

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Mad at History

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.85, 2009)

by Robyn C. Spencer



DEMONSTRATION IN BALTIMORE (JANUARY 15, 2015) IMAGE BY DORRET

I was unsure what to expect from Lehman College's Freshman Year Initiative (FYI) Program. FYI was designed to bridge the transition from high school to college by providing reinforced academic support, mentorship opportunities, and integrated courses. While many described it as a very rewarding experience, others warned that classroom dynamics could be challenging and student evaluations were often low.

My course (African American Heritage) hit a major bump in the road by the third week of the semester. The catalyst was Hakim\*, a student whom I had noticed on the first day of class due to his buoyant personality and who had become a disruptive force. At first I did not understand why. When I spoke to him individually he was respectful in a way that let me know that I was one of the few black teachers he had ever encountered. Although his work had structural issues, the content was thoughtful and sincere. I did not "get it" until the day he raised his hand and asked: "Now that 'we' have the chance, should Obama enslave white people?"

I would like to think that I have an unflappable demeanor, but his provocative question threw me for a loop. I can only imagine my facial expression. I asked how his question was related to the discussion topic: the Stono Rebellion. His response was blunt: "All that slavery stuff just makes me mad." Hands immediately shot up. Hakim's initial question was summarily dismissed by his peers and the conversation turned to the real issue -- managing the emotions involved in learning about brutal episodes in history. Most students started their comments with President Obama. To them, Obama's victory was a text to be read backwards. It was a salve on the deep and gaping wounds of the past -- it was hope in its most raw form. They believed that although African Americans had suffered brutality and injustice, the present was filled with possibility.

Although the question had resulted in a teachable moment, I made a mental note to ask Hakim to stay after class. I could now connect the dots between his loudly whispered comments during lectures, his extended bathroom breaks during videos, and his passive attempts to derail discussions during group work. What I initially thought of as immaturity and lack of discipline was actually resistance. He was resisting the knowledge about the sheer horror of everything that people of African descent had suffered. He did not want to see the black bodies kidnapped and shackled naked during the Middle Passage. He was outraged at what happened to John Punch, the black indentured servant sentenced to lifetime indenture in 1640 for running away while his two white co-conspirators simply received longer sentences. He was disgusted at the bitter injustice of 17-year-old Frances Driggs, brought to court twice by her master/rapist -- once for fornication and the other for having a child outside of wedlock. Her punishment was 30 lashes and more time added on to her work contract. This bloody history, albeit carefully packaged in a narrative of agency, survival, and resistance, was drowning him. Hakim was stuck somewhere between horror, anger, and a

desire for revenge. And we had not even gotten to the American Revolution yet.

After class the first thing he did was apologize for the disruption. Then he said: "You don't understand. I can't learn about this stuff. Obama or not, nothing has changed for me. I still get stopped by those same white cops on my block all the time." Our eyes locked. I saw just how upset this man-child was, underneath the swag. All of a sudden my classroom was the front lines. I saw Tupac, Fred Hampton, and the guys on the corner. In that moment, Hakim became the embodiment of all of the young men who chose college despite the fact that society told them that statistically they should be in jail.

I began by sharing the pains in my heart that I carry around for those many victims of historical injustices. Historians go beyond the familiar narratives. We see the nameless and faceless people who have been forgotten -- those who remain buried under what poet Alice Walker has called "the mud of oblivion" (374). We are trained to make the horrors less graphic and equip students to analyze with some measure of dispassion. Yet sometimes isn't the appropriate human(e) reaction shock, horror, and anger? Historian Nell Painter has written: "Any sojourn in southern archives covers the researcher in blood, and slavery, particularly, throws buckets of blood in the historian's face. Yet violence and pain seldom appear in historical writings, for professionalism prompts historians to clean up the mess. . . . The mopping up of blood occurs between the historian's research in primary documents and publication" (6). Hakim was reminding me not to "mop the blood" so thoroughly.

I reminded him not to let his emotions become a stumbling block. History had the potential to empower. James Baldwin wrote that to "accept one's . . . history is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it" (95). Hakim had the ability to think outside of the box and an innate sense of intellectual curiosity. He could either refine these gifts or become a loose cannon that few would take seriously. I suspected that he had been content to be the latter for most of his academic life, but I hoped that he would see that he had too much potential to settle for being the "class clown."

At the end of our discussion I asked him if he was going to meet the requirements for the class, including civility and classroom comportment, or drop. He seemed surprised. I reminded him that dropping was an option and I waited. I wanted to work with him but I also had 19 other students to tend to. Hakim would have to take ownership of the process. Somewhat begrudgingly, he informed me that he was going to "have to figure out a way to make it in this class." In turn, I promised him that black history was not an unceasing parade of oppression. And so we parted. I daresay we both learned something.

## Note

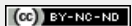
\* Name changed.

## References

Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Dial Press, 1963.

Painter, Nell. *Southern History Across the Color Line*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina UP, 2002.

Walker, Alice. *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems 1965-1990*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/dscribe/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.pitt.edu/press/).