Title
Teaching African-American History in the Age of Obama

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1jh998mq

Author
Millward, J

Publication Date
2009-02-27

Peer reviewed
Teaching African-American History in the Age of Obama

BY JESSICA MILLWARD

WHEN I proposed a spring course on major topics in Afri-

can-American history, drawing a large enrollment was

my chief concern. I had previously taught the course under a different title at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, a campus with a sizable African-American presence among students and faculty mem-

bers. I now teach at a college whose Afri-

can-American student population is about 2 percent and that continues to feel the impact of California's Proposition 209, which ended affirmative action in public education more than 10 years ago.

Of course, I believe that African-American his-

tory is a topic that all students should find intriguing; but without a "built-in" au-

dience, I suspected that I would have to re-

name the course to capture the imagination

of a broad spectrum of students. Hoping to draw students caught up in the general en-

thusiasm of the past year, I changed the title from what had been "Black History, 1619 to

the Present" to "(the date I say) "postracial" Major Topics in African-American History

From Slavery to the Presidency." I submit-

ted the course well before November 4, 2008, determined to keep the title regardless of the outcome of the election.

And then something profound happened. Barack Obama was elected president. Al-

though the present milieu provides a special teaching opportunity, I want to be careful not to read the present into the past. How do I explain that within some four decades, African-Americans have gone from being barred from voting in the South to being represented in the highest office of the na-

tion? At the same time, how will I teach that we cannot look at this exceptional moment as proof that race is not important and rac-

ism does not exist? I will have to stress con-

tinuity and change.

My pre-existing lectures must reconcile major themes of African-American histo-

ry—which include but are not limited to the

horrible violence of slavery, disenfranchise-

ment, segregation, and economic disparity

by race—with what is being hailed as a new

message of hope.

As a scholar of slavery and African-American women's history, I am immediately struck by how the public portrayal of the

black family is being reconstituted before our eyes. From their first bump, to their

dances at the inaugural balls, Barack and Michelle Obama have presented a new image of a black nuclear family (nearly com-

plete with puppy). That representation, however, must be balanced with the legacy of family separation during slavery and the persistence of African-American family-headed households. Lectures and discus-

sions will show the unfortunate elements of enslavement, while being tuned to the brighter image we see today.

African-American resistance—he it be to

slavery or to discrimination—is a topic that

always fascinates students. I will explain that decades of research by social historians have shown that enslaved people worked slowly or

feigned illness to subvert the slave system in

their own subtle ways. But I cannot ignore the role that violence has historically played in the history of African-Americans. I need to discuss the rape of slave women, lynch-

ings during the era of Jim Crow, the hanging

of nooses on the doors of black academ-

ics across the country in the fall of 2007, the

sobbing numbers of black youth murdered in

our cities.

Just as important, I fear that our celebra-

tion of civil-rights achievements and what

Rep. John Lewis has called a "nonviolent

revolution" runs the risk of eradicating the

lessons of more radical parts of our past.

So I will urge my students to balance their discussion of Obama's brilliance in mobiliz-

ing the grass roots and calmly meeting the

challenges of critics with other narratives.

That will mean including lectures on black Feminist thought, with its analysis of how

power is cooled by both race and gender; on the Black Power movement and Pan-African struggles for equality, which engage ques-

tions of imperial domination and deconomi-

zation. By situating the United States within a

larger international context, students will

have the opportunity to assess challenges to

American exceptionalist claims about its past and present.

What I fear is a march by an education of

hope and optimism in an era of reality—

by which I mean the reality of a first African-American president who is conceiv-

ably out of reach of African-American students. As is the case of Martin Luther King Jr. and Barack

Hussein Obama, I will remind them that the

president more resembles Franklin D. Rous-

svelt, and to a lesser extent John F. Kennedy,

in his projected proposals for economic recovery. That will mean pointing out that at the end of his life King was prepared to mount a Poor People's Campaign of non-

violent confrontation to combat economic inequality.

The present moment in African-American his-

tory allows students to feel that they are architects of history. After all, large num-

bers of newly registered young people canvassed, voted, and went to the inaug-

uration. Moreover, countless members of the so-called hip-hop generation have used MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube to document their experiences. What do they think about the fact that it was not so long ago that pundits were proclaiming them apolitical? Can they examine their creative output the same way we would any histori-

cal source?

I know that not everyone is happy with how the election played out, as evident in the sounds of bousing, reports of spatting, and calls of the "N" word during John

McCain's concession speech, or the costly bill associated with protecting this new first family. Students who supported McCain or did not endorse Obama also desire a voice in the classroom, and they may use the forum of an African-American history course to work out their response to a system that they feel has let them down.

I need to consider how to teach African-

American politics to students who may still feel resentment about the election re-

sults.

In my African-American history courses, I

have found discussions on Africa to be nec-

essary—and compelling—as more and more children of African immigrants populate American classrooms. Although those stu-

dents identify with their African-American peers, they bear with special pride as I do a roll call and ask "Who is from Nigeria? Si-

erra Leone? South Africa?" I start all of my courses with lectures on the continent and continue to make intellectual connections to the African past. With Obama's election, and ties to Kenya, the connection between Africa and Africa-America is even more apparent.

The Black History Month is ending, and en-

rollment starts soon for the spring quarter. I'm already heaving about interest among students of varied racial backgrounds.

Some of them may decide this course is not for them. But others will embark on a 10-week journey tracing the major themes in African-American history from slavery to the presidency. All of us may dis-

cover new points of contact with the mate-

rial.