A Pedagogy of Empathy and Self-Interest in Teaching Multiracial History

By Alaina E. Roberts

My research revolves around the experiences of Black and mixed-race people enslaved by Chickasaw and Choctaw Indians in the 1700s and 1800s. The South is where the Chickasaws and Choctaws had lived for at least hundreds of years before European contact and where they began to engage in the Native American and then the African slave trade. But they also held people in bondage, grew and exported cotton, and passed anti-Black legislation in Indian Territory (the modern-day state of Oklahoma), a space that I, and a number of government agencies, consider the West because of its placement in the middle of the country. I write about people, events, and processes in both locations and so situate myself in the historiographies of both the South and the West. The range of courses I teach and the topics I cover in these courses reflect my interest in charting change over time in the southern and western portions of what became the United States.

I am conscious of the fact that most of my students will take only one history course in college (as part of their general education requirement), so there are three concepts that make up the cornerstone of every course I teach. First, slavery and race-based discrimination had (and have) no geographic bounds, though how they look and feel is different depending on the where (and the when). Second, North American history is not solely the story of Black and white people—we must include the experiences of Native Americans, Asians, Latino/as, and so on to fully understand the past and present. And third, and the one closest to my heart, the Native American slave trade was the first in the Americas, and, subsequently, some Native Americans enslaved people of African descent. These essential concepts haven't changed since I started teaching in the fall semester of 2018, but how I go about imparting them to my classes has, and in an unexpected way.

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As a Black woman, I've experienced my fair share of discrimination, and I know that my ancestors experienced far worse; as a result, I often feel anger and sadness when I think about the histories of marginalized people. I initially had visions of my lectures including fiery denunciations of the evils white Americans had perpetrated on people who looked like me. But I quickly realized that as a professor, you create the class environment and set the stage for the sorts of discussions that will take place. After hearing that my courses were usually my majority-white students' first opportunity to learn anything about Black and Native people outside of a few stereotypes or key events, I saw that I had the opportunity not only to provide them with information they hadn't been able to access, but also to demonstrate why this history is relevant to them—and, maybe, the emotion that would best motivate them wasn't anger but empathy through self-interest. Just as I would if I were canvassing for a political candidate or a ballot measure, I decided I need to show my students why they should care about a topic they perhaps didn't think had much to do with them (or people who look like them) at all.

I start by positioning slavery in North America as something that did not just passively and inevitably happen. I use the work of Michael A. Gomez, Stephanie E. Smallwood, Jennifer L. Morgan, and David Northrup to show students that Africans and Europeans had been in contact long before 1619, and so a racialized permanent method of enslavement was a departure from their previous interactions and relationships based on trade, intermarriage, shared religion, and temporary captivity.[1] Then we venture into the South, the region students are the most likely, due to preconceived notions, to think about with regard to slavery and race. They read primary sources about indentured servitude and an excerpt from Christina Snyder's *Slavery in Indian Country*, which together locate the South as a site of Indigenous captivity practices and enslavement and of varying degrees of coerced white labor.[2] This reading prepares them to understand that there were many different types of "unfreedom" and that, for a number of reasons, African

[1] Michael A. Gomez, *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora* (New York, 2005); Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, 2004); David Northrup, *Africa's Discovery of Europe: 1450–1850* (3rd ed.; New York, 2014).

[2] Richard Frethorne to his parents, March 20, April 1, and April 2, 1623, in Susan Myra Kingsbury, ed., *The Records of the Virginia Company of London* (4 vols.; Washington, D.C., 1905–1933), 4:58–60; Christina Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).

chattel slavery was eventually chosen as the preferred method of labor to produce cash crops. Learning how Native, Black, and white peoples' interactions shaped the South and, from there, the continent forces students out of the Black-white binary they're so used to.

Continuing with this thread, I use multiracial history to show that enslaved and free Black, white, and Native people were involved in key colonial events on various sides due to their varied motivations and alliances. I teach them about Bacon's Rebellion of 1676 as evidence that some Black and white people banded together because they felt similarly aggrieved about working conditions, a lack of upward mobility, and the British government's veneer of respect for Native American sovereignty and land claims.[3] By contrast, when students read a 1739 letter written by the lieutenant governor of South Carolina, William Bull, where he introduced the idea of employing Chickasaws as slave catchers after the Stono Rebellion, the largest colonial-era slave revolution, they learn that some Native Americans united with white colonists to oppress Black people.[4] The inclusion of Spanish Florida, where slavery and freedom looked different than in the British colonies, means students begin to understand just how diverse the colonial South was and that Native Americans were purposely pulled into African slavery in a particular way to encourage them to support this increasingly racialized institution—an institution some of them would take a larger part in and transport to the West.[5] Students' minds are blown when they find out that Native Americans were some of the first slaveholders in what became Oklahoma, which serves as the opening to later discussions about Native American and African slavery in western spaces like Michigan and California.

This first third of the semester establishes that in North America from the late 1400s to the 1800s exploitation was merely a matter of degree. There were instances where people of different races recognized and tried to fight it, but many more times when those lower on the spectrum of exploitation would rather use their small degree of power to harm others than to work to make the country (or world) a better place for all. This module also establishes that there was a white elite pitting people of color against one another and pitting the white poor against Black and Native people. Far from a conspiracy theory, laws

[3] Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1996), esp. chap. 5.

[4] William Bull to the Board of Trade, October 5, 1739, in Mark M. Smith, ed., *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt* (Columbia, S.C., 2005), 16–17.

[5] I like using Jane Landers's classic *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana, 1999).

that spread throughout the South and the North, such as those Warren Eugene Milteer Jr. cites in his book *Beyond Slavery's Shadow*—fines for white people who engaged in sex with a Black person, taxation for free people of color and interracial couples, differences in punishment for the same crime committed by a Black or a white person, and so on—demonstrate that societal change happened through a forced difference in treatment that came from the top and only then shaped broader attitude shifts.[6]

My students are morbidly surprised not only by the details of the deranged punishment that enslaved people endured, but also by the fact that white indentured servants could be whipped to death and made to sign contracts they did not agree with and that did not better their circumstances. Through emphasizing that the racial hierarchy put into place by elite white people didn't help the average white woman or man, I help students see that structural inequality in the past and present actively harms them, even as people of African descent suffer the most. Modern-day parallels of millions of white Americans voting against free or low-cost childcare, an improved medical system, and so on just because they don't want Black people and immigrants to also benefit abound. For my students, who are smart enough to see racism all around them but who have largely not been given the tools to understand its origins, this realization provides the click, the "ah, suddenly it all makes sense." They have selected my class to learn about minorities but end up learning that the majority in this country—the people who look like them—are also a part of African American and Native American history, as villains, as victims, as antislavery and anticolonialist activists, and as silent, passive participants. This knowledge gives them a choice now: they can go out in the world and actively confront inequality, or they can become the same silent, passive participants.

My African and African American students are usually less surprised about the details of the horrors of slavery and are readily able to empathize; for them, my class serves as a space where I am able to validate the blatant racism and microaggressions they've experienced in their young lives and to provide the opportunity to fashion their responses to potential future questions about topics like slavery and alleged Black criminality and violence. From the first day of class, I do my best to make all my students feel comfortable asking any sort of question. I don't want them to be afraid that they will be looked at as

[6] Warren Eugene Milteer Jr., *Beyond Slavery's Shadow: Free People of Color in the South* (Chapel Hill, 2021).

stupid or even racist; if they don't ask me the question, they risk never being enlightened or, perhaps worse, trying to find the correct answer amid a wealth of online misinformation. To allow non-Black students to ask their questions without judgment while making sure my Black students feel seen and respected is certainly a juggling act, but part of the key for me is making everything a discussion open to all.

When dealing with, for example, the question of how we should view Thomas Jefferson in light of his coercive relationship with Sally Hemings, I can expect a range of responses from students (just as I know I would receive from historians). Was any amount of love or affection possible between Hemings and Jefferson? Should there be schools named after Jefferson; should there be monuments? In the spring of 2019, I had a lovely class that engaged in a spirited discussion related to these questions. A Black student named Sydney and a white student named Tim staunchly disagreed in their interpretation of this issue, with their various classmates chiming in to say they agreed with one or the other, bringing in readings and previous class conversations. It was one of the most invigorating days of my teaching career because the students were so engaged and passionate.

Of course, race does not always shape students' viewpoints on these sorts of topics, but in this case, Tim and Sydney were on the respective sides you'd probably expect. If no one had spoken up to challenge Tim, I would have provided the opposing perspective, but allowing Sydney the opportunity to do so gave her the chance to refine her ideas about race and power. Tim has gone on to become a teacher who still writes me occasionally to let me know how his classes are going and to thank me for opening his eyes to a different way of seeing the world. Sydney has gone on to become a lawyer, but before that, in 2020, she started a petition that led to the University of Pittsburgh creating one of the nation's first mandatory courses for all enrolled students on anti-Black racism. Sydney cited her experience in my class, and one other, as an example of how conversations about racism that she'd had with people who both agreed and didn't agree with her had convinced her of the need for all her fellow students to have a similarly generative experience.[7]

For me, teaching about both the South and the West as dynamic, multiracial spaces that have seen the origins of both our horrible racial hierarchy and our movements against racism allows me to help my

[7] Donovan Harrell, "Recent Alum Wants Pitt to Require Black Studies Course," University of Pittsburgh *University Times* 52 (June 12, 2020), https://www.utimes.pitt.edu/news/recent-alum-wants-pitt.

students understand the country and world they live in as well as themselves and their communities. I don't mince words when it comes to the violence of slavery and dispossession, but I do my best to explain in a way that signals to students that people in the past always had a choice to do better, and I hope that encourages them to be the people doing the right thing in the present.