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June 2009 Newsletter

Teaching American History and African Diaspora Heritage in Scotland

By Peggy Brunache

I am a Miami native, daughter of Haitian immigrants, and a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin. I have been working in archaeology for nineteen years and have recently concentrated on the archaeology of African diasporas, with a focus on foodways within enslaved populations and the construction of group identities in the French Atlantic.

As most of us know, life doesn't always take one down the easiest path. After finishing my coursework at the University of Texas at Austin and adjusting to a few life-altering developments, I decided to move overseas. In 2006, I emigrated to Scotland to marry my Scottish fiancé and begin a new life. In order to finish writing my dissertation, my husband and I recently decided to utilize daycare services for the part of some days. To offset the cost of childcare, I accepted a part-time position as a tutor in the History Department at the University of Edinburgh in September 2008 to teach American history. In this essay, I briefly explore some of my initial teaching experiences in Scotland.

A historian's sensibilities are readily engaged by the circumstance of a Black American teaching United States history to the youth of Scotland. Some historians have claimed that the revolutionary ideals of democracy and freedom that fueled the American rebellion from Britain were rooted not in continental philosophy but rather sprang from the Scottish Enlightenment. Yet that legacy of American independence proceeded in a flawed state, built on a platform of racial ideologies and expropriated lives and labor. I now worked to teach young Scots of the unfulfilled promise of America, of its legacies of oppression, hope, and the ongoing struggles of African descended populations to overcome the adversities they confronted. This role seemed all the more remarkable given the low representation of African descended persons in Scottish universities. A recent report in the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (April 23, 2009,

[http:// www.jbhe.com](http://www.jbhe.com)) pointed out that individuals of Caribbean heritage only “made up 1.4 percent of the students at Scottish universities in 2007” while “Caribbean blacks make up 2 percent of the population in the United Kingdom.”

The University of Edinburgh is one of the oldest universities in Britain, founded in the late sixteenth century. It has what most of us would call an ivy-league status and is the highest ranking Scottish university. According to GS.com, a global career and education network website, the university ranked at number six in Europe’s 2008 university systems survey and during that same year was named the twenty-third best university in the world. It is for this reason that the University of Edinburgh often receives more upper-class English applicants than most universities in England (except Oxford and Cambridge).



A view of Edinburgh, Scotland (Source: <http://www.shc.ed.ac.uk>).

The University offers four-year degree programs similar to most institutions in the U.S., with some notable differences. The first two years of a student’s coursework do not count towards the degree and are considered much like a “window-shopping” period so a student can decide what subject best fits his or her goals. At the end of the second year, an area of concentration must be declared. The first and second year students are required to take between

two and four wide-ranging survey courses (each course is a year long), chosen from among regional and temporal specialties.

Within the university's College of Humanities and Social Science is the School of History, Classics, and Archaeology. The School houses over 120 teaching, research, and administrative staff to manage undergraduate and post-graduate teaching and services for over 1,500 students. In particular, the History Department holds academic partnerships with the Centre for the Study of Two World Wars, Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, and the Scottish Centre for Diaspora Studies. As a historical archaeologist, the most obvious choice would have been to seek employment with the School's Archaeology division.

Historical archaeology in British universities is a rapidly expanding branch of archaeology. Post-graduate programs are offered at several universities including University of York, University of Sheffield, Bristol University, Cambridge University, University of Leicester, and University of Glasgow, specializing in sites throughout the U.K. and world regions such as North America, the Caribbean, South Africa, and Australia. However, teaching for the Archaeology office was not an option as their regional expertise only included Scotland, Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Near East. The History Department's individual subject-area includes economic and social history, general history, and Scottish history. The general history program is multidisciplinary in scope, with several subject areas that include a survey course entitled "American History 2," which was the most suitable alternative for me.

American History 2 is a survey course to be taken (usually) during an undergraduate's second year at university. It aims at providing a general introduction to the major issues in American history, from the colonial period to the present, with an in-depth coverage of a few specific topics. To be more specific, in the autumn semester the course primarily focuses on the colonial period (1607-1776), the American Revolution (1776-1789), the Early National period from 1789 to 1815, and Jacksonian democracy. The spring semester begins with a focus on the height of the antebellum period and proceeds through subjects to the present "war on terror."

The survey class' intended learning outcome, according to the department's webpage, is that it

aims to enable students to develop general intellectual and personal skills. Students will have the opportunity in both their written work and their tutorial discussions to participate in intellectual

debate -- comparing conflicting arguments, weighing up evidence and reaching conclusions. In the process, we hope that students will be able to develop their research, analytical and interpretative abilities. Equally importantly, we hope that, in both their written work and their oral discussions, students will develop their capacity to express arguments cogently and confidently. More generally, we want to use the discipline of history to give a humane education within the tradition of the broad-based Scottish arts degree; to encourage active learning and habits of critical and independent thought, profiting from the close association of research and teaching; and to teach intellectual and communication skills which will equip students for high personal and professional achievement. (<http://www.shc.ed.ac.uk>)

The course averages two hundred students and is taught by a team, consisting of five or more professors who have research interests in some aspect of American political and cultural history. The professors provide three weekly lectures. The students also meet once a week for tutorials, taught by “tutors” (graduate level students working as teaching assistants with significant amount to teaching responsibility) in groups of ten or smaller. Tutors usually manage two groups per week.

Tutors are encouraged to use both primary and secondary sources; readings chosen to enable students to discuss specific topics are left to our discretion. There is no set style for tutorial groups and, therefore, we can manage our groups in whatever manner best facilitates an atmosphere of critical analysis and intellectual debate. Along with readings on specific topics, students are required to submit tutorial journals electronically on the University’s Blackboard Learning System (WebCT). Each semester, students must compose six 500 word ‘journal entries,’ based on their readings and the tutors’ set questions for the tutorials. The journal entries must display depth of analysis and include major arguments of the reading, strengths and weaknesses, and if appropriate, consider matters such as historiography, methodology, and use of evidence. References are required and proper citations must be in the form of footnotes.

My initial experiences in teaching these students were shaped by a variety of dynamics, including language negotiation, socio-economic perceptions, and the influences of racial and ethnic group heritage.

Language

While I have sufficient experience teaching, I was nervous to teach in Scotland out of a concern for an occasional struggle with language barriers. The English we hear when Hugh Grant is on the screen or during a James Bond flick is not the language spoken by all or even most British citizens. Dialects and accents can differ by region and by socio-economic groups. Scottish English and related dialects of Scots language can be almost indecipherable for an American. Certain words were easy enough, such as “*aye*” and “*wee*.” Other terms took longer. For example, “*getting messages*” means grocery shopping. It is even common to hear someone in the local pastry shop asking for “*twa bridies, a plen ane in an ingin ane an a*,” which translates to “two *bridies* [savory pastry pies] please, a plain one, and an onion one as well.” At the start of my class sessions, I explained to the students that I am a new resident to Britain and am still working my way through the local accents and mannerisms. Each of my students was usually conscious to speak very slowly if his or her accent was particularly difficult for me, or to refrain from using unfamiliar British colloquialisms when discussing the readings. But over time, I grew more comfortable with the local dialects and mannerisms, and didn’t mind when they would sometimes slip out of an ecumenical form of English, just as they didn’t mind that Americans cannot properly say “Daniel Craig.”

Demographics and Student Profiles

The University of Edinburgh’s international credentials for teaching and research make this institution a top choice for top students in Britain. To understand it another way, if one doesn’t make it into Oxford or Cambridge, that student will aspire to attend Edinburgh. Therefore, there is often a type of class-based tradition associated with the University. I was surprised to learn that over half of my students (and over half of the total class in general) were English rather than Scottish. More so, these were students from wealthy backgrounds. It is not uncommon to have the 27th Earl of so-and-such within your tutorial group. Speaking with other tutors, the greatest tutor-student problem isn’t necessarily the “I should just get a good grade for attending” attitude that professors and teaching assistants often complain about in the American universities. Instead, there is often a social economic-based attitude of high class snobbery and privilege that can affect the learning process for other students in the group as well as impact the tutor-student relationship.

Fortunately, I had no such students in my tutorial groups. But I admit that I was a bit taken back by how well-traveled my students were. Many spent the holidays backpacking through several Asian countries, locked away in an exclusive Swiss chalet, or clubbing in South Africa. Apparently, spending lazy, drunken days and nights on the shore is too rudimentary for my students.

A student participating in a year-abroad program from the United States or Australia is common in American History 2. These students may have initially felt a certain sense of ease because I was their tutor and American. However, it quickly became obvious that they were not prepared for the level of critical analysis and intellectual debate required for the group participation. I never did ask, but I did get the sense that this American history class was much more rigorous than the coursework to which they were accustomed. Getting these exchange students to engage the readings on a critical level and express clear articulations of their perspective seemed overwhelming to them.

Race and Racism

It may come as little surprise to you that I was the only person of color serving as a tutor for American History 2. I don't think anyone on staff has treated me any better or worse off than any other tutor. One or two of my students (I suppose the ones who are interested in African Americans) did say that my heritage gave me a "cool factor." Generally speaking, a discussion of racism and racial categories was never initiated by anyone other than me. An American colleague and dear friend was curious about how I engaged my students on the topic of race and racism within the course themes. I use the term "race" in this context to mean a socially constructed category of group differences, and the terms "racism" and "racialization" to denote the dynamic processes of ideologies of social difference. I tried to explain that at times, issues of race and racism loom like ghosts -- problem difficult to grasp or even identify. Sometimes you're not sure you are seeing racial dynamics at play in the classroom. In Britain, one very often becomes caught up in the politics of socio-economic class more so than race. After stating this, my friend commented, "If a Black woman teaches a college class on American history in the U.S. and doesn't talk about race . . . people would think that was odd. Right?" Right. So, the next question was: should the situation be any different overseas?

My first semester teaching abroad happened to fall during one of the most significant American political election years. The week leading up to November 5, 2008, was filled with many questions about the reliability of the electoral votes, red vs. blue states, and did Americans really question the possibility of electing a Black president. One of the most difficult topics that we discussed that week and would re-visit several times throughout the course of the semesters was the issue of race and racism in America. While racial constructs are also a part of British history, the perpetuation of racial prejudices in the way that is unique to the U.S. is particularly difficult for some students to understand. According to a number of students, my providing them with accounts of personal experiences of racial discrimination helped them to come to a closer if not complete understanding. In my tutorial discussions I tried to bring the topics to life, to strengthen the link between the past and the present, so that one may understand the context of the present in order to comprehend the significance of the past.

To detail all our conversations would require much more space than is allotted for this essay, but I will say that some of the more confusing aspects of racial politics in the U.S. for British students are the “one-drop rule” or hypo-descent. For example, many Brits consider Barack Obama as a biracial (or “mixed race”) president, rather than a Black president. Other confusing facets of American history included: how the institution of slavery maintained for centuries; the social and cultural divide of “The North” and “The South”; racial profiling; and institutionalized racism. I was responsible for providing students with a general overview of specific events over the course of America’s four hundred year history without marginalizing the significance of racism in American society and culture. To assist the students in understanding these complex topics, we explored anthropological and archaeological connections to racialization. Examples from plantation studies, in particular, allowed the students to engage with race on a historical and material level.

To gain a deeper understanding of my tutor role and its effect on the students, I asked them a series of questions about their experience with me at the end of the year. The following overview of their responses provides an intriguing perspective.

Why are you taking American History 2?

While American popular culture is ubiquitous in Britain via television and other forms of media, American history is not studied in much detail in British primary and secondary schools.

Some students were told by others that it was a relatively fun and interesting class -- quite different than their other history courses. Also, the course would help them learn a basic overview of how America gained its position in global power and influence, as well as understanding certain national impulses like intense patriotism and global paternalistic attitudes. For the American visiting students, it was a requirement.

What do you expect to learn?

Most students were unsure what to say specifically regarding this question. Generally, the students expected to gain an overall understanding of key events and themes throughout American history. Although, some students felt that too little time was spent on understanding early Native American experiences and their responses to the colonists. The American students expected to receive a British perspective on our history.

What topics discussed have been most intriguing?

The answers were quite varied as to historical topics. For some it was the early colonial period and the American Revolutions; for others it was the Civil War, slavery, and the Reconstruction years. Some were most intrigued by the black codes and the actions of the KKK. The rise of American imperialism and the social and racial struggles of the 1960s for other students sparked almost visceral reactions. As for primary sources, many students enjoyed *Common Sense* and the *Narrative Life of Fredrick Douglass* (or “Freddy D.” as he became affectionately known).

What is your experience with previous tutors?

I found the students’ answers most intriguing. While a few stated they had positive experiences with previous tutors, most felt belittled and intimidated by them instead. In general, the overall atmosphere of the tutorial was very formal, one of high tension, awkward long silences with students too uncomfortable to speak even when pressed. Debates were difficult to generate when the student assigned random readings and made to give a presentation each week. This left them interested only to present the main arguments of their readings and literally “switch off” when it was the next student’s turn. At best, the students found some tutors reasonable if less personable.

Has having an American tutor given you a different perspective on class topics?

Most students did feel that having an American tutor, combined with my cultural and national experiences, enhanced their class discussions and learning about the social and cultural impacts of certain events. They particularly perceived a benefit in the degree to which such a tutor could provide greater insight into the ways in which contemporary Americans may perceive their own historical events and heritage.

Has my race and ethnicity affected your learning experience?

The students generally felt that my race and ethnicity (Black and Haitian-American) did not greatly affect their learning experience, at least not in a negative way. However, the students were well aware that I focused on topics of interest related to the slavery and post-slavery periods and to African-descendant communities. Some of the readings and tutorial discussions illustrated points that they may have missed in the lectures. According to them, I was able to shed light on several historical racial events and display a passion about race related discussions, sometimes through experiences by comparison, in a manner that enhanced their knowledge without creating an environment that stifled understanding of a racial, social, and cultural history that is very foreign to their current experiences, perceptions of race, and cultural history.

Is it similar or different to previous tutorials?

While the students found I required far more work than the other tutors, they did find the class less formal, more enjoyable, and more interactive. I managed the tutorial groups much like graduate seminar classes, with each student expected to read the same group of articles and be prepared to discuss them in class. Debates were rigorous and a class with no analysis of the readings or no debates was not tolerated. The students felt comfortable to criticize any article on the grounds of weak writing, no historiography, or even boring presentation of argument, as well as to question one another's perspectives, as long as they articulated their points effectively and with respect.

Navigating the halls of Edinburgh

Overall, the students and I had an enjoyable year. I learned as much as I hope I taught, and look forward to a new group of students in the Fall.

The last day of tutorials as requested by my students, I combined my groups for a joint meeting at a nearby pub. We talked about a number of subjects including the similarities and differences between American and British universities. In general, students at University of Edinburgh are financially better off than students I've taught in the U.S. They are more traveled and do not "expect" high marks for not falling asleep in class as was the case in some of my U.S. experiences. It is not to say that there were no slackers, but at least they accepted their low marks without argument. While the university does demographically exhibit students from many ethnicities and racial categories, very few registered for American History 2, and there were none in either of my groups. Instead, socio-economic class was the greatest marker of difference. My Scottish husband had an opportunity to meet some of my students and within seconds pointed out who was not from a working class background (and therefore, he joked, could not be completely trusted). Apparently, people need only hear you speak for a few seconds and you are summed up and thrown into a pre-constructed category. As an American, I was often unaware of which students were of upper-class status and which were not. Nor could I immediately sense if either of my groups had the potential to be disrupted based on conflicts of socio-economic class between the students. Lucky for me, it never happened.

As for my fellow American students visiting for the semester, I was often uncomfortable with their lack of general American history (some had never heard of the Black Panthers or Malcolm X) as well as their inability to critically analyze readings and argument their opinions effectively. While I can say that I only taught four American students throughout the year, I'm afraid of how this may reflect on the American educational system of higher learning. My guess is that their performances were not unusual. I'm sure their lower marks are quietly observed and recorded by the department.

Two hours later, still at the pub, we also recounted the highlights of our discussions and debates and the week before and after Obama's win of the presidential election. And of course, we talked about race. One student asked my opinion on the future state of racial groups in the world. "Do you think after hundreds of years or maybe more, we might all just blend into one race?" My answer was no. I think most individuals find comfort in the shared experiences and

perceptions of others with whom they feel a commonality. While there will always be people who mix and blend culturally, ethnically, and racially, there will also be some who prefer more limiting social group boundaries and to preserve what they sense to be ‘the way things have been, and the way things should be.’ My only hope is that we can openly interrogate our fears and issues about ideologies of difference in a meaningful way that pushes humanity forward.

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