



Taking America (USA) Beyond the Legacy of Enslavement

# COMING TO THE TABLE

This article,  
*Ben Affleck and PBS Failed at Helping  
Viewers Deal with the Past*  
first appeared on Time.com  
and is shared here courtesy of  
Coming to the Table



## Vision

Our vision for the United States is of a just and truthful society that acknowledges and seeks to heal from the racial wounds of the past—from slavery and the many forms of racism it spawned.

## Mission

Coming to the Table provides leadership, resources, and a supportive environment for all who wish to acknowledge and heal wounds from racism that is rooted in the United States' history of slavery.

## Approach

The CTTT approach to achieving our vision and mission involves four interrelated practices:

1. **Uncovering History:** researching, acknowledging, and sharing personal, family and community histories of race with openness and honesty
2. **Making Connections:** connecting to others within and across racial lines in order to develop and deepen relationships
3. **Working Toward Healing:** exploring how we can heal together through dialogue, reunion, ritual, ceremony, the arts, apology and other methods
4. **Taking Action:** actively seeking to heal the wounds of racial inequality and injustice and to support racial reconciliation between individuals, within families, and in communities

## Values

The Values upon which Coming to the Table operates are Inclusion, Respect and Tolerance, Honesty, Truthfulness and Transparency, Compassion, Mercy, and Forgiveness, Love, Peace and Nonviolence, and Reconciliation.

**For more information visit:  
[www.comingtothetable.org](http://www.comingtothetable.org)**



# Shannon LaNier: Ben Affleck and PBS Failed at Helping Viewers Deal With the Past

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Peter Kramer—NBC/Getty Images Ben Affleck in 2014.

*Shannon LaNier is a pop-culture expert and the co-author of *Jefferson's Children: The Story of One American Family*.*

## We have to stop censoring history

It saddens me to learn that superstar Ben Affleck asked Henry Louis Gates Jr. and the Public Broadcast Service to withhold information about his slave-owning ancestors when he appeared on the documentary series “Finding Our Roots.” It’s understandable that Affleck would be embarrassed to learn such shocking news about his ancestors, but we can’t hang him out to dry for making an emotional request. With a little research, a huge number of Americans would find out that they too have not only slave owners but slaves in their bloodline.

As a descendant of President Thomas Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemings, I know what it’s like to accept the good, the bad, and the ugly of our pasts. However, we have to stop censoring history and start accepting it and learning from it. Affleck and PBS missed out on an important opportunity to face the ugly truth head on. This is a chance to educate and enlighten America about its painful past and current struggle. Instead of hiding the information about the *Gone Girl* star’s past, maybe PBS could have, and still can, help him and others cope with the devastating news that his ancestor owned people.

Pain, anger, guilt and embarrassment are all normal emotions when people start digging into their pasts, and that’s natural, but those feelings must be addressed. We must own up to our past so we can learn from it and move boldly toward the future. As uncomfortable as it may be, the first step in the healing process is to admit what happened and then discuss it. Avoiding our collective past is one of the reasons why this country is still experiencing so much racial unrest, because so many people, black and white, refuse to deal with the past and come to a place of healing.

In my opinion, one thing white people have to understand is that most black people are not going to blame them or hold them responsible for what their ancestors did decades before they were born. I’m not going to ask you for reparations, and I’m not going to stop watching Ben Affleck’s

movies (except *Gigli*). Life will go on, but understanding how we are all interconnected would help make this world a better place. One group I belong to that's helping to do just that is the **Coming to the Table** organization. It provides resources, seminars and a supportive environment for those wanting to acknowledge and heal wounds from racism that is rooted in the history of slavery. They literally sit at a table with descendants of slaves and descendants of slave owners and use conflict resolution to help people deal with their emotions. It's an amazing healing process to witness and be part of.

As a television host, I know mistakes can be made, but they can also be fixed! In the future, PBS and *Finding Our Roots* should shine the light on the truth to be an even more significant catalyst for change. I hope the show doesn't pass up other opportunities to help its subjects and viewers deal with their pasts. As a television host, I know mistakes can be made, but they also can be fixed. It's time for a Part Two of *Finding Our Roots* with Ben Affleck. Will they be brave enough to do what their show was really designed to do in the first place?