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Author

Millward, J

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Teaching African-American History in the Age of Obama

By JESSICA MILLWARD

WHEN I proposed a spring course on major topics in African-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 members. I now teach at a college whose African-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 a decade ago.

Of course, I believe that African-American history is a topic that all students should find intriguing; but without a "built in" audience, I suspected that I would have to rename the course to capture the imagination

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of a broad spectrum of students. Hoping to draw students caught up in the general excitement of the past year, I changed the title from what had been "Black History, 1619 to the Present" to the (dare I say) "postracial" "Major Topics in African-American History From Slavery to the Presidency." I submitted 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. Although 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 nation? At the same time, how will I teach that we cannot look at this exceptional moment as proof that race is not important and racism does not exist? I will have to stress continuity and change.

My pre-existing lectures must reconcile major themes of African-American history—which include but are not limited to the horrific violence of slavery, disenfranchisement, 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 reconstructed before our eyes. From their fist bump, to their dances at the inaugural balls, Barack and Michelle Obama have presented a new image of a black nuclear family (soon complete with puppy). That representation, however, must be balanced with the legacy of family separation during slavery and the persistence of African-American female-headed households. Lectures and discussions will show the unfortunate elements of enslavement, while being tuned to the brighter image we see today.

African-American resistance—be it 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, lynchings during the era of Jim Crow, the hanging of nooses on the doors of black academics across the country in the fall of 2007, the sobering numbers of black youth murdered in our cities.

Just as important, I fear that our celebration 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 mobilizing 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 coded by both race and gender; on the Black Power movement and Pan-African struggles for equality, which engage questions of imperial domination and decolonization. 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.

NO MATTER how encouraging one may find messages of hope and civic responsibility, students should also understand that it takes time to change formal systems of government and informal mechanisms of power. For example, the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, passed after the Civil War, prohibited discrimination at the polls based on former enslavement, race, or color. Yet African-Americans could not safely vote without threat of violence until Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965—a law that is up for renewal every 25 years. And although students like to draw comparisons between Martin Luther King Jr. and Barack

Hussein Obama, I will remind them that the president more resembles Franklin D. Roosevelt, 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 history allows students to feel that they are architects of history. After all, large numbers of newly registered young people canvassed, voted, and went to the inauguration. 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 historical source?

I know that not everyone is happy with how the election played out, as evident in the sounds of booing, reports of spitting, 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 results.

In my African-American-history courses, I have found discussions on Africa to be necessary—and compelling—as more and more children of African immigrants populate American classrooms. Although those students identify with their African-American peers, they beam with special pride as I do a roll call and ask, "Who is from Nigeria? Sierra 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 African-America is ever more apparent.

Black History Month is ending, and enrollment starts soon for the spring quarter. I'm already hearing 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 discover new points of contact with the material. ■

Jessica Millward is an assistant professor of history at the University of California at Irvine.