

Fighting The Civil War In The Classroom: Reconstruction

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Feature Essay

Fall 2016

Sheila Sundar *FIGHTING THE CIVIL WAR IN THE CLASSROOM: Reconstruction.*

The Necessary Complexity of Reconstruction

I.

Ashley Cowart was the type of student for whom teachers, particularly the unexperienced Teach For America set that descended upon New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in his elementary years, had little capacity and energy. In 4th grade he began questioning his teachers' decisions to emphasize slavery year after year. "They just wrote me off as a kid. They said, 'because it's important'. Nobody really responded, and it frustrated me." Now in 12th grade, he has the perspective to frame his elementary-aged concern more fully. "We studied slavery all the time, as though that was the full African American history. Every year, it's black history month, and slavery, and then a bit of the civil rights movement. But we never study actual black history."

The curriculum on which Ashley was reared reflects remarkable cohesion amongst teachers across ideological lines. We disagree on testing, school funding, and the nuances of history curriculum. Yet we are willing, regardless of our heritage or political leanings, to teach the events of historical consensus. Blurrier, and less present in American classrooms are the periods in history that remain open and ambiguous, and that set the stage for centuries of debate over democracy, citizenship, and race.

Historian Eric Foner describes Reconstruction as America's unfinished revolution—introducing and undermining progress, advancing legal equality yet choking real political, social, and economic advancement through a complex tangle of state laws, terrorism, and propaganda. Reconstruction forced America to look at questions of democracy, citizenship and power through the lens of race. Answers to these questions, with which we continue to grapple, might lie in its analysis.

If history educators teach only moral absolutes, reducing African American history to key chapters of slavery and Jim Crow, we ignore enormous contribution and complex debate. If we pause on the events and contradictions of Reconstruction, other history comes into focus: the role of the Freedmen's Bureau and black churches in establishing Historically Black Colleges and Universities, the brief yet powerful rise of black political participation, the differing arguments on race and social progress that parallel contemporary sociological debates. This is the stuff of struggle, and also contribution.

II.

Ashley Cowart's high school, New Orleans Charter Math and Science High School is an open admission school serving students throughout the city. 80% of the student body identifies as African American, and the remainder of students are divided evenly amongst those identifying as White, Hispanic, Native American and Asian-American. Nearly 90% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch. Discussions in civics classes center around such subjects as mass incarceration and voting rights, infused with a belief that American is a place of promise and also great want. The social studies curriculum is rich with discussion of America's historical contradictions. Required reading in humanities courses includes *A People's History of the United States*, *The New Jim Crow*, and *Between the World and Me*. In 12th grade English, students read Mississippi writer Jesmyn Ward's breathtaking memoir, *Men we Reaped*, and discuss the transgenerational trauma of the American South. All of these stem from the complex foundation of Reconstruction, readings attempting to answer the questions left open in the late 1800s.

But still, students argue, we fall short.

Ashley Cowart's classmate, Keree Blanks, describes what he calls "the basics." "History, how it's taught now, they only reflect these specific low points and then these major events. From this time to this time, millions of slaves were transported from Africa. Then the next lesson is right up to the Civil War. And then civil rights. And you think, 'I think there was a lot of stuff in between.'"

"There's a lot of stuff we don't talk about. Cowart finishes, "We cover the main broad figures. MLK, Rosa Parks. But there are people who the general population doesn't know."

Their classmate Skyler Prevost echoes this sentiment. “When you learn about African American history, you only learn about the negative. You don’t learn that we brought voodoo to New Orleans. About Congo Square. I do want to understand the brutality of slavery. I also want to know, what did slaves bring over, and how did this influence America?”

In order to properly answer these students’ questions, we need to begin by reexamining and reteaching Reconstruction. History teachers need to crack open its contradictions, allow students to examine the ways in which American democracy can advance legal rights while simultaneously disenfranchising, how battles are waged and won through every level of civic participation. They need to see how ideas grow and flourish through an unyielding belief in educational advancement, how ideas of people like W.E.B. Dubois and Henry Lyman Morehouse can serve as the foundation of institutions and social movements.

III.

In the aftermath of the brutal murders in Charleston, South Carolina, writer Ta-Nehisi Coates published a beautiful reminder of the Confederate Flag’s history. It was not the defiant symbol that rose during the Civil War, as proponents might tell it. It returned to fashion one hundred years later, at the height of the Civil Rights movement, proudly displaying the South’s historic allegiance to the racial hierarchies with which we were left at the close of Reconstruction. White Southerners who raised it in the 1960s wanted their 1860s back.

In response to Coates’s column, David French published an article in the *National Review* reflecting on his own, and that of his generation of Southern white men’s, complex relationship with the Confederate Flag. French argues that the flag should remain in order to acknowledge the difficult truths of history— a truth in which slavery was built upon “plunder and pain” and the identity of the new South, one of Jim Crow laws, lynching, segregation, was a brutal continuation of this unfinished revolution. Yet he argues that when the flag flies over cemeteries and monuments to Confederate war dead, the context shifts its meaning. It becomes a symbol of history rather than a desire to return to its paradigms.

It was this paradigm that, as recently as the early 2000s, convinced Ashley Cowart that he would never get close to a white person. All around him were reminders of his country's racial hierarchies—from the composition of New Orleans neighborhoods to the names of city streets. It was clear who owned America. “When I was in middle school I told myself, I’ll never be friends with anyone who’s white.” High school shifted this perception. The slight increase in his school’s diversity played a role, but also a fuller sense of who he was as a person and student. “Even though I’ve changed in that way, I still feel angry,” he says. “Particularly now, with what’s happening in the world. Sometimes we’re treated like African Americans are the cause of slavery, the Civil War, segregation, and all of the tension associated with BLM. Like we’re sparking it, even though we’re the ones being killed.”

Ashley’s classmate, Skyler, connects students’ changing sense of themselves, and the communities with whom they can meaningfully interact, to the content of their history classrooms. “If we study the contributions, we’re going to think, these people are powerful. If you study only that black people were slaves, then you’re going to feel marginalized.”

Ashley continued, “I want to know what somebody who was black built. I can say who made the lightbulb. There’s people who encouraged slavery but I know their names. I’m struggling to identify the name of the black man who invented the streetcar. And it’s not just me. If a little white boy learns about black people who invented the things they used every day, he’ll see a positive.”

Reconstruction marked a shift in our national discussion of race and citizenship. Texts that define schools like New Orleans Charter Math and Science High School are founded upon the view that the work of racial equality is as unfinished as the other battles of Reconstruction. Proponents and opponents of the removal of the Confederate Flag rarely sit side by side in a classroom, taking in the arguments that have shaped and divided American since 1877. But perhaps, by allowing for the complexity of history, they can. Perhaps we can build classrooms so empowering that students can grapple with these opposing arguments about race, power, and commemoration. Our students’ generation may never finish this revolution. But perhaps our curricular choices can give them the tools to enter it.

Sheila Sundar is the founder and director of the Southern History Project.