

## RACIAL IDENTITIES AND CLASS DISCUSSION IN AN AMERICAN SLAVERY SEMINAR

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This essay started in the classroom discussions of an upper-level history course at Illinois State University in the Fall of 1994.<sup>1</sup> The seminar, entitled "Slavery and the Old South," enrolled 22 students, consisting of upperclass students and two graduate students. The racial composition of the class roughly paralleled that of Illinois State University as a whole, 82% white, 13.5% black and 4.5% Latino. Discussions in this seminar were strained, so much so that by the last weeks of the semester, I decided to hand out an eleven-question, anonymous survey that asked students to discuss their feelings about participating in class as well as other topics. Students were encouraged to identify themselves by class rank, race, and gender, and they were informed that their responses might be used for research purposes. While not a large enough sample from which to draw reliable statistical results, the questionnaire decidedly struck a nerve. The students' response was enthusiastic: Students as a rule wrote extensive remarks, far longer ones than are typical on standard class evaluation forms. Clearly, the topics discussed below were of considerable interest to the history and history education majors who constituted the majority of my "Slavery and the Old South" class. What I have found is that roughly half of the white students were afraid to participate in class discussions about slavery. They gave two main reasons for their fear. First, many white students, especially women, did not want to engage in confrontational debates. Second, many white male students perceived themselves to be under attack whenever criticisms were raised against white males in the Old South, and this over-identification with assailed nineteenth-century men made them angry and silent.

Let me preface my remarks by noting that the focus of this paper is on white behavior because I have been fortunate each time this course has been offered to have had articulate minority students who participated regularly in discussion. Quite simply, students of color as well as white critics of slavery have for the most part shown no particular tendency to silence, a classroom dynamic that especially marked my Fall 1994 class.<sup>2</sup> The second prefatory point concerns the frequency of remarks in the student responses about feminism and women's history. As in all of my classes, the "Slavery and the Old South" seminar

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<sup>1</sup>This essay has profited from exchanges with former colleagues at Illinois State University including Francesca Sawaya and Pamela Riney-Kehrberg. Timothy Houlihan and Laura Barefield made insightful comments on earlier drafts. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Mid-America Conference on History in Springfield, MO in Sept. 1995.

<sup>2</sup>I should also note that because this paper is about students and their attitudes, it will bypass the thoughtful work on the question of how successfully a white instructor can teach a class that is largely about African American history. See, for example, Vince Noble, et al., "White Professors, Black History: Forays into the Multicultural Classroom," *Perspectives*, 31 (September 1993), 1, 7-19.

features readings, lectures, student presentations, and discussions about both black and white women's history. Issues of gender are highlighted in matters ranging from the stability of the black family in slavery to the degree to which white women supported the Confederate States of America. As we will see, analytical investigations about the impact of patriarchy on southern women met with both favorable and hostile responses.

This essay is about the unease many white students felt during class discussions in my seminar, an unease that prompted many to silence. Of those who completed the anonymous survey, fully one half, or eight of sixteen, European-American students answered "yes" to the question "Were there times when you felt afraid to participate?" Another testified that she was not afraid, but that the instructor seemed to "tip-toe around subjects and overstated obvious things" (student #13). Only one of these eight students (student #2) attributed her occasional reticence to the fact that she thought she talked too much already. The remaining seven white students were almost equally divided between men and women--four were men, three women. This gender breakdown was the same that occurred in the group of whites who responded "no" when asked if they were afraid to participate. No minority students who completed the survey expressed a reluctance to voice their opinions in class. What then were some white students afraid of?

Happily, students did not seem to be afraid of incurring the wrath of the professor. This came out most strongly on the standard "History course evaluation sheet" they completed at the end of the semester. After a series of quantifiable questions, the form asks students for "Additional Comments." A junior presented a fairly representative assessment: "Dr. Pierson encourages questions and participation at all time, and accepts conflicting views. He is very un-biased in his presentation of material." The student evaluations cannot be arranged by the race of the writer, but the sentiment seemed to be that, in the words of a senior, the instructor "allowed everyone to voice their opinions on [the] subject matter." Survey results confirm this impression. When asked "Should the professor be more or less opinionated?" even students who felt uneasy thought the teacher "was fine the way he was because it got us to think about how we viewed the issues" (student #6) or "was very fair at letting us have our own opinion" (student #1). While not meeting with unanimous approval (some thought I should be more opinionated), no one indicated that they were silenced or intimidated by me.<sup>3</sup> The reasons for silence lay elsewhere.

Students mentioned two apparently distinct reasons for not feeling comfortable about voicing their opinions. The first was a fear of confrontation with their fellow students. The desire to avoid disagreement could be a midwestern cultural pattern, or perhaps a more universal desire on the part of students to avoid standing out. Gender training also

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<sup>3</sup>Student 2 is the only exception to this dynamic. As one of the critics of slavery and patriarchy, she frequently contributed to class discussion and stated her opinions directly. On her anonymous survey, she wrote that "on occasion the professor wouldn't call on me because he wanted other people to talk (who very rarely did so), so he would pass over me. This made me feel very self-conscious and afraid to offer other suggestions at other class discussions."

might be a factor. Fear of confrontation was more powerful among women than it was among men in my class. While an equal number of male and female students listed fear of confrontation as a factor in promoting silence, women were more likely than men to list it as the sole reason and to feel, apparently, that no other explanation was necessary. Regardless of its origins, the self-styled timid students feared disagreement. A female senior wrote that "For one I don't talk much, but I also felt that what I said would be cut down by the ultra fannist-civil rights ~~girls~~ people in the class" (as written by student #6). Another white student wrote that she "was afraid to participate at times due to the fact [that] there was one girl who slammed everything I said and made me feel stupid" (student #1).

These students, however, did not fear "losing" debates in the traditional academic sense. Student #1, quoted above, claims that she was made to "feel stupid," a serious matter, but not a concession that she actually was uninformed. Rather, these students feared confrontation because they were afraid of what other students would think of them and call them. A white woman commented that she was afraid to talk solely "because my idea could have been wrong based on how I interpreted the situation" (student #17), a remark that leaves ambiguous whether "the situation" referred to is the historical situation under discussion or the classroom dynamics being played out in the present. The fact that she wrote "situation" not "material," however, suggests the latter interpretation. A senior wrote that he "was afraid to participate *only* when I wasn't 100% prepared," but then he gave more emphasis to a different concern. Mentioning his desire to "speak out" against a specific, vocal African American female student, he continued by writing that "I feared the confrontation that MIGHT have ended up with me being called RACIST" (student #15). This, of course, could happen whether or not he was completely prepared. Confrontation seemed to remain the primary worry for these students, not because they felt ignorant or ill-prepared to debate, but because of the extreme tension they felt during discussions of race.

A white male senior I will call George epitomizes this problem.<sup>4</sup> George, when asked on the survey how often he talked in class, responded that he "tried to participate a lot," an accurate self-analysis. His response to whether he was afraid to do so reveals the degree of concern that accompanied his efforts at speaking up. He replied to the question about whether he was ever afraid:

Yes and no. It wasn't fear or embarrassment or lack of knowledge, but rather intimidation. I felt certain members dominated discussions with their opinions, and I felt that I couldn't express my own opinions. It was like walking on eggshells, you have to be careful what you say so you don't offend them...

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<sup>4</sup>I have changed all of the names used in this paper. On occasion in this paper, I assume that I can, on the basis of class rank, race, and sex, as well as similarity of opinions expressed, match an anonymous survey with a particular student, in this case with one who spoke with me informally after the completion of the semester.

Asked in person about class discussions after the semester, George eagerly took up the topic, and referred to what he called "the race debate" as a potential "confrontation" and twice as a "powder-keg." Towards the end of the conversation he again said that he "didn't want a shouting match" and that he believed discussion was sometimes futile because people often "would not see one another's point" (my paraphrase). My students, or at least some of them, seemed to be practicing confrontation avoidance, perhaps because they have been socialized by parents or peers to value harmony and consensus to the point where it becomes conformity.

Given patterns of gender socialization in contemporary America, it is not surprising that this might affect more women than men. Many women, it seems, are still raised to be agreeable rather than to be forceful proponents of their views. This silenced them because two of their female colleagues, one white and one black, staked out rhetorical space early in the semester and maintained a firm and vocal commitment to feminist and antislavery interpretations. Because of their clearly delineated positions, remarks directed against those visions sometimes did provoke conflict. While these outspoken women never labeled any of their peers racist or sexist, as was evidently so feared by some white students, they did, in the best spirit of the participatory classroom, make their positions known. Perhaps most alarming to their peers who so valued consensus, these two women and their occasional supporters advanced an interpretation of history that emphasized racial and sexual conflict in the past, exactly what many white students seemed particularly eager to avoid in the present.

If a cultural dislike of conflict seems embedded in some white Illinois State University students, a second roadblock to free discussion was a preoccupation with some degree of race consciousness. Obviously, many of the white students quoted above are highly aware of racial tensions and their own racial identity, but just how far this racial awareness goes toward actual racism is hard to know. Most students are either not racist or are sophisticated enough not to make blatantly offensive remarks in a classroom. Student #6 knew enough about politically sensitive language, for example, to heavily cross out the word "girls" in one of her survey answers and write in "people" in its place. The frequent silence and linguistic sensitivity of the fearful students makes it hard to judge just what their privately held opinions about race and gender roles are. But not everyone attempted to avoid making such remarks. "Steve," a white junior, demonstrates the possible extent of racism in this seminar. Asked along with his colleagues to write an analysis of Barbara Fields's book *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground* near the end of the semester, Steve ended his essay with these thoughts:

If this all seems vague, and I'm positive it does, it is because I found this book extremely tough to comprehend. Obviously it's been embraced by hundreds of historians, but I think my problem with it was that I knew ahead of time the author was black. To me, it seemed like another account of what I already knew crammed down my throat.

Having seen Ken Burns's film series, *The Civil War*, in which Barbara Fields appeared, this student blocked out Fields's arguments, apparently assuming that a black professor (even one accepted by "hundreds of historians") could have nothing new to say about slavery. Steve, in fact, assumed he knew as much as she did. The book was, simply, "what I already knew." Here again the problem is not one of white ignorance. I do not think it is over-reading this remark to suggest that Steve knew that Fields had collected specific evidence about Maryland in the 1850s and 1860s that he did not literally possess. Rather, I think Steve means to imply that whatever research Fields has done will be used to support an interpretation of slavery that Steve already finds too familiar. He implies, I think, that Fields could have only one interpretation, one purpose, for writing the book and that goal was predetermined by her race. With such ideas as this, a white student might well feel that discussions of racial matters would be confrontational and, ultimately, unenlightening to all parties. Blacks will, in this vision, unalterably advance the notion that whites were oppressive and that slavery was a miserable system, an interpretation that Steve apparently resents at some level and finds "extremely tough to comprehend." That Steve can simultaneously claim that Fields's book is both "what I already knew" and "extremely tough to comprehend" is probably less significant than the violent image he held of a black, female historian force-feeding him an interpretation that he did not want to swallow because he felt it was based entirely on the author's race. It is, however, very hard to tell how deeply and pervasively this kind of racism permeated my classroom, and it is probably significant that these most racist thoughts were written in a formal paper between a white student and a white professor, where there would be, in other words, no blacks present to witness and comment on the exchange. During the 75-minute class discussion of this book, Steve kept these opinions to himself.

In addition to students' awareness of race, gender consciousness became a factor because our seminar discussed patriarchy in the Old South in a unit that included readings by Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Brenda Stevenson, and Catherine Clinton as well as lectures and discussions.<sup>5</sup> Most of this material emphasized the advantages men enjoyed in the Old South, although the dangers and difficulties men faced were also brought out. Some white male respondents interpreted the attacks on white male figures in the past as assaults against them in the present, despite the fact that no such connections were expressed in class or in the readings. This sense that they were under assault stemmed from their self-identification as white men. An attack on any white man was an attack against them, because they identified themselves by their race and gender. Three white male students identified themselves in their written responses explicitly by their race and sex, and it is worth noting that this is almost all of the white men who felt afraid to participate, the only

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<sup>5</sup>The readings were Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Brenda Stevenson, "Distress and Discord in Virginia Slave Families, 1830-1860," in Carol Bleser, ed., *In Joy and In Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 103-24; and Catherine Clinton, "'Southern Dishonor': Flesh, Blood, Race, and Bondage," in Bleser, ed., *In Joy and Sorrow*, 52-68.

exception being a student who did not elaborate at all on his fear. The others brought race and gender into their definitions of themselves. George, who, I noted earlier in this article, feared confrontation, ended his answer to the survey question about fear by observing that, while he had to watch his language, "they can lambast me (and my race and gender)." A male graduate student, Richard, expressed very similar thoughts; he claimed to be afraid "when the Extremists (i.e. Feminist and Racist) elements were on their soap box. Being a white male mid/early twenties and middle to upper class, I felt the brunt of anger and hostility and did not want to enter my opinions into discussions."<sup>6</sup> Student #15 complained that he "wanted to speak out when Tyniece got on her 'Everything the white man has done is bad' kicks," but that he was afraid to do so. Three white male students in this section obviously conflated criticism of historical figures who share their superficial gender and racial attributes with attacks on themselves and their roles in current society. That no female students made remarks like this indicates either that male students feel a more extreme discomfort during discussions of patriarchy than white students generally do about discussions of racial slavery, or that society empowers men to feel more entitled than women to complain when they feel disadvantaged or perceive an injustice against themselves.

It is important to note, however, that, at least in the case of George, he believes this sense of siege was not a logical reaction. He thinks that the misbehavior, as we see it, of white men in the Old South does not reflect poorly on him; as he said after the semester ended, slavery was all a "long time ago" and he had "not much to do with it." While many would agree that slavery has affected the material and psychological conditions of life in the present, George's comments are interesting because they highlight the paradoxical nature of how he relates himself to past white males. Here, the same person who earlier stated that "they can lambast me (and my race and gender)" suggests that he knows that he is not indicted in any direct way by attacks on slaveholders. The fact that this closely-felt siege mentality on the one hand and the perception of great distance from slavery on the other can co-exist in the same person suggests that George and possibly other white men are torn between two very different visions of their link to the white men of the past. One vision suggests that the link is an all-consuming part of their present identity, while the other disregards the connection as completely non-existent. Such paradoxical logic suggests how important both of these strategies are to some students.

Why, then, do white male students identify themselves with white men in the Old South even as they disavow any actual connection to past slaveholders? The urge to identify with past figures is, perhaps, natural, or at least common. Certainly there is a long historiographic tradition of using past lives as exemplars for current generations, especially in traditional education for boys. Indeed, the creation of role models and the

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<sup>6</sup>Richard's remarks are similar to those of a white male student in a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article who was quoted as saying, "I'm sick of being blamed for everyone else's problems. I just want to be left alone so I can finish school and get on with my life." Quoted in Billie Wright Dziech, "Coping with the Alienation of White Male Students," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 13, 1995.

imaginative placement of oneself back into the past are among the chief appeals of being a history major. Ironically, early practitioners of black and women's history were inspired in part by their realization of the importance of using history to create role models.<sup>7</sup> When white men, however, search the past looking for people to identify with, they sometimes link themselves with the Old South's white men because these students identify themselves in the present primarily by their race and gender, as we have seen above.

One possible solution to the role model dilemma could be to offer white students an alternative to the typically pro-slavery southerner by emphasizing those southern whites who, like James G. Birney or the Grimké sisters, acted against slavery at considerable personal expense. In the end, however, this solution runs the risk of overemphasizing what were, in the end, the voices of a small minority of southern whites, an option that for this instructor risks distorting the historical record for the sake of historical comfort. Nor is there any assurance that the students could or would envision themselves as social activists of the Birney-Grimké model, brashly challenging a social and economic system from the inside. They have already chosen not to identify themselves by an intellectual position in the present, for instance as opponents of racism and patriarchy in this seminar. To identify with more radical positions would usually call on them to transcend superficial identities, something that appears to be very difficult for them to do. Still, to deny antislavery role models to white students could lead to a considerable problem. If the black history and women's history elements of a course are taught to provide role models of leadership and resistance, are we to expect a different kind of imaginative engagement from white male students? To encourage role modeling for some students but not others might well inspire confusion and rightful resentment from whites; we will be best served by abandoning the concept of role models and identification for all students (even if it finds some African Americans complicit in the slave system) in favor of a more overt focus on historical methodology.

However understandable imaginative gender and racial identifications may be between present students and past white southern men, they do produce obvious unease for many students. While there might be times when historians should strive to produce feelings of unease, tension, or even guilt in their audiences, allowing white students to feel comfortable during discussions of race and gender will make it possible for classroom exchanges of ideas to occur. Only then will opinions be challenged and potentially changed. While scholars have suggested different means of overcoming the problem of resistance to a multicultural curriculum, historians themselves have a unique disciplinary

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<sup>7</sup>These fields are now well out of the hero/heroine finding stage. Leon Litwack recently wrote of his class on African American history that "it does not lend itself ... to eulogistic sketches of heroes and heroines. If they are expecting celebratory history, racial politics, and racial therapy, in whatever guise, they will be deeply disappointed." In Noble, et al., 14. Support for the idea of developing "empathic power" between students and subject matter can be found in Eve Kornfeld, "The Power of Empathy: A Feminist, Multicultural Approach to Historical Pedagogy," *The History Teacher*, 26 (November 1992), 28.

discourse that may be employed to counter the largely irrational, cross-generational identification by race and gender indulged in by some of our students.<sup>8</sup>

An overt and undisguised appeal to historical methodology may be especially effective in combating white male self-identification because some of these students already embrace the reasoned and rational investigation of the professional historian. The male graduate student, Richard, condemned what he saw as the "*angry* extreme views" he thought he heard during "the week long discussion on the Gender/Race Role whites played in slavery." He elaborated on his own model of scholarly, historical discourse:

... moderation of discussion is important. Those who are the most emotional are not always the most Rational...

The attacks on my Race and Gender, and constant Reminder of the same, did at times keep me from voicing my opinions. Have we lost the ability to discuss issues in an academic manner, must every issue be emotionally charged[?] I feel in an effort to present the entire spectrum of ideas and views on slavery, many moderate and "middle-of-the-road" ideas were left unvoiced.

All look at history through previous experiences and personal views. These experiences and views determine our interpretation of historical events. I would argue that these interpretations should be put forth in an academic manner.

Richard's complaint, namely that two students had abandoned objectivity in favor of "emotional" history, should be turned back on him. Obviously this should be done gently; no one likes to be told that their perceptions and reactions are driven by something other than reason. But Richard, by seeing closely reasoned historical investigations of gender roles in patriarchy and racial roles in slavery as "attacks on my Race and Gender" is reacting at least as emotionally as he thinks his supposed attackers are. Through his over-identification with certain historical figures, he has abandoned his own model of scholarly discourse. This must become apparent to the student before comfort can be restored to the classroom. Not until he feels and intuitively believes what George said about "not having much to do with it" can he properly distance himself from patriarchs when they are under assault. Abandoning the role model pursuit of historical similarities in favor of a scholarly interrogation of the difference that exists between historians and their subjects

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<sup>8</sup>Gerald Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992). Francesca Sawaya, "Silent and Sullen: Resistance to the Multicultural Classroom," in a paper delivered at the Midwest Modern Language Association Annual Meeting, in November 1994, argues that students should be taught and encouraged to participate in a wide-ranging and inclusive debate illustrating the connections and divisions between a wide spectrum of historical and literary positions. By allowing students to engage with controversial rhetoric written by non-academics in the past, Sawaya argues, they are able "to identify and hence *voice* their differing beliefs." My classes engaged in the more severely limited debate between differing groups of recent historians, none of whom explicitly advanced pro-patriarchal or pro-slavery positions.



in the past could help Richard and others achieve the scholarly model he so appreciates. An investigation of how the socially constructed meanings of terms such as "white" and "male" have changed over time could be a place to start. In fact, a student such as Richard would become a better historian in the process of realizing our alienation from the past. This approach, which calls for students to jettison the more romantic aspects of history, might make the study of the past less attractive to some, but it should appeal to students who already know the discourse of objectivity.

Some of the roadblocks to class discussion mentioned above will be hard to remove. Outright racism and cultural training to avoid confrontation, especially when such training reinforces a gendered upbringing that emphasizes polite agreement instead of individuality, are serious obstacles that are often beyond the ability of an instructor to end in one semester. But it might be possible to change the sense that about one half of white male students have that they are under assault, if only because some of them already possess a substitute model. Their identification with people of "my race and gender" reveals much of how they envision and define themselves, but they might also have within their knowledge base a rationalist discourse that can be used to counteract the irrationality of that self-identification. If white students can be convinced that their response to classroom discussion is as emotional as that of their supposed opponents, they might re-evaluate how they view themselves and their roles in discussion.

Students learn best when their ideas must be explained and are then challenged and debated by the group as a whole. Perspectives can only be changed when an ideologically diverse range of people make contributions, and this can happen only when most students feel comfortable. An atmosphere in which all students can speak about race and gender would also, significantly, help the two outspoken critics of slavery and patriarchy, one of whom complained that she "felt I *had* to say something to keep things interesting" (student #2). For all of these reasons, it seems important that we communicate to white students that they need not identify with Old South whites. If we are to foster a study of slavery in a mostly white educational setting such as Illinois State University, we should acknowledge the fears that many white students bring to discussions of slavery and address their emotional over-identification with slaveholders that partially creates this fear, anger, and silence.