging president — is proving to be a legislative magician.



In his campaign, Trump's number one promise was that he would "immediately" repeal the entirety of Obamacare, then — hocus-pocus and abracadabra! — Simultaneously replace it with "great health care for a fraction of the price."

Sounds impressive! No wonder his White House media operation calls him "President Action, President Impact."

But it seems that the Amazing Donald has abruptly learned that what magicians do isn't magic. They just perform illusions. In other words, it's fakery.

So Trump is now caught in the spotlight of reality, unable to produce a workable plan to "repeal and replace" Obamacare, as he so glibly promised.

In fact, the GOP replacement scheme

he's been backing would leave millions of people with no health care coverage, while reducing the benefits and jacking up insurance payments for millions of others.

Frustrated, President Action recently whined to a meeting of state governors that "nobody knew that health care could be so complicated." Of course, by "nobody," he meant that he didn't know — and therefore no one could've known, since he knows everything.

But now, in a truly amazing magical act, The Donald has pulled a rabbit out of his hat. His new Trumpcare plan, he brags, will guarantee that every American will have access to health coverage.

Before you erupt in applause, however, notice the trick word he's using: "access." That doesn't mean you'll get coverage. You'll just get access to coverage — if you can afford it.

It's the same as promising that everyone will get "access" to owning a private jet and living in a fabulous Florida golf resort, just like Trump.

See, he truly is magical!

OtherWords columnist Jim Hightower is a radio commentator, writer, and public speaker. He's also the editor of the populist newsletter, *The Hightower Lowdown*. Distributed by OtherWords.org.

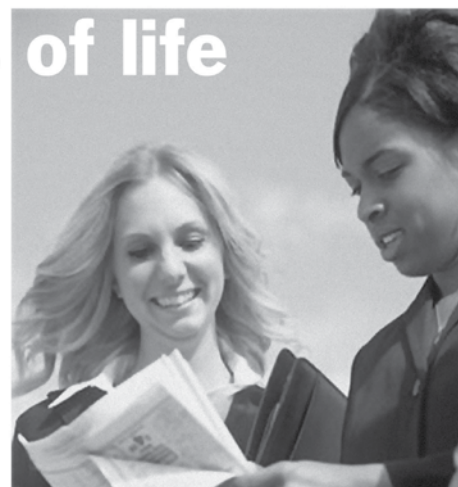
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