Teaching What You're Not

Mayberry, Katherine

Published by NYU Press

Mayberry, Katherine.  
Teaching What You're Not: Identity Politics in Higher Education. 
NYU Press, 1996. 
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A few years ago I delivered a lecture on Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* to an audience of college students in New York City. After the talk, two undergraduates approached me and initiated a conversation. They had recently read my book on the history of black working women, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow,* and, they confessed, they were surprised to see that I was white. They had assumed I was an African American, but instead... The young women were too polite to say so, but I realized they had hoped to meet a tall, proud sister rather than a short white girl. One of the students asked how I came to write the book, and so I launched into an autobiographical tale that began with my childhood in a racially segregated small town in Delaware, and continued through my college years as a tutor of inner-city children. I was wending my rhetorical way up to my experiences at Wellesley College, where my mostly upper-middle-class students lacked any understanding of African American history, when I noticed that my listeners were becoming increasingly impatient with my little walk down memory lane. Exasperated, one of them interrupted, “May I ask you a personal question?” I nodded, and she asked, “Are you married to a black man?” In response, I could only smile and shrug and say no, and the conversation ended on a rather unsatisfying note for all three of us. The students had been looking
for some personal—even intimate—connection between me and the story I told in the book, and when they could not find it, they felt disappointed.

My reaction to this encounter was mixed. On the one hand, as a graduate student (at the University of Wisconsin, in Madison in the early 1970s) I had come to believe that “all history is autobiographical.” My friends and I were studying history because we had a compelling interest in American society, and we sought insight through the lens of our own families and communities—hence the self-proclaimed “swamp Yankee” from a New England working-class family writing a history of an early-twentieth-century strike among textile workers; the granddaughter of Irish immigrants researching the structure of nineteenth-century Irish immigrant families; the native Californian exploring the history of agricultural migrant labor in that state. Within this small circle of graduate students I fit right in; the subject of my dissertation, the Northern teachers who went south after the Civil War to teach the freedpeople of Georgia, evoked my early elementary school years in a Jim Crow school system. By the time I wrote Labor of Love I had a daughter (Sarah, born in 1981; Anna would come along in 1985), and (I told myself) perhaps motherhood was the “intimate connection” between the book I wrote and the person I was. In a sense, then, my student-questioners were on the right track, though I never got far enough in the (admittedly long-winded) story I was telling them to make that point.

On the other hand, I must confess that I was a bit irritated by the two students’ queries about my decision to write a book about black working women. After all, I wondered, how many historians are routinely called to account for the subjects they choose to explore? After a lecture on nineteenth-century financial institutions, is my econometrician colleague asked, “Are you married to a banker?” Does my colleague in seventeenth-century Puritan studies face routine challenges, “Is your father a preacher?” Too, I asked myself why I had never heard of instances where any number of white male scholars of black his-
tory were questioned about the “personal” reasons behind the topics they chose to study—slavery, free blacks in the antebellum period, the freedpeople during Reconstruction, for example. Finally, I suspected that the “motherhood connection” between my subjects and me amounted to a desperate attempt on my part to rationalize, or justify, my topic. In fact, I realized that I began my research on *Labor of Love* in the late 1970s, before I even contemplated having children, and that the real motivation behind it was my desire for something on the topic to assign to my Wellesley students. More significantly, I had an intrinsic interest in the history of black working women and their families, and I realized that very little had been written on these topics. What more did I need to launch a major research project?

To understand why I have chosen to write about certain topics over the last twenty years, one would need to consider the sequence of my four major research projects. In the process of writing my dissertation on the Northern teachers of the Georgia freedpeople from 1865 to 1873, I realized that I would have to learn much more than I already did about the history of African American life and culture. That interest led me directly to *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*. While researching the history of Southern sharecroppers for that book, I was struck by the similarities in the material condition of the black and white families that lived under that system, and I was struck by the efforts of those families to seek out work and better wage and educational opportunities, within a highly circumscribed plantation economy. Those concerns resulted in a study of black and white poverty after the Civil War, *The Dispossessed* (1992). At that point I became intrigued with the highly contingent dynamics of the structure of the American labor force—how certain groups of people came to embrace, or be assigned, certain kinds of jobs throughout history. I am currently at work on a history of the social organization of labor, and especially the ways that the job histories of white women and children have at times converged with, or diverged from, the histories of African American men, women, and children. Over the generations,
within a variety of regional economies, black people and white women and children (not to mention a whole host of other groups identified by their marital status, age, and religion, among other personal characteristics) have predominated in certain kinds of jobs, waged and nonwaged, as a result of not only racial and gender ideologies (which have shifted over time in any case), but also military considerations and the availability of large numbers of (certain kinds of) laborers in a particular time and place. Shut out of the paid labor force for whatever reason, or limited to ill-paid seasonal or casual labor, blacks and poor white female household heads have been stigmatized as lazy and lacking in ambition. Indeed, white elites (men and women) have tended to conflate criminality and poverty; hence the currently fashionable view that holds poor women of both races responsible for all the ills that afflict American society today. For example, Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, authors of *The Bell Curve*, argue that poor women are the agents of dysgenesis, the process by which “dumb” women reproduce (what the authors might call) the Cognitive Mudsill, children who will supposedly inevitably grow up to be violent and irresponsible members of society.

*Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow,* then, represents one stage in the evolution of my professional interests. It should go without saying that none of my books represents some distilled essence of “who I am”; rather, each book is a “text” of my interests at a particular time in my career.

More to the point perhaps is my lack of comprehension about what it means to study or teach “what you are” or “what you are not.” Obviously, all of us are composed of multiple, overlapping spheres of identity. Would those who insist that I teach only “what I am” find it acceptable for me to teach white women’s history, but not black women’s history? Or the history of all middle-class women (black and white) but not the history of poor women? Or the history of women in small towns but not those in big cities or rural areas? Or perhaps I should confine myself to the history of white women
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academics, preferably those who have married and have had children? Obviously, the whole notion of matching any single personal demographic characteristic to one's teaching and scholarship is absurd on the face of it. This is not to deny the value of collaborative scholarship or the importance of intellectual exchange among people from different backgrounds (at conferences or within the pages of journals); the study of history (or any field, for that matter) thrives on debate, give and take, and the more people involved the better. But it would be difficult to sustain the argument that one particular kind of person will inevitably possess insights into the past based on his or her background or life experiences. The study of history depends on people's research and analytical skills, and the passion they bring to their work, not their psychic powers.

Historical scholarship is a highly politicized enterprise today, and that politicization is manifested in a variety of ways, in and outside the classroom, within the publishing business, and within the profession itself. Yet I stand by one fundamental principle: scholars must remain free to write about and teach any subject they wish. Debate should focus not on what a person has chosen to research, but rather on how well he or she has done it. Whenever anyone expresses doubts about my work as a white woman writing African American history, I reply (if given the opportunity), "Let's begin the discussion with my footnotes, and go on from there." The vitality of historical—and indeed, all scholarly—inquiry depends on a generosity of intellectual spirit, an openness to the exploration of any number of issues in any number of ways. The field of history is enriched, and enriches life outside the academic community, only to the extent that scholars are free to pursue the study of the past in all its dazzling complexity.

Far too timid about any criticism they might face for writing on topics related to the history of race or ethnicity, some younger white scholars have decided to focus on whites exclusively, on the theory that, for example, African American history is best left to blacks,
Asian-American history to persons of Asian descent, and so forth. Implicit in this attitude is the narrow-minded and misguided conviction that minority historians should study one thing, and one thing only—the history of their own ethnic or racial (or gender) groups. This view is objectionable both on practical grounds and on principle. In practical terms we might note that the number of black men and women going to graduate school in history today is very low, for a variety of reasons—the sagging academic job market; the need for many college graduates (from all backgrounds) to find a job and begin paying off their student loans as soon as they receive their diplomas; the lack of encouragement gifted students of color receive throughout their educational careers, encouragement that is necessary to get anyone into graduate school and keep her or him there.

A larger issue of principle is at stake here—the potential fragmentation of scholarship altogether. Some American historians are preoccupied with sorting out a wide range of personal demographic characteristics—gender, race, ethnicity, regional identification, and class—and parceling out topics to scholars accordingly. Thus we hear serious discussions about whether or not men should write women's history, whether non-Southerners can actually understand "the Southern way of life," and so on and on. Obviously, if we wait for descendants of English indentured servants to step forward and write the history of that group, or if we reserve the study of Florida phosphate miners to people of their own kind, we will be out of luck. In fact, the view that the histories of certain groups of people must be written only by members of their own group shows a veiled contempt for those groups; the idea would seem to be that if no representative scholar steps forward to write that history, who cares? Better we learn nothing about that group than learn it from the "wrong" person. I believe that the bottom line is that no particular piece of the past should be ceded to a particular group; why should our willingness to explore every avenue of history be limited by the economics of the job market and the demographics of the profession?
Over the past few years, the field of American history has been enlivened by attention to groups that received short shrift—if any attention at all—from traditional scholars who focused their sights on “great men” and the wars they waged and the politics they practiced. History was narrowly defined precisely because one group of people—white men of property and privilege—was writing about people in the past much like themselves—white men of property and privilege in the past. While one might argue that the elite should write about the elite—that these men “understand” the culture and values of their forebears, it is clear that as a consequence many generations of American students gained only the most shallow view of the past.

A scholar’s choice of topics for research has a clear connection to what he or she teaches in the classroom. To the extent that our departments are inclined to indulge us, we teach about the things that intrigue and inspire us; it is up to us somehow to communicate the love of history to our students, and the best way to do that is to present the most inclusive and expansive view of our subjects. Consider how silly it would be for me, or any other white person, to announce to my classes at the beginning of the semester that I feel uncomfortable talking about black history, because I am not black myself, and so if my students who are interested in the history of the family or labor history want to learn about black families and workers, they should take a course offered through the African and Afro-American studies department—if one is offered that year, or if not, too bad. Stated another way, I would be offended to know that my male colleagues down the hall teaching American survey courses were taking care to omit any mention of the vast scholarship in the field of women’s history because they were men and felt it inappropriate for them to do so. Clearly, such a parochial approach would set us back several decades to the time when women, black people, and workers of all kinds were omitted from standard history courses and textbooks.
My course syllabi include a wide range of voices from the American past, and it is ludicrous that I should apologize for it, just because I grew up in a white middle-class family in the mid-Atlantic region (how “white bread” can you get!). In my survey of American women’s history, I have assigned a number of Federal Writers Project slave narratives, as well as Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Anne Moody’s *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. For a course on Southern women’s history I have used Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Mamie Garvin Fields with Karen Fields’s *Lemon Swamp and Other Places*, and Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple*. I have taught a survey of American history with a special focus on autobiography, and included Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery* and Frederick Douglass’s autobiography. The reading list for my modern social history course includes Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk*, in addition to Federal Writers Project interviews with a variety of black workers, from Pullman porters to Southern midwives, and a collection of interviews of automobile assembly line workers (including black and white men and women) from the 1970s and 1980s.

At this point I should mention the obvious: as a historian, I do not hesitate to teach novels and autobiographies written by African Americans (or by Native Americans or Asian-Americans or Italian-Americans, for that matter). My students must learn to read these works the way they would any other historical texts—there is nothing particularly mystical about the stories these writers tell, or the way they tell them; how irresponsible it would be to suggest that appreciation for these works depends exclusively on one’s chromosomes, phenotype, or family rituals practiced back home.

Over the past twenty years or so, I have taught hundreds of students at Wellesley, Brown, and Brandeis, and I know for a fact that a good many of them (Native American, Asian, black, and white men and women, undergraduates and graduate students, from a variety of backgrounds) have gained a deeper appreciation for the study of
American history as a result of reading these works. I cannot con-
ceive of constructing a syllabus around the notion that I must teach
only “what I am”—whatever that is: mother, white person, resident
of New England, academic? Similarly, the suggestion that I should
refrain from teaching what I am not—whatever that is: sharecropper,
coal miner, working-class, black?—insults the intelligence of my stu-
dents, and indeed, the ideals of learning and scholarship altogether.
After all, the goal of higher education is (or should be) to introduce
students to worlds outside their own, to engage them with complex
questions about the human condition, and to encourage them to
study the work of serious thinkers.

I reject the whole notion of an “authentic voice” and its corollary—
that only persons with certain demographic characteristics may un-
lock the secrets of that voice. The autobiographies, oral interviews,
and firsthand accounts listed above are not “pure” in the sense of
being raw or unmediated accounts. For instance, the Federal Writers
Project slave narratives were transcribed by interviewers who varied
in their views of their subjects. It is important for students to under-
stand the social context in which those interviews were conducted—
the Depression-era South, when Jim Crow patterns of racial etiquette
pertained—and the point of view of the interviewers themselves.
This particular kind of historical source offers a good lesson in the
pros and cons of oral histories and interviews.

In a similar vein, Booker T. Washington wrote his autobiography
with prospective benefactors and other white patrons in mind. We
need to consider his “secret” life as a sponsor of test cases challenging
Jim Crow segregation in order to begin to understand *Up from Slav-
ery*; the book itself of course hardly tells us the whole story of his life.
To cite another example: perceptive students of any class or color
can surely recognize the dramatic forms utilized by Angelou—her
selective choice of childhood memories; her license in reconstructing
dialogue from many years ago; the series of vignette in which she, or
members of her family or community, encounter specific incidents of
racism and then, just as surely, seek to regroup and triumph over mean-spiritedness in its various guises. Every text must be read critically; any good teacher can help a student understand how to do that, and any good student can learn how.

My own experiences have taught me that, if the notion of an "authentic voice" is less than helpful in understanding primary texts, it is downright dangerous as an approach to secondary works like historical monographs. Over the last few years I have accumulated a number of anecdotes—some funny, and some not so funny—about people who believed they were reading the "authentic voice" of an African American woman in Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow. There was the African American graduate student who prefaced her comments about my book in her women's history seminar with the observation that it was a relief to move beyond the history written by white women and finally grapple with the more sensitive work of a black woman historian. There was the debate about my race in an undergraduate class, where one student assured her classmates that I was indeed black (despite the suggestion to the contrary offered by my photo on the book jacket); it was just that I was "very light skinned." Or the time I was asked by a magazine book editor to review a new biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. (I had recently reviewed a book by Angela Davis for the same magazine). In the course of the conversation the subject of my race came up, and when I mentioned that I was white the editor responded in dismay, "But I was assured you were black," and then promptly retracted the invitation (she felt bad, though, and gave me a book on the history of housework to review instead). I have waited at airports for long periods of time because the person sent to fetch me was looking for a black woman to get off the plane; I have arrived at speaking engagements only to have my hosts profess their disappointment with my appearance, because they had intended that I should serve as a "role model" for their black students. Together, these stories add up to a cautionary tale—the
hazards of extrapolating much at all about a person on the basis of the kind of history he or she writes.

A variation on this theme is the criticism my work has received because I am white. I have had my share of uncomfortable encounters at scholarly conferences when I was urged to sit down and refrain from speaking because my presence on a panel devoted to black women’s history simply replicated historic patterns of class and racial oppression. (I know for a fact that witnessing one or more of these encounters has been enough to dissuade certain younger white women and men scholars from ever focusing on the history of black women in their own work.) One reviewer of The Dispossessed charged that, first, I was guilty of “sentimental racism” because I had an unrealistic and condescending view toward black family life, and second, that I should examine the cultural degradation of my own middle-class white existence before deigning to make any hypocritical comments, scholarly or otherwise, about any aspect of African American life or culture. These public and personal criticisms are of course hurtful, but I would not want to spend much time whining about them. Most scholars who have ever written a book or article or delivered a paper at a conference have endured strongly felt criticism of some type, and indeed, contempt and ridicule are tried and true means of intellectual discourse in a whole host of settings. It’s hard to be on the receiving end of such invective, but it is certainly not limited to historians, or to white girls who write about black history. And ironically, personal attacks are easier to deal with than attacks that focus on aspects of my work over which I have some control; in the end (I have to remind myself), I would rather be denounced for the color of my skin than for the weakness of my argument. In the next book I can work on sharpening my argument, but there is not much I can do about my whiteness.

While teaching a new course at Brandeis University in the fall of 1994, I was reminded that my high-minded ideals about the nobility
of the scholarly enterprise will continue to collide with some of my students' expectations—personal, political, and otherwise; but as far as I could tell, my race was not a major factor in this particular setting. The course was part of a new "University Seminar" (Usem) program offered at Brandeis; its aim was to group all first-year students in seminars, introduce them to the critical analysis of texts, and help them improve their writing skills.

In preparing the catalogue copy (this was the first time the course was offered), I made the mistake of giving the course a broad, and probably misleading, title: History of American Race Relations. The short course description sent to all incoming students noted that the main theme of the course was the history of blacks and whites in the workforce, from colonial times to the present; but it was not until students arrived in class on the first day and saw the syllabus that they had an idea of what we would be doing:

This course focuses on the relations between black and white workers, from the country's earliest colonial settlements through the late twentieth century. We shall pay particular attention to place (regional variations in patterns of work and family), change over time (the development of the economy from rural to agricultural to urban and industrial), and varieties of work culture (the ways in which workers resist the demands imposed upon them, and the ways in which they create communities among themselves). Several questions inform our study: What are the shifting meanings of "race" throughout American history? How do the factors of class and gender affect patterns of "race relations" over time? What is the impact of larger economic transformations on the relations among various groups of men and women workers? And how do workers who live in racially segregated communities perceive each other within a racially integrated workplace?

By the time my Usem students saw this fuller description of the course, the damage had been done. Most had expected to spend the semester talking about Rodney King and O. J. Simpson (with the history of the Los Angeles Police Department providing the "context," I suppose). They were in for a rude shock. Over the next few weeks I
found that at least some of the students resisted examining their own ideas about race, and some were (in all probability) wondering how they had gotten themselves into such a course. It did not take long for them to realize that their own histories as family and community members, as high school students, and as enthusiastic consumers of late-twentieth-century youth culture were not necessarily going to provide them with any direct connection to the past.

In the course, we examined a variety of full-length texts, as well as a hundred-page packet of short primary documents that I had collected as part of my research over the last few years. These documents included court cases from the seventeenth century Chesapeake; excerpts from the laws of Virginia 1661–62 and 1691; a list of tithables in Northampton County, Virginia, 1666; an early-eighteenth-century New York indentured servant’s contract; Samuel Sewall’s antislavery and antiblack tract “The Selling of Joseph” (1700); notices for fugitive slaves, servants, and white wives published in New Jersey papers in the eighteenth century; a Virginia planter’s misgivings about slavery (1736); slaves’ petitions for their freedom during the Revolutionary era; the Ohio black codes of 1804; James Henry Hammond’s defense of slavery (1845); newspaper articles written by Frederick Law Olmsted, based on his travels in the South in the 1850s; documents related to the deployment of black and white labor during the Civil War, the violence inflicted on blacks by white workers in Northern cities around the time of the war, the struggles of freedpeople to own their own land and control their own families in the Reconstruction South, the history of trade unionism in the late nineteenth century, and federal policies related to black labor during the two world wars.

I could be wrong, but in terms of shaping the classroom learning that semester, the demographic makeup of the classroom was secondary compared to other factors. Among the eighteen students, half were women, three were African American, and most were probably middle-class or upper-middle-class. The students gave no indication that they considered my race significant one way or the other; they
saw me first and foremost as a professor—one of the very first they had encountered in college—and I think they were simultaneously open to my teaching style and wary of the demands I placed on them.

As for the students themselves, I cannot categorize them by race or gender on the basis of how often they talked in class, what insights they brought to bear on the material, or how well they wrote their papers. In other words, no particular kind of student was either adept or handicapped at reflecting on the historical significance of the readings. Most had only a tenuous grasp on the chronology of American history, and when it came to examining documents from the seventeenth century, they all started at about the same point in terms of their prior knowledge of the period. They were, essentially, still high school students, and I intended that their first college-level history course should introduce them to a wide range of methodological and historiographical issues. We talked about the problems of using legal statutes, court cases, personal reminiscences, social workers’ reports, and newspaper editorials as historical evidence. We used one account written by Olmsted as an exercise in inference; from his description of slaves and poor whites, we speculated about his views on slavery and on poor people of both races. We drew connections among workplaces in antebellum Baltimore, Boston, and Cincinnati, based on the sometimes violent confrontations between black and white workers at certain worksites, in certain jobs, in those cities.

I was intrigued that, toward the end of the semester, almost all the students listed Maggie’s American Dream (the autobiography of Maggie Comer, edited by her son James P. Comer) as their favorite book for the semester. I think most college students, and first-years in particular, are pretty egocentric, and so for understandable reasons my students found particularly appealing this story of a young woman determined to get a good education and see her children succeed in life. Too, Maggie Comer seemed to live in a world that was not so distant in either time or sensibility from their own twentieth-century urban, industrial society. On the other hand, at times they seemed unable to
make the leap of imagination that a study of (for example) the seventeenth-century Southern colonies called for. If an when I offer the course again, I will consider using autobiographies exclusively; most students seem most easily and effectively drawn into the study of history through stories about specific people.

Throughout the semester we considered a wide variety of workplaces, the tobacco fields of seventeenth-century Maryland, the docks and taverns of the early-eighteenth-century seaport city, artisans’ shops during the Revolutionary era, antebellum Piedmont cotton fields, Civil War army camps, postbellum plantations of tenant farmers and sharecroppers, steel mills, the parlors and kitchens of middle-class white women, World War II defense industries, and finally, high-tech and corporate offices. We tried to keep in mind a truly bewildering number of factors as we examined each workplace—the ethnic, gender, and racial composition of the workers; the political economy that shaped their work choices (or lack thereof); the physical and emotional demands of the job; and the conditions that shaped their everyday experiences. We talked about the historical processes by which certain groups of workers come to think of themselves as part of a community, variously defined, and about the many forces that have divided American workers over the years. At the midpoint of the semester I asked the class to review what we had learned thus far and was rewarded when one student suggested, “Sometimes race matters—and sometimes it doesn’t.” This observation was, of course, one of the major themes of the course. I allowed myself some tentative feelings of satisfaction.

The course ended on an ambiguous note. Moving into the more recent period and reading Cornel West’s *Race Matters*, the students finally felt free of the historical straitjacket I had imposed on them all semester, and began to talk about racial issues as revealed in contemporary popular culture, the news media, their neighborhoods at home, their circle of high school friends. But these discussions seemed curiously circumscribed and muted, considering the fact that
I thought they would amount to the culmination—or rather, refutation—of a semester-long attempt to censor “easy talk” in favor of close textual analysis. The hard fact of the matter was that glib generalizations did not come so easily anymore. A description of white boys emulating the black “hip hop” style at one student’s high school brought the inevitable questions—where is the high school located, and what is the class makeup of the student body? It mattered whether the school was in Manhattan, or Cambridge, or Atlanta—some of the places represented by the students in the class. Stories of family-based prejudices had to be placed in the context of a particular place, ethnic or racial group, and the ages and occupations of its members. Other questions included, What is the significance of skin color today, and doesn’t it matter which particular shade you are referring to, and in what setting? And on and on. We had run out of steam; there were so many factors to consider about any one situation.

Still, in broad outlines we could draw some conclusions about changes in the meaning of race and in the nature of biracial workplaces through the centuries. We began the course by examining a 1658 Maryland tobacco plantation worked by white male and female English indentured servants, male African and Native American slaves, and the white landowner and his wife and children. Most laborers during this period were bound (in this case, only the landowner himself was “independent,” or “free” in any meaningful sense of the word), and teenaged white servants and black and Indian workers of all kinds were often lumped indiscriminately into a category of rowdy, promiscuous, profane, intractable workers. The contrast between that work setting and the white-collar office place of postindustrial America was striking, to say the least, though if we consider gender, class, and racial configurations in both time periods we might detect some threads of continuity linking the Maryland of 1658 to the America of 1996.

Obviously, I faced a number of pedagogical challenges in teaching this course, but my inadequacy as a white person teaching African
American history was not high on my list. I had to figure out the most effective ways to teach first-year students how to read historical texts, analyze their significance, and see the connections among them; and how to write a well-organized paper and document it appropriately. I had to encourage shy students to overcome their reluctance and speak out in class. Obviously high school preparation affected individuals' literary, analytical, and verbal skills, but a whole host of other factors influenced their engagement with the material. I was paired with thirteen of the students in this class as their faculty first-year adviser, so I made a special effort to get to know everyone outside class; as a result I came to understand better some of the developmental problems first-year students must deal with. One student was homesick; he missed his high school friends. Another student decided very early on that she wanted to try to transfer to the West Coast; her parents were separated, and her mother lived nearby, but she wanted to live near her father. A couple of soon-to-be math and science majors were not happy about taking history seriously; they saw my course as the least of twenty-two other evils they had been forced to choose among. One student spent at least part of the semester comparing me to her beloved high school social studies teacher, and found me lacking. When I think of all the problems my students faced that semester—getting adjusted to a new place to live and to new friends, to a new set of academic demands and a whole new weekly work rhythm—my race quickly receded in significance as an issue of major concern in the classroom.

Offering a variation on my student's succinct observation, I would venture to suggest that in the historical profession today, sometimes race should matter, and sometimes it should not. As historians, we have come to believe that a full and honest rendering of the past necessarily mandates attention to groups long believed unworthy of scholarly study; and we have discovered that throughout American history, whether we are exploring the ratification of the Constitution or the Cult of True Womanhood, the history of the trades union
movement or the development of American foreign policy, certain notions about "race" have mattered, and have mattered a great deal. At the same time, when we debate, teach, and otherwise draw on current historical scholarship, the race of a particular scholar should matter much less than the shape of his or her argument, the content of his or her footnotes. In the classroom and at scholarly conferences, in department meetings and the pages of scholarly journals, the advancement of history relies on a diversity of viewpoints. As a means of furthering scholarly inquiry within the historical profession, self-censorship has little to recommend it; and in fact, assigning certain kinds of people to certain historical topics, while ostracizing those who stray from these narrow-minded guidelines, poses a distinct danger to our continually evolving understanding of groups and issues that have received far too little attention from scholars in previous generations.

Over the past few years we have made great progress in opening up the study of history—in breaking down artificial boundaries between men’s and women’s history, between social and political history, between economic and labor history (for example). The last thing we need to do now is to slip back into a Balkanized view of the world, a view based on dualities between black and white, rich and poor, male and female. Should we as scholars retreat defensively into our respective "camps," or subfields, the whole study of history will be diminished, and accordingly rendered suspect as a scholarly enterprise.