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Black History Is American History: Teaching African American History in the Twenty-first Century

Allison Dorsey

History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, and if faced with courage, need not be lived again.

—Maya Angelou, "On the Pulse of Morning," 1993

In the spring of 2003, I received an invitation to the screening of the hbo film *Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives* at the Prince Music Theatre in Philadelphia. The film features black actors reading from the text of the 1930s Works Progress Administration—sponsored Federal Writers' Project interviews with former slaves. At the reception following the screening, I overheard the conversation of a group of professional thirty-something African American women, all of whom seemed stunned by the film. Most remarked that they had no previous knowledge of the Works Progress Administration project, and many reported being amazed that "slaves" could have articulated their life experiences so clearly. Reluctant to enter the conversation as a know-it-all historian, I remained silent until one of the women remarked that she would have to figure out how to get to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., so she might gain access to the narratives herself, to find "our own history that has been hidden away from us." "Hidden?" I sputtered in response. "No, it is not hidden. And you don't have to go to Washington, D.C. You can go to a library and ask for all or part of George Rawick's many volumes of *The American Slave!*"¹ **1**

My spirited outburst sparked a spontaneous, lengthy "teach-in" session that left me feeling socially inept and intellectually frustrated. How was it, I wondered as I boarded the train home, that in 2003, a group of college-educated, professional black women were so unaware of the tremendous body of work, researched and written by hundreds of scholars, about slavery or African American history and culture in general? Equally perplexing, why did some of the women in question, with computers and knowledge of the World Wide Web, continue to hold the rather dated belief that "our" history was "hidden" and inaccessible? And, just as troubling, if middle-class and rising black women did not know their history, what might that mean for other people of color or whites in the larger society? **2**

I strode into class the next day determined to teach with such intensity and passion as to ensure that no Swarthmore College student would leave school without knowing the history of African-descended people in the United States and that this history is readily accessible and belonged to all Americans. Sadly, I do not have the power to compel any student at Swarthmore to take African American or any **3**

other type of history course. Still, I continue to teach the African American history survey in service to the Department of History, to the Black Studies Program, and to my core belief that knowledge of American history is vital for all citizens. For the American story simply cannot be told without discussion and analysis of the experiences of black people whose labor created the nation's wealth, whose enslavement undergirded and undermined the concept of democratic freedom, and whose civil exclusion sparked the political revolutions of the twentieth century.

The year-long survey in African American history (7A, "African American History, 1500–1865" and 4 7B, "African American History, 1877—Present") that I teach was originally divided to acknowledge the formal end of American slavery and to allow space for my upper-level course: "Black Reconstruction." In current practice that periodization has become a bit of a misnomer. The first semester always ends with a discussion of the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the second semester always begins with a more detailed discussion of Reconstruction. The survey is designed to provide a general knowledge of the social, political, and cultural history of the people who would become African Americans, from the development of the sixteenth-century Atlantic world to the presidency of William Jefferson Clinton. The earliest lectures focus on life among the many peoples of West Africa prior to European contact and, *by necessity*, emphasize the development and evolution of the concept of race, one of the themes of the course. I learned in my earliest years of teaching that American undergraduates, products of what Toni Morrison has identified as "the wholly racialized society that is the United States," need to confront and begin to dismantle their ingrained notions of race as a fixed and static concept in order to make possible any genuine understanding of the past.²

The course work for 7A is comprised of readings from a textbook and ten to twelve additional texts, 5 including a few novels and historical monographs. Lectures and discussions move the course through the processes of enslavement, the development of slave culture, the formation of free communities, the rise of abolitionism, and the experience of life in the immediate postemancipation era. The 7B course includes a discussion of the hopes and failures of Reconstruction, an outline of the rise of Jim Crow and early black political protest, and highlights of the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance. Analysis of the debates about and within the growing black middle class gives way to discussion of the black experience during both world wars, and then the course inevitably gets bogged down in my detailed discussion of the modern civil rights movement. The survey ends with a discussion of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, the urban crises, the rise of black conservatives, and the dangers of the "ghetto trance." I place great emphasis on the diversity of the black experience. To disrupt the assumption of a monolithic, universal black experience, I instruct students to pay careful attention to the impact that time, location, and occupation had on the lives of black people in the past. The interplay of gender within the black community, as well as gendered limitations imposed on the black community by white society, runs like a bold stripe through the course. Beginning with a discussion of Edmund Morgan's thesis found in *American Slavery, American Freedom* linking black enslavement and white liberty, I foreground issues of class: class formation, class mobility (or lack thereof), and class solidarity. My own interest in black community studies creeps into my lectures, and students leave the survey with at least an awareness of the titles of the most recent literature in that subfield.³

I have spent the bulk of my teaching career at small liberal arts colleges: Oberlin, Hamilton, and 6 currently, Swarthmore. Working at an affluent, predominately white institution, I have no expectations that a majority of my students will be of African descent, neither recent immigrants nor descendants of American slaves. Indeed, students of color are a distinct minority at most such institutions. As a result, the course was not and is not designed to appeal to any particular category of student—save my accurate assumption that most of my students have graduated from an American high school. Most also come from upper- and middle-class backgrounds; such students are well read, write well, and have had some small exposure to American history, though considerably less to African American history. I seek to provide more of an "event history" of African Americans—the who, what, when, where, and why—and less of a historiographical overview in the survey course. I am more interested in students understanding the work

of contemporary scholars, such as Leslie Harris's study of blacks in pre-Civil War New York, Charles Payne's dynamic analysis of the civil rights movement, or Steven Hahn's discussion of the black pursuit of freedom and political equality in the era of Reconstruction, than I am in studying the works of Ulrich B. Phillips and company. While discussions of the exclusion of black scholars by the mainstream history profession, the work of the Dunning school and of black ethnographers of the Chicago School, and the rise of post-World War II "revisionist" scholars bubble to the surface on occasion, I believe it is generally far more important that students in the survey course learn about the lives and struggles of the vast majority of black people in America (in addition to improving their writing and learning how to do research). It is my hope that they will leave the course with, among other things, a clear understanding that slavery flourished well above the Mason-Dixon line, a knowledge of the difference between the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment, an understanding of the political and social activism of blacks in the post-Civil War era, and a recognition of why the full name of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom matters.⁴

African Americans are, as stated in the syllabus, the subject matter of the course. Rather than discussed as an "add-on," or as simply part of a special unit on the Civil War or World War II, the black experience is the center of the story. At the same time that I seek to center the African American experience, I emphasize that this history is quintessentially American history. From before the beginning of the nation, Africans were an integral part of what would become America; their status as enslaved persons cannot diminish their contributions to the creation and success of the nation. Historians have long acknowledged that fact, though it may be new to undergraduates. Writing in *Slavery and Public History*, Ira Berlin notes that, "Simply put, American history cannot be understood without slavery. Slavery shaped America's economy, politics, culture, and fundamental principles. For most of the nation's history, American society was one of slaveholders and slaves."⁵ Slavery fostered notions of race for all Americans, notions that mutated over the centuries of that peculiar institution and through the Jim Crow era, ultimately influencing the whole of the nation's life. Later freed, though for most of the nation's existence barred from the rights and status of citizens, black men and women met all the challenges that tested other Americans and left their mark on the nation's intellectual life, culture, and industry. How can the nation fail to recognize black history as American history? The senior scholar John Hope Franklin, speaking in a recent television interview, reflected on the notion of black history as American history.

You can't be a historian of blacks without distorting the relationship between blacks and whites; you can't be a historian of whites without distorting the relationship. They're all here together; they interact all the times. Sometimes it's not favorable or exciting or good, but the interaction is there. And you have to take into consideration all these aspects of American history before you can say that you're really a historian of the United States.⁶

The emphasis on black history as American history often provokes questions about why the African American survey continues to be taught separately from the U.S. history survey. My pragmatic response focuses on time and reading load. If each of the three Americanists currently teaching in my small department offers a course on some portion of American history, with a different emphasis on sexuality or class or period, and each has corresponding lectures and a reading load that averages about two hundred pages a week, combining them into a gigantic American history survey would not do justice to either the themes or texts we are attempting to teach. The students would be overwhelmed and the faculty would be frustrated. I have no concerns that either of my well-trained colleagues, one white female and one white male, could not teach a basic survey in African American history in the same way that I often teach the U.S. history survey. We are distinguished more by our work and subfields than by our sex or race.

Swarthmore students tend to understand my rejection of notions of "authenticity" regarding the phenotype of the person teaching a course. My deep concerns with authenticity have to do with the preparation and skill of any given scholar. Is the scholar well trained? Has he or she studied and become well versed in the literature of the field? Is the research for his or her publications exhaustive and well

presented? Does the scholar in question acknowledge and engage with the work of other scholars in the discipline? An affirmative response to those questions makes the historian in question authentic much more than does his or her race. In my experience, the instructor's race has only been significant when the person in question evidences overtly racist behavior or an unconscionable racial insensitivity. For example, the social scientist who can find only *black* examples when discussing criminality or drug abuse, or the scholar whose racial insecurity manifests in inappropriate humor and storytelling. It is hoped that such experiences are rare.

On the few occasions that a student has expressed concerns about authenticity, I have used the moment to teach about the dangers of assuming that all people of any given race, religion, or creed think or act alike and of believing in the illusion of perfect racial solidarity. I have also taken some wicked pleasure in highlighting the dangers of racial stereotype and identity politics. For some students, my phenotype and working-poor background make me much more authentic than some of my peers or colleagues. I remind them that my phenotype and life experiences are representative of one type of collective black experience and that there have always been many black experiences, all of them authentic. I also remind students of the dangers of the flip side of the authenticity question. If they reject out of hand a white scholar doing African American history because of his or her race, then they must also accept that an African American scholar would be inauthentic doing the history of the white working class or, for that matter, analyzing the sonnets of Shakespeare, a conclusion they all reject as untenable. Lastly, I have been known to highlight the fact that some of the authors of their assigned texts, scholars they have judged to be excellent and authentic (especially if they agree with the thesis of the text), are not, in fact, African American. **10**

Swarthmore students are famous for their nose-to-the-grindstone, shoulder-to-the-wheel approach to their education. They are also known for their love of challenge and debate, a good part of the joy of teaching at this particular institution. I expect students in the survey to engage in classroom discussion of the assigned text, which is structured into the course for one meeting per week, but generating student discussion is always a challenge. Some are silent because it is their nature to be reticent, others because they have not completed the reading. Some students, often male students, assume that they have the right to the floor and hold forth until gently encouraged to let others participate. These are normal patterns of discussion. Still, discussions in the African American survey are somewhat distinct. **11**

In most years there are only a few students of color, including African American and self-identified "multi" students, in the survey—they are no more likely to take the course than other students. Nevertheless, I am often troubled by what I understand to be the self-imposed silence of some of the students of color who do enroll. That silence is sometimes connected to their failure to recognize that naïve knowledge of the black past is not the same as historical knowledge; students should not assume that being of African descent gives them more historical knowledge of the black past than other students have. Yes, black students reared in black homes, having attended black churches with parents who may have belonged to black fraternities or sororities, will undoubtedly have some basic awareness of the black experience in the past and a lived understanding of being black in the twenty-first century. That is not, however, historical knowledge of the black past, which requires research, study, and familiarity with documents, texts, and critical debates, as does the historical knowledge of any other past. Racial identity does not in and of itself produce historical knowledge. Some students of African descent erroneously assume that they "should know this history already" and are therefore likely to be intimidated into silence when they discover that they have as much to learn as everyone else in the class. **12**

Other times, it is clear that this silence, especially in 7B as the class is struggling with the story of African American life in the twentieth century, is connected to something else. After class and, more frequently, during my office hours, students of color have reported tremendous frustration, and sometimes legitimate anger, at arguments expressed by some of their white peers. When asked why they did not speak in class, why they did not challenge a peer on the merits of the case, they respond, "It is just too hard," or "Professor Dorsey, this stuff is just too close, I don't want to shout or lose my cool in front of those white kids." More than one student has shed tears in my office while recounting some deeply **13**

personal experience—with racism or with harassment by law enforcement, experiences rooted in the everyday life of urban black America. Faced with what they see as the glib commentary of their white peers, many retreat to silence rather than try to explain their reality. Some white students also retreat to silence and have been known to shed tears in my office—pressed by their own professed sense of "white guilt" or more often because they fear being perceived as a racist.

This classroom dynamic is both baffling and frustrating. I have great empathy for my students of color **14** struggling to come to voice around issues of race and class. I also have some faint understanding of the fear of being charged as a racist. Yet, as I remind my students every year, the college classroom is the safest place in the nation to study, debate, challenge, argue, or even shout. I struggle to remind these thin-skinned youngsters that they will not be forever marked or damaged by disagreeing or even by being charged as a racist. The history classroom is to my mind the very best place for Americans to engage in the process of coming to grips with our complex story of slavery and freedom, racial exclusion and participatory democracy. Here, we root our arguments and defend our positions with evidence; here, we have the tools—words, documents, photos, and songs—to create knowledge of the past and to glean some new understanding of our present. When my classroom feels safe for all, when students recognize that heated disagreement *can* be resolved in dialogue, when I have encouraged all students to push past their comfort zones to achieve intellectual breakthroughs, I deem the survey a success. Some terms are better than others.

The African American survey fits nicely into the core of courses on American history offered at **15** Swarthmore. There is very little sequencing of history courses at Swarthmore, though students who take my colleague's Civil War course may follow it by enrolling in 7B. Similarly, students who take 7A may move on to another colleague's course on American labor history. Ideally, the African American survey would serve as a feeder course for upper level and double credit honors seminars.⁷ This is not necessarily the case, and, as a consequence, some students enter the honors seminar on slavery or black communities with no background in African American history. Most students will overcome that lack with extra study and reading. Unfortunately, others will assume that training in this field is unnecessary—resulting in anemic contributions to seminar discussions and lackluster essays.

The study of any history is reading and research intensive, and because many students come to the **16** field with little knowledge of research methods, I have added a research skills component to the survey course. This decision to require more research in primary-source documents is grounded in my hope of teaching a new skill and in my frustration with reading yet another paper on the Tuskegee experiment or *Brown v. Board of Education*.⁸ While those papers are usually well written and reference the required five secondary sources, the work represents a sameness, a failure to understand how much other subject matter might be investigated. I have discovered that exposure to primary-source documents helps students develop their own ideas about what topics need study and what questions should be asked.

I also aspire to other revisions of the survey. I have not yet found a satisfying way to incorporate **17** more literature on music and the music industry from the era of Scott Joplin or to address the transformation of the cultural landscape created by the hip-hop revolution. Nor have I found time within the structure of the class to address black theater and art seriously. There is much to add to the syllabus each year: the history of interaction between African Americans and Latinos in the West or Asians in the South, the story of black immigration from the Caribbean and Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and issues of sexuality beyond the dynamic of black heterosexual relationships. This challenging predicament is revealing of the vibrancy of the field of African American history.

At the close of the survey, I distribute a "Summer Reading List in African American History." **18** Conceding that I cannot require students to read from the list and test them in the fall, I encourage them to explore some of the themes we have not addressed in the course. Over the years, a number of students have reported that they were "working" through the list. I choose to believe that the survey in African American history has created in some a lifelong interest in the field and, I hope, it has sparked more than one heated, well-informed debate about the American story. Though the spontaneous "teach-in" at the

reception for *Unchained Memories* may have been too little and too late for my thirty-something auditors-of-the-moment, I hope, in a way shared by every other educator, that the students who have taken my survey courses are better prepared to recognize the survival and importance of the historical in the present and to understand the myriad sources and the vast number of stories out of which "our" American history is made.

Notes

Allison Dorsey is associate professor of history at Swarthmore College.

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Readers may contact Dorsey at adorsey1@swarthmore.edu.

¹ *Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives*, dir. Ed Bell (hbo, 2003). George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (19 vols., Westport, 1972); George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography. Supplement, Series 1* (12 vols., Westport, 1977); George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography. Supplement, Series 2* (10 vols., Westport, 1979).

² Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), xii.

³ Peter Edelman, "The Worst Thing Bill Clinton Has Done," *Atlantic Monthly*, 43 (March 1997), 43–58. William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York, 1996). Mary Pattillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class* (Chicago, 1999), 119–20. Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975).

⁴ Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863* (Chicago, 2003); Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, 1995); Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York, 1918).

⁵ Ira Berlin, "Coming to Terms with Slavery," in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, ed. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (New York, 2006), 2.

⁶ For Gwen Ifill's interview with John Hope Franklin, see "Civil Rights Activist, Historian Discusses New Autobiography," transcript, June 15, 2006, *Online NewsHour*, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june06/franklin_06-15.html.

⁷ For information on the Swarthmore College Honors Program, see <http://www.swarthmore.edu/honors.xml>.

⁸ *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

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