THE PAST MEETS THE PRESENT: TEACHING WOMEN'S HISTORY IN THE URBAN SOUTH

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When asked to participate in a panel discussion about teaching women's history back in June 1988, I responded enthusiastically. I knew the occasion would provide an opportunity for me to speak about the students I had taught at the University of Alabama at Birmingham over the preceding five years. "UAB," as the university is called, is an urban campus that sprawls over 60 square blocks of the city, about one and one-half miles from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, and two miles from Birmingham's infamous City Hall. The undergraduate college at UAB was 20 years old in 1989; organized after the Birmingham civil rights movement, the college is a vibrant symbol of the "New Birmingham." Today, the University is the city's largest employer, with a student body of 15,000 that is twenty percent black. Students come from an area once known as "The Birmingham District," the mountains and valleys of north central Alabama, rich in the coal and iron-ore that formed the bedrock of Birmingham's economy.

The first course I taught in women's history at UAB was in the spring of 1983. The class was small (about a dozen students or so), and made up of half men and half women. Surprisingly, the two students in that class who stand out in my mind were both men. I remember them because they taught me an important lesson: that in a place like Birmingham the past impinges so heavily on the present that one cannot possibly escape it, and that if you make a claim to teach history in that southern city, you have to be willing to acknowledge the "ghosts" who slip quietly into your classroom and fill the empty seats in the back row.

The two students I remember so well from that first women's history course introduced me to these "ghosts." One raised his hand immediately when I asked the class how they responded to Myra Page's book, *Daughter of the Hills*. I had been a bit reluctant to use Page's book for I feared that her perspective as a proletarian writer, a political radical of the 1930s, would put UAB students off. "The book was all right," this student said, "but there was one thing I didn't like about it." "What was that?" I asked, bracing myself for a reactionary retort. "Page was too easy on the coal operators," he explained. "Those guys were meaner to the miners and their families than she described." "I know," he continued, "because my dad and granddad worked in the mines around Birmingham, and we grew up in a coal town."

The other student in that class who opened my eyes in an unforgettable way was a young black man in his twenties who spoke out when we talked about the history of interracial relationships between southern men and women. "I know now," he said, "what happened to my grandfather who loved a white woman." He told the class that his grandfather had been publicly whipped in a south Alabama town, and then had disappeared; the family knew that he must have been lynched

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but older relatives would not speak about what had happened. Another ghost took up residence in my classroom.

Racial issues and concerns have dominated life in Birmingham since the first iron furnace opened in 1872; little has changed in that regard, and the long shadows cast by the events of the 1960s still darken the city. "We are the children of the rioters," one of my students wrote, and inside each student's mind is a unique, often unconscious, history of their own relationship to the Birmingham civil rights movement. In classrooms at UAB, daughters and sons of the Klan sit next to the sons and daughters of those who marched for their freedom. Some of the older black students played a special role in the Birmingham movement as participants in the children's marches. (If these students did not march, they provide a careful explanation about why they did not; usually it's that their concerned and worried parents successfully restrained them.)

Taking great pride in the civil rights movement, black students in Birmingham share a legacy of courage and hope; white students in the same city share a legacy of fear. A young black woman described herself as one who inherited the motto "to struggle." She saw the women in her family as "superhuman," and remembered the civil rights movement as a time when "women young and old were willing to go to jail for equal rights." "Some protested by marching," she wrote, "others by listening to what the people they worked for were saying and carrying the information back to their leaders." She argued that there were many ways black women in Birmingham were involved in the struggle for their civil rights, "and not always did people know it."

In sharp contrast, a white student wrote: "I grew up in Birmingham in the 1950s and 1960s, and as a child . . . I learned fear from my parents; fear of violence, fear of revolution, fear of blacks. For the first time in my life my father got his pistol out, and my father hates guns. Although he never loaded it, he bought bullets." The same student remembered when the city closed the parks: "I was told it was so the blacks couldn't integrate them," he explained. "I had a big beautiful park two blocks from my house, overgrown with weeds. *No one* [white or black] was allowed to swing, play baseball, or feed the ducks. It seemed [so] stupid to me."

How does one make sense out of the history of a particular time and place? How do young students, and older students, black and white, female and male, weave the past and the present into a reasonable future? Racial issues, so close to the surface in Birmingham, involve thorny problems that have no easy solutions. Gender roles and the history of women's roles, within and outside of the family form another, closely related, set of challenges with which UAB students are struggling.

The students in my classes, ranging in age from nineteen to fifty (with an average of 26) have inherited a complex legacy regarding gender roles. The story of one white student depicts an almost uncanny microcosm of the classic way in which women's lives are transformed. This woman married her high school sweetheart at seventeen, and as she put it "began [her] wifely duties." She wrote

that "I personally feel I was born about 100 years too late. I would have loved being a Southern belle on a plantation somewhere." She felt her "foremothers" influenced her life and her feeling that it was her responsibility to be a wife and mother and stay at home. She wanted to be like *her* mother who was considered "a true Southern woman," and "raise babies." She had two children within three years and in her words, "stayed home and played the loving domestic wife and mother." Her world was self-contained, and, as she described it, the domestic sphere was all she knew. As her children grew older and she turned thirty, she began to wonder what she was going to do with the rest of her life; how she would lead a "fulfilling life" once her children were gone. This time, a specific female relative provided a model. As the student explained: "My grandmother was the business manager of a successful radiator company when this was not a socially accepted way of life. I felt if she could have a fulfilling career, so could I." Having returned to college three years ago, this woman will soon graduate. "I feel like a totally different person," she writes, "and if my 'foremothers' had not opened the doors for career and educational opportunities, I might never have found the courage to take that first step." Clearly, while we do not choose our relatives, we can carefully select which "foremothers" we want to emulate at specific turning points in our lives.

Grandmothers have played a special role in the lives of many of these students, both black and white. The generational divide seems to have provided essential space, allowing a type of objectivity that rarely occurs between mothers and daughters. More concretely, the economic and work experience of these students, struggling to get on their feet in the 1980s, is more similar to that of their grandmothers who were young in the 1930s, than to that of their mothers, who grew to maturity in the era of rapid economic growth after 1945. This is especially true in Birmingham where the decline of the steel industry since the early 1970s has had an overwhelmingly negative effect on the economy during the years when most UAB students were attaining their majority.

Grandmothers' lives provided important models for students whose families lived in the city, and equally significant examples in agricultural communities. One white student wrote: "My Grandmother, who had a great influence on my life, was a very strong willed woman. She encouraged me, telling me 'You can do anything you set your mind to.'" Raised in a rural agricultural economy, this grandmother had few occupational options open to her, and she married a farmer--which in her granddaughter's words, "destined her to a life of hard and exhausting work." Another white student explained it this way, drawing on the details of her own family history:

> For the generation of women my grandmother belonged to, there were few alternatives. Once of majority age, one either married right away or one went to Columbus, Georgia, to work in the cotton mills, hoping soon to find a husband. My two great aunts did this. Unfortunately, their husbands worked in the factory, therefore their

> incomes would not allow my great aunts to quit their jobs. My grandmother was fortunate to marry immediately after she finished school, and she seemed satisfied with helping her husband with the restaurant business.

In an interesting way a granddaughter's respect can transcend the confines of regional cultural norms, as this student continued: "Being a *southern* woman, [my grandmother] possessed an equal status in the marriage. I could never see my grandmother placing herself second."

Black and white students hold in common this critical link to their grandmothers' experience. One black student eloquently traced the history of the women in her family, writing:

> My great-grandmother was a medicine woman and mid-wife; for her the land was one with the soul. She believed that everything you did was connected with mother earth. She taught her daughters how to read the moisture on a leaf that told of coming rain, which herbs and plants were good for what was ailing you. Childbearing was made easy on women who followed her advice. My grandmother followed in her footsteps, but hers was a restless spirit that traveled from Georgia to Tennessee to Alabama in search of better opportunities. My mother and her sister were raised to be independent, able to survive on their own. When nursing opened up to black women, my mother went into nurses' training in 1933. She was the first professional woman in the family's history, yet she was merely following in the footsteps of her grandmother. My mother taught my sister and me to be independent and self sufficient. First you get an education, then you get a job, and then you can marry, whatever pleases you as long as you remember to think for yourself and have the business sense to not allow anyone to run over you.

What have I taught these students? Much less than they have taught me, that is for sure. As they have read the works of Nancy Cott and Suzanne Lebsock, Susan Porter Benson and Glenda Riley, Anne Firor Scott and Jacqueline Jones, they have worked hard to put their own personal version of women's history into a larger and now very rich historical framework. Often this proved difficult. As one student wrote about *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*: "Jacqueline Jones lets us go deeper into history than we ever wanted to go." For many of these students a survey course in American women's history provided a first exposure to women's history as an academic subject, *and* to the idea of women's liberation, as well as their only link to what remains of the contemporary women's movement. As one older student wrote:

> The rhetoric of the Women's Movement passed over me, probably because of the economic and social environment I was raised in. I knew about Betty Friedan's book, but at that time I was too busy being a housewife to read it. Even though I was consumed with caring for a child, keeping house, and being a good wife, I never thought too much about the limitations it imposed on me. I was too tired.

As my women's history students make plans for the future they are at once unbelievably optimistic and disarmingly modest in setting goals for themselves. "I am twenty-two years old with my entire life before me, wrote one young white student, "and I can do anything I want . . ." Another white student wrote, "When I hit the real world of work, I expect to be paid lower wages than men, expect to do more work and expect to put up with sexual harassment. I expect these things, but I don't have to accept them." With particular insight a young black student wrote: "Today, I can go in any restaurant that is public domain. I can even go to the college of my choice. Yet still I have seen how gender and color can hold a person back. All the roads have not been made smooth, all the ways have not been made easy . . ." As these women's lives unfold, they use the history of American women as a guidebook. Within that context, I have encouraged them also to face those "ghosts" in the back of the classroom. To not allow them to haunt us any longer, but rather to let them sit with us as we struggle to understand the past and plan for the future.

I left Birmingham, Alabama, several months after participating in the June 1988 panel on teaching women's history at the Southern Association of Women Historians' Conference in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Since then I have been teaching American Women's History at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, a university with about the same number of students as UAB, but one that contrasts sharply in every other way. Founded in 1809, Miami is as old as UAB is new. Miami's campus, in contrast to UAB's 60 urban blocks, covers hundreds of acres in the small town of Oxford, a community that grew up around the four colleges and seminaries located there in the nineteenth century. Miami students live on or near the campus, in a cloistered environment removed from urban realities. Miami is the quintessential American college campus, with Georgian red brick buildings surrounded by carefully tended grounds. Non-traditional students are the exception at Miami, as opposed to the rule at UAB. While African-American students comprise twenty percent of the student body at UAB, at Miami the percentages are an order of magnitude lower. Few Miami students work full-time; most can afford to attend college, and the majority come from suburban families with middle-class resources. Most Miami students, women and men, are grappling with the legacy of the women's movement; students with direct ties to the civil rights movement are rare. Unlike the older students at UAB, the younger college students at Miami are hesitant to expose their backgrounds, to consider their personal stories part of a larger history.

Returning women students, the fastest growing group of university students in the country, even at traditional four-year colleges, are particularly drawn to courses in American women's history. These women use their rich life experiences to evaluate their socialization and education in terms of gender, race, and class. They can analyze how the political, economic, and social history of women in the United States has touched past generations of women in their family, and they know how to evaluate what bearing the history of American women has had on their own lives. Generally survey courses in American history, largely because of their emphasis on political history, rarely provide students the opportunity to relate the historical to the personal, to discover their own past in the context of the national story. Because of American women's exclusion from the political realm, women's history courses cannot simply follow the traditional political format. Freed from the rigid structure that most survey courses reflect, women's history naturally has encompassed more social, economic, and cultural history, the very nature of which emphasizes grass-roots participation, collective movements, individual contributions, and demographic analysis. It is therefore difficult for any group of students to study American women's history without dealing in some way with their own personal history.

And yet, it can be done. The past does not impinge on the present as blatantly in Oxford, Ohio, as it does in Birmingham, Alabama. As one Miami women's history student, a young white woman from the Detroit suburbs, wrote, "It seems as if a lot of history happens outside of us." Another white male student in the same class of fifty students concurred: "In many ways, I feel isolated from history." Miami students, and professors alike, can hold history at bay more easily than their counterparts in the urban south. But not completely, for those "ghosts" continue to slip into the back of the classroom. I can see them clearly, although they are invisible to most Miami University students who truly believe that history has never happened to them. Students like this need encouragement first to name, then to meet face to face, the "ghosts" of the American past. Their understanding the complexity of a history that is not homogeneous, middle-class, white-dominated, or punctuated with one success after another, is essential to our weaving the past and the present together into a future that is viable and humane.