

Glorious Burdens: Teaching Obama's History and the Long Civil Rights Movement

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AS A YOUNG CHILD, Barack Obama learned about the civil rights movement from his mother. “If I told her about the goose-stepping demonstrations my Indonesian Boy Scout troop performed in front of the president,” Obama remembered, “she might mention a different kind of march, a march of children no older than me, a march for freedom.” Obama’s mother strove to instill in her multiracial son pride in being more than just literally African American. In her lessons, “To be black was to be the beneficiary of a great inheritance, a special destiny, glorious burdens that only we were strong enough to bear.”¹ There is much to learn from Obama’s history, understood both as the story of his life and as what Obama himself has said about his past and the larger history of race in the United States. For the past two years, I have had the opportunity to explore the pedagogical possibilities of Obama’s history with fifteen college freshmen in a seminar entitled “Barack Obama and the History of Race in America.” I have found that teaching Obama’s history can help students understand how the traditional narrative of the civil rights movement can be expanded both geographically and temporally. Perhaps even more important, viewing the past through the lens of Obama’s history empowers students to examine how their own lives have been influenced by and could contribute to the many legacies of the long civil rights movement.²

On the first day of class, I play a short excerpt from the speech Obama delivered to the NAACP Centennial Convention in New York in July 2009. At an important juncture in the speech, Obama offered a series of rapid-fire references to iconic moments in civil rights history—“walking instead of taking the bus ... taking Greyhounds on Freedom Rides; taking seats at Greensboro lunch counters; and registering voters in rural Mississippi.”³ After fleshing out the details of each reference, I ask students what similarities exist between them. Perhaps the most obvious connection often remains unsaid, revealing one of the most pervasive assumptions my students hold about the struggle for racial justice in the United States. Montgomery, Greensboro, Mississippi—these places occupy center stage in what is assumed to be a distinctly regional story based in the American South.

Many students think of the civil rights movement as limited to the South, and thus unconnected to the places that figure most prominently in Obama’s history: Hawaii, Los Angeles, and Chicago, as well as Indonesia and Kenya. Teaching Obama’s history offers several opportunities to expand the geography of the movement. My seminar begins in Hawaii with the Supreme Court case of Takao Ozawa, the Japanese-born resident of Honolulu who applied for American citizenship only to be told by the nation’s highest court that such a privilege was limited to those of “Caucasian” descent. Ozawa’s case was decided in November 1922. Some three months later, the Supreme Court considered the case of Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian man whose ancestry many ethnologists would then have deemed “Caucasian.” Rather than maintain its deference to “race science” and admit Thind as a citizen, the Court ruled that citizenship was not open to all “Caucasians,” but only to those who “the common man” would recognize as white. Thind had applied for citizenship in California, where Obama would attend college as a young man. By examining the cases of Ozawa and Thind, while reading the first section of Obama’s autobiography, *Dreams From My Father*, my students engage the long history of racial contestation in both Hawaii and California. Read on its own, the first section of *Dreams From My Father* could be taken to confirm the belief, shared by many of my students, that each individual is free to define her or his own identity. Many of my students view Obama’s account of his youth and adolescence as another indication of the personal freedom that defines a post-racial America. The Ozawa and Thind cases remind students that science, politics, and the law have historically limited the range of “ethnic options” open to both individuals and groups.⁴

To the degree that racial identities have been defined by region, expanding the geography of the civil rights movement can help students understand the many social, legal, and institutional constraints limiting an

individual's choice over who they are or want to be. To help clarify the relationship between race and region, I assign two texts that allow students to contrast Obama's evolving self-understanding with alternative models of racial and ethnic formation. The classic meditations of W.E.B. Du Bois on "double consciousness," reflections that Obama himself references in *Dreams From My Father*, are already familiar to some of my students. What is less familiar is the way in which Du Bois grounds his discussion of double consciousness in his own experience growing up in a largely white community in western Massachusetts.⁵ Challenging students to compare and contrast the double consciousness faced by Du Bois and Obama focuses attention on the importance of historical and geographic context. Robin D. G. Kelley's "The Riddle of the Zoot: Malcolm Little and Black Cultural Politics During World War II," provides another useful contrast—this one between Malcolm X and Obama, young men struggling to define themselves within quite distinct social and cultural environments.⁶ Kelley locates the young Malcolm X (then Malcolm Little) within the context of Boston during the Second World War. Linking class and gender dynamics particular to the urban North with Malcolm's understanding of his own blackness, Kelley makes evident, as do Obama's own musings on his life in Hawaii, the intersections of race with other notions of regionally based identity.⁷

Studying Obama's time in Chicago, the subject of the second section of *Dreams From My Father*, allows students to more closely examine the obstacles facing the civil rights movement in the North.⁸ The history of racial inequality in the North challenges students to broaden their understanding of racism, moving beyond a narrow focus on psychological bias or overt brutality to a more probing concern for the structural and institutional dimensions of racial inequality. We focus, in particular, on the nexus between inequality in housing, education, and employment. I begin by asking students to read one paragraph in the introduction to *Dreams From My Father*. This paragraph, I explain, details two distinct forms of racism that impact the life of Michelle Obama's six-year-old cousin. At a largely white suburban elementary school, Michelle's cousin found himself ostracized on the playground because "of his dark, unblemished skin." The child's parents, Obama reports, began to develop second thoughts regarding having moved into a predominantly white suburb, "a move they made to protect their son from the possibility of being caught in a gang shooting and the certainty of attending an underfunded school."⁹ Asked to parse the different forms of racism in this example, my students distinguish the racial discrimination faced by the young boy on the playground from the racial inequality that dictates that a safe, affluent neighborhood will most likely be predominantly white. Obama's writings on his community organizing

efforts, coupled with secondary texts on the history of racial inequality in the urban North, help students understand the historical processes that create and perpetuate racial inequality in a city such as Chicago.

While turning north helps broaden how students understand the struggle against racism, the transnational dimensions of the civil rights movement offer even more opportunities to demonstrate the diversity of resistance to racial oppression. In a now-famous speech offered in Selma, Alabama at the height of his primary contest with Hillary Clinton, then-Senator Obama invoked the experiences of his grandfather with British imperialism in Kenya in order to solidify his connection to the civil rights movement and the experience of being black in America.¹⁰ I show students clips from that speech and ask them to analyze Obama's rhetorical moves and the historical claims they presuppose. Crucial for this exercise, the third section of *Dreams From My Father* offers an extended meditation on the relationship between Obama and his relatives in Kenya. Connecting such personal reflections with excerpts from the rich literature on the transnational dimensions of the black freedom struggle, I challenge my students to think about the many ways in which the civil rights movement was interconnected with, similar to, and different from struggles abroad.¹¹

Immigration offers the most direct linkage between Obama's story and the transnational history of the struggle for racial justice in the United States. Our discussions of Ozawa and Thind begin the course with a focus on the racial dimensions of immigration, a topic related to Obama's own life history in more ways than many students realize. In his writings and speeches, Obama often locates his father and thus himself within that most American of narratives—the story of the successful immigrant who found education and a better life in the land of opportunity. David Hollinger's "Obama, Blackness, and Postethnic America," by contrasting the experiences of recent black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean with African Americans whose lineage extends back to the days of Jim Crow or earlier, encourages students to consider the dangers of lumping different immigrant groups into racial categories such as "Asian" or "African American."¹² Hollinger's analysis facilitates a discussion of the educational and professional success of certain ethnic immigrant communities, a success often used to laud the social and cultural capital of so-called "model minorities" and to criticize affirmative action. Offering a strong critique of the "model minority myth," an excerpt from Vijay Prashad's *The Karma of Brown Folk* adds to the discussion the importance of state selection—and especially immigration law—in determining the characteristics of immigrant communities.¹³ Many of my students are themselves either first- or second-generation immigrants and often

bring their own stories into the debate regarding why certain immigrant communities have achieved more than others. Complementing this debate, Obama's second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, raises contemporary questions regarding the racial dimensions of the public controversy surrounding immigration policy. I ask my students why Obama chose to locate his discussion of immigration in a chapter entitled "Race."¹⁴ The ensuing discussion, while wide-ranging, often revolves around the fact that black Americans have long faced the kinds of racial profiling now confronting Latinos and Latinas, as well as the many Americans who might be taken as being of Middle Eastern or South Asian descent.

Obama's interest in Mahatma Gandhi offers another opportunity to probe the transnational dimensions of the long civil rights movement. While visiting a school, Obama was asked by a young student with which historical figure—"dead or alive"—he would most like to share dinner. After a dramatic pause, Obama replied "Gandhi," who he described as "a real hero of mine," adding that it wouldn't be a big meal given the fact that Gandhi "didn't eat a lot." I show my students film footage of this interaction as well as of Obama's Nobel Prize speech, in which he distances himself from Gandhi and Martin Luther King in order to defend American military endeavors in Afghanistan. Obama's ambivalent relationship with Gandhi and King offers an opportunity to probe the transmission of Gandhian nonviolent civil disobedience into the civil rights movement, and to talk more generally about linkages between black and South Asian freedom struggles. Obama's brief involvement with the anti-apartheid movement during his undergraduate years provides an opportunity to broaden our discussion to examine the relative merits of violence and nonviolence in the global struggle against racism and imperialism.

For many students, the civil rights movement ended sometime in the late 1960s, perhaps with the death of Dr. King. Two recent historical texts and a work of contemporary drama help my students unravel the ways in which Obama's life and career make evident the ongoing legacies of the black freedom struggle. Thomas Sugrue's *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* locates Obama's political and intellectual development in the struggles of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. One of Sugrue's themes, Obama's engagement with various forms of Black Power, is explicated in greater detail in Peniel Joseph's *Dark Days, Bright Nights: From Black Power to Barack Obama*. Together, Sugrue and Joseph offer many opportunities for students to discuss the relationship between civil rights and black power and the relevance of both to the life and career of Obama. August Wilson's *Radio Golf* brings this discussion to Pittsburgh, where I teach. The last in Wilson's series of plays on black history in the twentieth century, *Radio Golf* centers on a black mayoral candidate

struggling with how to balance his political ambitions and his personal involvement in the gentrification of one of Pittsburgh's historic African American neighborhoods, the Hill District. Anticipating Obama, *Radio Golf* artfully portrays the challenges facing a black politician who strives to attract white support while remaining faithful to the needs and expectations of the black community. Like Obama, August Wilson came to identify himself as African American, despite the fact that one of his parents was white. In addition to acting out and discussing crucial scenes from *Radio Golf*, my students and I have also had the opportunity to view productions of the play, as well as to visit the Hill District, the play's setting and the neighborhood in which August Wilson himself grew up.

While the majority of the seminar focuses on the history of the twentieth century, Edmund S. Morgan's "Slavery and Freedom: The American Paradox" reminds students of the depth of America's racial past.¹⁵ Morgan's analysis frames a theme that runs through the course and marks much of Obama's rhetoric on issues of race—the complicated relationship between the progress that has been achieved and the many racial inequalities that remain. Obama has repeatedly demonstrated his ability to capitalize on the civil rights movement as a morality tale, even while acknowledging that much work remains to be done. In his speech to the NAACP Centennial Convention, with which I begin the course, Obama called attention to ongoing racial inequalities in the unemployment rate and health outcomes, and denounced the discrimination facing women, Latinos, Muslim Americans, and "our gay brothers and sisters."¹⁶ "Even as we celebrate the remarkable achievements of the past 100 years," Obama told his audience, "even as we inherit extraordinary progress that cannot be denied; even as we marvel at the courage and determination of so many plain folk—we know that too many barriers still remain." Acknowledging the "many barriers" that remain can help, in the words of Jacqueline Dowd Hall, to "make civil rights harder. Harder to celebrate as a natural progression of American values. Harder to cast as a satisfying morality tale. Most of all, harder to simplify, appropriate, and contain."¹⁷

Of course, even though he does at times "make civil rights harder," Obama is perhaps the most successful promoter of the view that the civil rights movement should be seen, in Hall's words, "as a natural progression of American values." Obama embodies, consciously and successfully, the idea that the civil rights movement reflected not just America at its best, but America at its core. To examine the audacity of Obama's hope, I ask students to read carefully "A More Perfect Union," the now famous speech that Obama offered in Philadelphia, largely as a response to the growing controversy surrounding Obama's former pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. A close reading of that key text allows us to debate

the degree to which Obama's progressivism is rooted in his pragmatism, understood not as a willingness to say what it takes to win votes, but rather as a philosophical commitment to democracy grounded in the legacy of William James and John Dewey. James T. Kloppenberg's analysis of Obama's intellectual development, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition*, demonstrates the merits of reading Obama within the history of American pragmatism. Kloppenberg locates Obama's ideas about race within a larger set of beliefs about justice, truth, and progress.¹⁸ By reading the "race speech" and careful explications of the speech such as that offered by Kloppenberg, my students learn to take seriously Obama's history, understood not only as the story of his life, but also what Obama himself has said about the past in his writings and speeches.

The difference between these two meanings of "Obama's history"—the story of Obama and the stories that Obama tells about himself—opens a space in which students can examine their own relationship to the long civil rights movement and to history more generally. The opportunity to see Obama grappling with history uniquely demonstrates that history is not just a series of facts. In *Dreams From My Father*, Obama repeatedly turns to history to reconcile his mixed ancestry with the promise and perils of being black in America. In 1932, Carl Becker lamented that students think they know no history "because they have never taken a course in history in college, or have never read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*."¹⁹ By personalizing history, Obama's writings offer students the opportunity to make their own claims on the past, to grapple, like Obama, with how history has shaped their lives.

Throughout the course, I encourage students to consider how their lives have been influenced by the long civil rights movement. At the same time, I challenge them to consider how they can contribute to the movement's future. In the beginning of the course, I distribute a letter that I wrote to President Obama about the course and its goals. "Regardless of their future professional path," I wrote, "I want my students to carry on, in their own ways, the work that you have done to foster an open and constructive dialogue regarding race in America." I share this letter with my students as a way to impress upon them the seriousness of the endeavor we will undertake together, but also to underscore their agency in that endeavor. I conclude the course by asking students to write their own letters to President Obama, detailing what they have learned about a particular aspect of the history of race in America. I encourage students to make their letters personal, but stress that they must also demonstrate the analytical rigor, evidence-based argumentation, clear organization, and elegant writing that I would expect in any other assignment. After students

have the opportunity to revise their letters, I gather them and send them to President Obama. One student wrote, "I used to be afraid to talk about race, and as a kid I painstakingly avoided using words that alluded to a person's ethnicity or skin color because I was terrified of coming across as racist." She welcomed the opportunity to find "an environment of mutual respect where people can feel comfortable listening to each other and asking questions without fear of ridicule or reproach" and thanked the President for helping to create such opportunities. In keeping with Obama's own belief in questioning authority, she concluded by challenging the President to remain faithful to his principles and his past: "Please be true to your promises, and consider how your twenty-year-old self would advise you now."

Notes

1. Barack Obama, *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, revised ed. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), 50-51.
2. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, no.4 (March 2005): 1233-1263. For a critique of the long movement narrative, see Sundiata K. Cha-Jua and Clarence E. Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies," *Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 265-288.
3. Barack Obama, speech to the NAACP Centennial Convention, New York, July 2009, available at <http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2009/07/obamas_naACP_speech.html>.
4. Marcy C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1990) and David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*, revised ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2005).
5. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of Spiritual Strivings," in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago, IL: A. C. McClurg, 1903).
6. Robin D. G. Kelley, "The Riddle of the Zoot: Malcolm Little and Black Cultural Politics During World War II," in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).
7. In the words of Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "Race, class, and gender, are not fixed and discrete categories ... they overlap, intersect, and fuse with each other in countless ways." Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, second ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 68. On "intersectionality," see Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 3 (November 2007): 1771-1800 and Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241-1299.
8. Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008) and Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi

Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

9. Obama, *Dreams From My Father*, xv.

10. For an account of this speech, see the first chapter of David Remnick, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama* (New York: Knopf, 2010).

11. See Penny Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997) and Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

12. David A. Hollinger, "Obama, Blackness, and Postethnic America," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 54 (29 February 2008): B7-B10.

13. Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

14. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006).

15. Edmund S. Morgan, "Slavery and Freedom: The American Paradox," *The Journal of American History* 59, no. 1 (June 1972): 5-29.

16. Lynn Sweet, "Obama's NAACP speech, New York, July 16, 2009," *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 17, 2009.

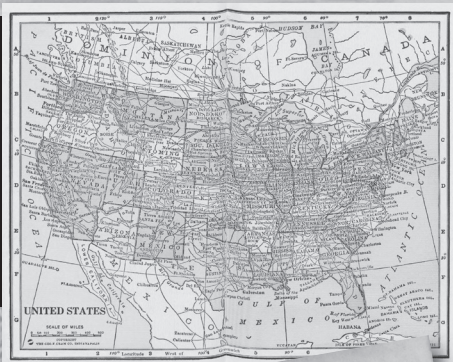
17. Hall, 1235.

18. James T. Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

19. Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (January 1932): 223.

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