Teaching What You're Not

Mayberry, Katherine

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“When Christie Pope [Farnham] entered the room, there was immediate whispering and shock. One question that quickly entered everyone’s mind was, How could a white professor teach black students about African-American history?” This quote from the April 1991 newsletter of the Black Cultural Center at Iowa State University posits the problem of identity politics in a nutshell. It raises questions of both authenticity and authority, not out of concern for some philosophical abstraction, but out of the increasing anger and alienation that characterize so many African American youth on today’s college campuses. They feel that, historically, the treatment of African Americans has been so cruel and inhuman, so contemptuous and still unrecompensed that any normal black student must, on at least some level, be enraged that a white, whose ancestors came willingly rather than in chains to this country to take advantage of the wealth that slavery created, would have the audacity to lecture African Americans on their history.

Blacks, however, are not the only students who register for my upper-division survey courses in African American history. In fact, they are outnumbered by white students who represent a self-selected group whose interest in the subject grows occasionally out of personal relationships with blacks but more frequently out of an ab-
horrence of the injustices African Americans have suffered in a society that idealizes freedom and equality. The white students differ from their black peers, however, in their commitment to the notion of a color-blind society. Yet this commitment is occasionally accompanied by an unexamined tendency to judge black experiences by white norms, which accounts for their often silent dissent from the insistence by African American students that black cultural differences be validated.

While whites come to the subject from a different perspective, many accept the same notion of authenticity and authority that animates the quote at the beginning of this essay. Although I have devoted many years to reading and researching in the field of African American history, white students want to hear the views of the black students on the issues raised. This is not simply a matter of being interested in the input of students from the group whose history is under discussion, as important as that is. It is also the belief that, no matter that the interpretations I present are often the results of black scholarship, what African American students have to say is the “real truth” on the subject.

In this regard, white students are no different from white administrators and faculty who often appoint black faculty to positions in the field of black studies on the basis of the color of their skin rather than on the focus of their research. For example, the black male appointed by the dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences to head the African American studies program at my institution last year teaches in the department of chemical engineering.

Permitting pigmentation to impute an aura of authenticity and authority is a type of stereotyping to which social science research on the nature of prejudice over the past thirty years should have sensitized all Americans. Yet even African Americans are capable of stereotyping white faculty. The current climate of intolerant conservatism encourages many of them to assume that no white will see anything positive in Nat Turner and resistance or in Marcus Garvey and cul-
tural nationalism, for example. Nor would they expect to see a significant portion of the syllabus in an African American history course taught by a white instructor begin with a lengthy overview of African history and culture. The assumption is that whites will not teach anything damaging to the reputation of whites, like the rape of black women by white men, and that courses taught by whites will be formulated from a Eurocentric perspective—that is, whites will view the experiences of African Americans only in relation to the history of whites. In other words, critics of white instructors, who often include those with no firsthand knowledge of the courses in question, like other students on campus and members of the larger academic community, stereotype white instructors by assuming that being white is a subject position from which it is almost impossible to present an unbiased account of African American history.

Stereotyping on the basis of color foregrounds the question of pigmentation, which is more complicated than Americans of all races generally realize. In most of the Western Hemisphere there are numerous nomenclatures to designate persons by degree of intermixture, and only full-blooded Africans are referred to as blacks. The exceptions are the United States and Canada, where a “one drop rule” categorized those with any visible black African ancestry as black. The immigration of small numbers of largely male Europeans to Latin America and the Caribbean led to greater miscegenation there than in British North America. As members of an interstitial group, people of mixed ancestry were able to provide those goods and services that were uneconomical for commercial producers (slaves, peasants, and miners) to provide and for which there were too few whites to supply. This provided them with a claim to an intermediate status in society above that occupied by slaves. In contrast, British North America was colonized by entire European families almost from the outset, and they always greatly outnumbered Africans. Since slavery and further exploitation in its aftermath under the auspices of Jim Crow were dependent on the maintenance of ra-
cial boundaries, a bipolar racial society acquired the aura of being simply a fact of nature.

Yet most African Americans have some white ancestry (and many some Native American admixture as well). The early colonial intermixture before the racial caste system hardened, the vulnerability of African American women to sexual exploitation under slavery and later as well, and a small but significant pattern of voluntary interracial relationships, which continued throughout the centuries despite all efforts to eliminate it, contributed to this demographic outcome. The forces of discrimination have been so strong, however, that despite some “passing,” most African Americans of whatever proportion of African, Native American, and European ancestry have identified as blacks, whether by necessity or choice.

Nevertheless, race mixing has not ended. For example, 10 percent of non-Southern black males marrying in 1986 chose white brides. These intermarriages, together with a trend in the United States toward widespread racial and ethnic mixing, are creating a movement to challenge commonly accepted categories. The Census Bureau is being urged to add new categories for persons who insist that the old “one drop rule” is inaccurate. Many children who are products of interracial unions now want to acknowledge both sides of their heritage. What impact this will have on challenging the concept of identity politics is unclear; however, it does not seem to be undermining various forms of racial fundamentalism based on essentialist beliefs. Although most scholars today argue that race is less a scientific concept than a social construct, the public seems to be largely unaware of this argument. In my teaching experience, I have found that black students who have been adopted by white families, or persons of interracial unions who wish to acknowledge a wider allegiance often have been placed under intense pressure by African American students to maintain racial solidarity. As a consequence, many drop the class or stop coming rather than subject themselves to such intense pressure.
This move to maintain racial solidarity is partially a reaction against the cultural politics of intolerance engendered by the ascendency of the right, which is also the impetus behind the current trend toward an emphasis on victimization and a rhetoric that demonizes whites. If black students see their opportunities to change society diminishing, they can at least enjoy the moral high ground in the national debate. The ability to maintain a sense of moral superiority as a means of both resistance and empowerment should not be underestimated, for, although it can represent a retreat into the realm of words, not actions, it has the potential to engage students in ways that can lead to positive political involvement.

In this instance, however, an “us against them” mentality confronts white students with a dismissive attitude that denies their sympathies and concerns. To many black students, whites are an undifferentiated category, all equally complicit in the injustices of even the remote past. And the white students accept this complicity even though most of their ancestors arrived in this country after the ancestors of most African Americans. Large numbers of my students are descendants of European immigrants who came in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, settling in the prairie and plains states, never having had any connection with slavery. Certainly, an argument can be made that whites today, no matter how recent their arrival, are guilty by virtue of the fact that they benefit from the development of the nation on the backs of slave labor. But if that argument is made, so must analogous ones that implicate the nation as a whole, including African Americans, in the current exploitation of Third World workers and the privileging of Americans in terms of the nation’s share of the consumption of the world’s resources. Few students notice, for example, that the price of their clothes is considerably less than would otherwise be the case were it not for the fact that they were made by prison (slave) labor in China or child labor in other parts of the world.

Nevertheless, as Malcolm X and immigration scholars have
pointed out, part of the assimilation process for white immigrants was the acceptance of racism. But the white students who enroll in African American history courses, because of self-selection, seldom share the racism of their immigrant forebears or even the racism of some of their parents. This phenomenon of white guilt has always proved frustrating for me. Personally, I find it inconceivable that individuals should be held responsible for what other individuals and entire societies did before they were even born. Even though I am white, I do not feel any responsibility for slavery—I was not there. But if I encounter racism today and fail to confront it, then I ought to feel guilty. Or if I live in a society that harbors racism and do nothing to change that society, then I should consider myself culpable. And, of course, the same holds true with regard to other types of injustice, like sexism and anti-Semitism.

Without problematizing pigmentation, then, it is easy to understand the demand for black instructors to teach black history. There is the assumption that they have the necessary authority deriving from the authenticity of their experiences and their morally superior position inherent in their relation to the victims rather than the oppressors. Experience serves another purpose as well. It provides a "comfort zone" in which shared understandings do not even have to be verbalized to be communicated. As a specialist in women's studies as well as black studies, I have experienced the camaraderie and sense of rapport deriving from all-female discussions. The atmosphere is different: the level of emotion is more apparent; the self-disclosure and support more revealing; the identification with the subject matter more intense; the ability to say what you think less subject to censure. The same atmosphere is often found in classes of largely black students taught by African Americans. The students are more expressive; there is less concern for papering over the harsh truths of black experiences in the name of civility; there is a greater sense of solidarity in struggle. In both cases common experiences promote a feeling of common identity. Undoubtedly, the introduction of
a male instructor in women’s studies classes or a white instructor in black studies courses changes this class chemistry. For some students this may indeed mean that opportunities for leadership and independent thinking are lessened and that learning itself is impaired by the resulting anger and frustration. That is one of the reasons we have black cultural centers and women’s centers—they provide safe places to be oneself; yet these largely segregated sites are meant to be only way stations on the path to equality and freedom in the larger society, not final destinations.

Some academicians see these alternative patterns of class interaction as evidence of different learning styles. Whereas I have no doubt that different learning styles exist and that more of one type will be found in some groups than others, largely as a result of socialization and cultural differences rather than essential differences based in gender or race, these cannot be permitted to argue for race- or sex-segregated teaching and instruction in history, or a history pedagogy that emphasizes racial identification over substantive content. Having come of age under segregation, I am convinced that a segregated learning situation, whether it be of the “ins” and the “outs,” the whites and the blacks, or the males and the females, in the long term is always an impoverished one, because exclusion leads to misperceptions of the other and the rank ordering of groups in which the dominant social order is maintained.

It is also clear to me that mastering the substance of a subject is the best way to raise self-esteem. Teaching resource centers throughout higher education are presently promoting “active learning,” a variation on John Dewey’s and subsequent efforts to engage students by avoiding viewing them as passive receptacles of their instructors’ wisdom. The profundity of this insight, however, is often lost in the pressure placed on instructors to reject the lecture method in favor of discussions. Whereas the discussion method is an excellent pedagogical tool in many instances—for example, literature and composition classes—it is not always the most useful in large history surveys en-
rolling one hundred or more students, so I make use of it only in a limited fashion in conjunction with a lecture format.

I agree with Nathan Huggins that “there is an irreducible body of information” that students ought to know in history, simply as a skill." Identifying with the subjects under study and appreciating the social dynamics in which they were enmeshed are necessary, but not sufficient. Therefore, an African American history course cannot compromise content for a journey of self-discovery based on personal experiences. To do so would be to deny one of the primary purposes of education—to acquire the new knowledge a discipline has to offer. Joan Wallach Scott argues that, by forgoing dependence on disciplinary expertise, the instructor has “no protection from the charge that she is ‘silencing’ the opinions of some of her dissenting students, no way to prove that her criticisms of their work have not denied them freedom of speech.” Indeed, my own experience supports the view that, when one is dealing with controversial issues, restricting one’s presentation to scholarship on the subject is the safest strategy. Even so, active learning invariably takes place, because the subject matter is relevant to contemporary society and the presentation of competing historical interpretations compels students to choose among them on the basis of the historical data.

Many African American students view black studies courses as “theirs.” Thus, they feel that these courses should serve their perceived needs for self-validation, the celebration of black culture, the building of self-esteem, and, in some cases, even a boost in their grade point average. Viewing it as their turf, they not surprisingly object to its apparent appropriation by white students and faculty. Although such attitudes are understandable, and many of these demands have some validity in other contexts, they stand in conflict with the standards of the historical profession. Self-esteem may well result from the study of the African American past, but the discipline of history is not designed to serve this end.

Several points in relation to history as a discipline are important
to keep in mind here. First, history is predicated on the notion that the field is not esoteric but can be learned by anyone, just as universities are based on the belief that all knowledge is in some sense universally knowable and therefore can be taught to others. One does not have to be a Nazi or a Jew to understand the Holocaust. To quote Nathan Huggins again, "Black Americans, for instance, who fail to recognize that they are not the same as slaves will never understand slavery. The present provides us with a different perspective as well as a different knowledge of the past." To insist that only blacks can teach or study African American history would also mean, by that logic, that they would be unable to learn about or teach the history of Europeans or Asians. Such positions would lead inevitably to the ghettoization of black studies departments and programs, destroying their intellectual integrity and credibility. Even more damaging, such logic could be used to exclude African Americans from other areas of study, placing them on an inferior academic track.

Second, postmodern analysis has had only a limited impact on the historical profession, which had earlier recognized the impossibility of locating absolute historical truth by means of some type of objective, empirical, method. But, contrary to assertions by the more skeptical postmodernists, one historical interpretation is not deemed as good as any other. Because historical facts do have a concrete existence, all interpretations must be measured against them. Slavery did occur after all. Nevertheless, contemporary historians recognize that work done in the discipline provides only partial truths and that subject positions must be considered and respected. The bias of earlier historical interpretations is understood to result in part from the dominant subject position of the authors. Yet the potential for self-correction inherent in the historical method by virtue of its requirement that interpretations be systematically assessed against the facts, a requirement enhanced by the current openness of the field to scholars from a multitude of standpoints, largely accounts for the profession being comfortable with the view that past events, if not interpre-
tations, have an existence independent of language and author and can, therefore, form the basis of a realistic understanding of the past.

Finally, the historical profession traditionally has decried presentism in historical writing and deplored a research agenda that seeks a usable past. Today, however, feminist historians, African Americanists, and other scholars actively seek a transformation of American society and hope that their scholarship will provide a spur to achieving social justice. Although presentism still is deplored by most traditional historians, even they would probably agree that each generation asks its own questions of history, questions necessarily arising out of their contemporary social context.

Having said this, however, I must point out that how historians do their work, despite major shifts in focus and types of data assessed, has changed relatively little. Although the ascendance of social history over the political history writing of the past redirects the focus on new historical actors, and the introduction of fresh data, new questions, and "bottom up" perspectives brings major advances to the discipline, the day-to-day approach to the data is still one of collecting and evaluating evidence in a systematic fashion. It is true that to traditional archival textual materials have been added oral histories and examination of cultural artifacts and statistical analyses of all things quantifiable, but whether the historian is emotionally engaged or intellectually detached, the reality remains unaltered: like the sleuth in search of the killer, historians meticulously and systematically analyze the facts they have dug up to see whether they fit the theories they have developed to explain events. And a jury of other historians and scholars uses this same standard to judge the outcome.

The problem for the history instructor is that some of what goes for African American history in today's black communities does not meet these evidentiary standards. Ideas are being fostered in many public school systems in inner cities where African Americans, in an attempt to take control of their children's education, have turned to speakers, popular writers, and scholars trained in other areas to con-
struct their curricula. As a consequence, when these students arrive in upper-division university courses in black history, they charge instructors with giving them inaccurate information. Not surprisingly, given the way history is taught in the nation’s public schools as a series of indisputable facts and conclusions, any attempt to offer more than one interpretation for consideration, much less to point out which interpretations have given rise to consensus in the profession and which are still subject to debate, is seen as a rejection of their true history. If the instructor is an African American, such a challenge to their accepted belief system is called a “sellout”; if the instructor is white, this is seen as yet another instance of whites lying to blacks to preserve their own self-interest.

The onus to challenge the false claims of Afrocentrism falls most often on historians, for these claims often remain ignored in other disciplines. In English classes, for example, the focus is on writing, not historical content; and, in any case, the instructor, often a graduate student or newly minted Ph.D. teaching numerous sections of the required first-year composition course, probably does not have the expertise to separate fact from fiction, especially since most Americans have encountered very little African American history in their own secondary and higher education experience. Outside class, many Afrocentric speakers are being brought to campus, but they draw audiences almost exclusively from African American students. Thus, their speeches receive little or no critical commentary, leaving even the more extreme positions unchallenged, which gives them the appearance of credible, scholarly, “cutting edge” research, as far as students are concerned.

Much of what these speakers have to say may best be characterized as myth. Myths are difficult for an instructor to address, especially because all myths are constructed of both fact and fiction and therefore require a more sophisticated approach to learning than is generally demanded of students. And resistance is to be expected, because many African American students have something of their
self-perception tied up in these myths. This situation undoubtedly will become even more widespread as elementary and secondary teachers adopt materials, like those written by Molefi Asante, with “easy to identify symbols which challenge students to internalize history onto an emotional, personal, level.” American history itself has not been without its grand narratives like the triumphalist myth that paints a picture of the nation’s past as one of invincible progress. Many historical myths serve the function of legitimating a society’s origins, for example. But the purpose of history is to seek the truth about the past, not perpetuate myths. One of my black students insisted that myths should be taught even if they do not conform to the facts, because they build self-esteem; but it is my contention that, while this might be the initial effect, subsequent understanding that this self-esteem was not based on a true reading of the historical record would in the long run undermine self-esteem even more.

Many of the myths that African American students bring to the study of history may be characterized as Afrocentric. Although these ideas have been around for a long time, receiving popular attention in the early seventies, they are now being rediscovered by students on university campuses who are unaware of their earlier exposure. It is this historical amnesia that permits students to see such ideas as “cutting edge.”

Afrocentrism refers to an approach to the study of the history and culture of people of African descent that attempts to examine them from their own perspective. In this sense Afrocentric history is the story of blacks as agents, not objects, in society. The focus is not simply on race relations or even black contributions to the dominant culture, because this has the effect of depicting them as appendages of peoples of European descent. Most historians working in the field since the seventies are Afrocentrists in this sense, and I count myself among them. However, some Afrocentrists have taken this position further and developed a paradigm centered on ancient Egypt. A few even tout a rhetoric of anti-Semitism and theories of racial supremacy
based on melanin.\textsuperscript{19} The recent visibility of these views in the national media has resulted in a shift in popular usage of the term “Afrocentrist” to refer to those who see Egypt as a touchstone for black history, and I so employ the term in the remainder of this essay.

Afrocentrists have two goals: to gain respect for African Americans by providing them with a glorious origin in the remote past to counter long-held racist assertions that Africa, the “Dark Continent,” never produced any great civilizations; and to give black studies a distinct subject and methodology in order to provide legitimation as an academic discipline.

The glorious past refers to ancient Egypt, which Afrocentrists argue was the first civilization. They further claim that it was a black African civilization and that therefore much of the knowledge that Europeans credit to the Greeks and Romans should go to Africans, for they took their seminal ideas from the Egyptians. For Afrocentrists, Egypt constitutes a paradigm for understanding cultural achievements analogous to that which classical Greece and Rome constitute for Western European thought and culture, and they demand that even courses in the history of African Americans begin with the study of Egypt. Such a view counters the racist assertion that nothing great ever came out of Africa by turning it on its head, making European civilization derivative of African.

The Afrocentrists not only claim original achievements in the advance of high culture, but also insist on a cultural unity between the early Nile Valley and the rest of black Africa and its diaspora down to the present. Cultural values from the Nile Valley flow primarily from the significance placed on community and cooperation and are discussed in opposition to European civilization, which is seen as a cultural unity emphasizing individualism and aggressiveness.

By setting up such an oppositional paradigm, Afrocentrists believe they offer the key to deliverance. Molefi Asante says that “when a person believes that the society is only to be used, that people are only to be victimized, that neighborhoods are alien, he or she is capable of
the worst kinds of actions. Afrocentricity creates a framework for dealing with this type of dislocation." Deliverance, rather than coming through social action, results from a reform of the individual—from "recentering" one's life through a commitment "to internalize an African-centered consciousness in everything we do or think."21

This belief in the contemporary efficacy of the Afrocentric perspective in part accounts for the sense of urgency and missionary zeal, especially in view of the problems inner cities face in terms of drugs, drive-by shootings, and the feminization of poverty. An additional motivation is the perceived need to delineate a distinct subject and methodology in order to legitimate the new field of black studies, whose first program was initiated at San Francisco State University only in 1969.22 Despite the fact that advances in scholarship coming out of a variety of interdisciplinary programs call into question the very concept of disciplines as artificial and unnecessarily fragmenting, Afrocentrists feel that providing the field with a distinctive subject and methodology will legitimate its position in academia. This position is also an effort to increase respect for African Americans, because black studies has been marginalized within the academy as intellectually "soft." Afrocentrists are working to enlarge the field to incorporate the study of all peoples of African descent, whereas most black studies programs currently focus on African Americans, while separate programs, originally begun in the fifties and staffed primarily by whites, focus on Africa. Afrocentrism also provides a theoretical base in terms of a set of key concepts and a paradigm (Egypt and its cultural hegemony). The methodology centers on the notion that "there exist different, culturally-bound ways of knowing the universe." In this case, knowledge is seen to derive from an intertwining of both the material and the spiritual and is thus a rejection of Western empiricism. "In Africology," according to Asante, "language, myth, ancestral memory, dance-music-art, and science provide the sources of knowledge, the canon of proof, and the structure of truth."24

Black studies, like women's studies, has always had a commitment
to the community and to liberation; and some of their proponents have sought to challenge empiricism as objective truth, because it has long been used to maintain the subordinate status of both blacks and women. The oppositional nature of these two movements against deeply embedded forms of social injustice has led to many similar strategies. A case could even be made that the belief of some feminists in an early period of goddess religions leading to the development of nurturant and peaceful societies is analogous to the Afrocentrists' conception of ancient Egypt.

The black studies movement initially began with a demand for black history courses and the hiring of black faculty. Once ensconced in the university, it turned to developing new knowledge and frameworks for understanding African Americans. Presently, departments and programs are interdisciplinary in structure and staff and range in emphasis from Marxism to the black aesthetic. Contrary to the charges of some Afrocentrists that these programs tend to teach about blacks from the white perspective, scholars working in history since the early seventies have transformed the field with their new questions and path-breaking research.

Nevertheless, the Afrocentrists are insistent that theirs is the only perspective for black studies. The National Council of Black Studies is currently attempting to disseminate a curriculum that combines the study of peoples of Africa with the African diaspora based on the Nile Valley paradigm. Darlene Clark Hine objects to the criticism of more traditional black studies scholars by Afrocentrists: "In order that the intellectual domain remain healthy each group of Black Studies scholars must engage in continuous critique, not in a quest for academic dominance."

A critique of Afrocentrism is considered an affront by many African American students. Yet it is my professional obligation to point out problems with their version of the historical record. Ralph Austen, an Africanist at the University of Chicago, writes in reference to Asante and his department at Temple, "I personally find their work parochial,
misinformed, and trapped in the discourse of the very racism they claim to repudiate." Many scholars of both races have pointed to problems in the Afrocentric perspective. Egypt was not a black African but a multicultural society; many of the contributions to knowledge claimed to be African were indeed borrowed by the Greeks and Romans, but probably not all of those claimed. But perhaps more important, we should ask what civilization is anyway—only bureaucratized urban societies with monumental architecture? What are the linkages between Egyptian culture and those of West and Central Africa and diasporan cultures many centuries later? Are not Afrocentric assertions based on an essentialist view that culture is in the blood? These and many other questions can be raised to challenge some of the central assumptions of the Afrocentric position. This is not meant to dismiss the claims of those outside the historical profession, for they often bring fresh perspectives that lead to critical advances. The point, however, is the right to challenge their claims.

Although I had taught African American history since 1978 without difficulty, much of it as a faculty member in an Afro-American studies department, the rise of Afrocentrism in the early nineties, together with my move to a new university where my track record was unknown, resulted in serious problems. Some black students began to rudely object to portions of my lecture material. Personally, I like a frank exchange—"telling it like it is," as it was known in the sixties—and I had always encouraged questions and discussion throughout my lectures. But this was different. An in-your-face hostility surfaced that intimidated other students, both white and black. I experimented with teaching techniques from teaching resource centers to improve the learning environment, like an open invitation to students to give five-minute presentations on any subject, to provide those with dissenting views a voice. But this only intensified their hostility. Still searching for ways to enhance the learning environment, I began the course in the fall of 1993 with a discussion of the major schools of
interpretation in African American history, of which Afrocentrism is one.

Because African American history is an upper-division course, historiography has always been an important component of the subject. I hoped that, by getting the problem addressed early on in the course, tensions could be eliminated or at least diminished. As an example of anti-Semitism, I referred to the Nation of Islam’s *Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews*, even though I had many members of the Nation of Islam in class. I realized that this might prove to be impolitic, but I had decided that it was necessary to confront the growing acceptance by many blacks in my courses of the idea that Jews dominated the slave trade and slavery.

I was also confronting disruptive student behavior for the first time in my career. A Black Muslim freshman constantly objected to the points I was making. When the student refused to leave class after calling me a liar and then threatened me in front of my departmental chair, he was barred from attending class, pending disciplinary procedures. This incident provoked a sit-in of my class by members of the Black Student Association and the African American members of the university staff, including the head of the office of minority affairs, and took place even though a fearful administration had put the student back in my class over my objections and without requiring him to withdraw his threat against me. The sit-in was legitimated by the administration at a subsequent meeting with Black Student Association leaders, provided that the number of persons sitting in did not go over the limits placed by fire regulations. I continued to teach, even though advised by friends to ask for a leave of absence. The sit-in continued for almost six weeks, despite the fact that in an unrelated incident the disruptive student was jailed for bank theft.

During this period, campus and state newspapers carried numerous stories detrimental to my reputation, often including inaccurate charges made by students who were not even members of the class.
As a consequence, I was largely perceived either as a Eurocentric racist or an insensitive instructor. Because of federal and state regulations limiting what can be said publicly about students, I was initially unable to defend myself. Mass meetings were held on campus in which it was claimed that I must be afraid of African Americans; yet, as far as I could tell, none of the speakers knew with whom I vacation, who are my frequent house guests, with whom I party, or anything about me personally. The B.S.A. even rallied on the steps of the administration building to announce that they would get rid of me "by any means necessary."³²

The ordeal continued throughout the semester and would have lasted longer had I not been previously scheduled to teach abroad the second semester. Without the support of my colleagues in the history department, the chair of the African American studies program, and family and friends, I could not have survived, especially since I was up for tenure that year. But perseverance eventually paid off. The provost stopped the sit-ins, the faculty governing bodies passed resolutions on my behalf, and most important, I was allowed to complete the teaching of the course. The B.S.A. eventually found four students out of the one hundred in the class to bring charges against me of presenting inaccurate information and being disrespectful of a student’s religion. I was subsequently exonerated by the grievance committee that handled the charges.³³

The potential for conflict remains, however, because of the growing influence of Afrocentric claims emanating from rap music, public school curricula, and books for all ages disseminated through a proliferating market for ethnic goods. This influence, unfortunately, has a much larger impact on students than the current lively debate of these issues among black intellectuals in a variety of periodicals.

This essay is an attempt to demonstrate that not all problems arising out of teaching what you are not—in this case, being a white woman teaching black history—can be reduced to pedagogy or personalities. Certainly, if my classes had been limited to fifteen or twenty
students, with primary reliance on the discussion method, I might have been able to defuse the situation. But the decision to limit the number of students who can take the course has to be balanced against the reality that this means many who might benefit will be permanently excluded.

The primary problem, in my opinion, is an unavoidable conflict between the standards of the historical profession and the claims of the Afrocentrists—a conflict that exists independently of the instructor. I am not unmindful of standpoint theory, the "linguistic turn" in history, the contributions of Michel Foucault, and the insights of postmodernism. Yet I am committed to the traditional historical method because, despite its faults, it has demonstrated by its ability for self-correction that it is the best method to date for arriving at historical truth. This is not meant to denigrate the contributions of thinkers outside the discipline. They often provide fresh insights—insights that send historians back to the record to check these claims against their own.

It is unfortunate that many of the current Afrocentric claims are offered in a dogmatic fashion and that the debate, even among the African American intelligentsia, has become so rancorous. But even were that not the case, my problem would remain, because the public (including my students) generally adopts intellectual claims like these without their accompanying qualifications. This process of oversimplification is not new and has long afforded history professors the challenge of confronting naive undergraduates with ideas that undermine their parochial worldviews. But this challenge cannot be avoided, for the mission of the university and the history profession is the search for truth—no matter what the consequences.

NOTES
1. Bob Blauner argues in "Talking Past Each Other; Black and White Languages," American Prospect, summer 1992, 55–64, that white students locate
racism in the absence of color blindness, a position that places them in opposition to nationalist views. Most black students today feel that for whites to insist on assimilation of dominant values and styles is itself a form of racism.

2. For an analysis of this phenomenon, see, for example, Carl N. Degler, *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1971).


4. The implications of this trend are discussed in Lawrence Wright, “One Drop of Blood,” *New Yorker*, July 25, 1944.

5. One of the publications I have found particularly insightful in this regard is Peter J. Frederick, “The Lively Lecture: Eight Variations,” *College Teaching* 34, no. 2 (1986): 43–50. A growing body of literature on improving teaching techniques is being disseminated by teaching resource centers of universities.


11. For a critique of postmodernism and the historian’s practical approach to the problems it raises, see Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacobs, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994).

12. There are a few notable exceptions, like Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations* (New York: Knopf, 1991), which combines fictionalized accounts with narratives true to the historical record.


14. I have had firsthand experience advising a composition instructor at Iowa State University and reading some of the essays written for this class.
15. An example of someone whose ideas first appeared in the early seventies who has been rediscovered by African American undergraduates and currently appears on many campuses is Frances Cress Welsing. A psychiatrist, she claims that whiteness is a genetic deficiency; and since “color always annihilates, phenotypically and genetically speaking, the non-color white,” and since whites are a minority of the world’s population, a fear of extinction motivates behavior known as white supremacy. See The Cress Theory of Color Confrontation and Racism (White Supremacy) (Washington, D.C.: C-R Publishers, 1970), 6.


18. This is especially apparent in studies on slavery that demonstrate that slaves developed their own culture significantly influenced by African retentions. See, for example, John Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); and Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).


The charge that Jews dominated the slave trade and slavery has forced the American Historical Association in 1995 to take an official stand against such a view. One of the best discussions of the evidence is David Brion Davis, “The Slave Trade and the Jews,” New York Review of Books, December 22, 1994, 14–16. Davis claims that the “extreme example of anti-Semitic accusations masquerading as a documented history of Jewish involvement in the slave trade and American slavery [is] … The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and
Jews, Volume One (The Nation of Islam, 1991)" (14n). The Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith periodically publishes research reports documenting statements by the Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, whose lieutenant, Khalid Muhammad, achieved notoriety for a speech espousing these views at a New Jersey campus. Tony Martin also achieved national notice when he was reprimanded by the president of Wellesley, where he is a faculty member, in the wake of complaints following the publication of his book The Jewish Onslaught: Despatches from the Wellesley Battlefront (Dover, MA: Majority Press, 1993). See Welsing Cress Theory of Color, for an example of ideas about melanin.

26. The number of scholars in this regard are too numerous to mention; however, the work of feminists like Deborah Gray White, Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985) provide useful examples of some of the transformations to which I am referring.  
30. Prominent among those African American scholars who oppose the excesses of Afrocentrism are Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Cornel West, bell hooks, and Clarence Walker.  

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


