

Teaching History and #blacklivesmatter

Over the last two weeks Americans have taken to the streets to protest the lack of indictment in two high profile cases where the use of police force resulted in the death of civilians. Last week, members of the [Black Student Union at Cal](#) occupied a dining facility on campus and this weekend [protesters marched from the campus into the city's streets](#).

As an organization that works with history teachers, I keep coming back to this question: *How can we use history classrooms to arm students with skills and knowledge to make sense of their world?*

My short answer: I believe that the study of history can serve as a powerful analytical tool to be employed by students as they move through life and try and make sense of the world that unfolds around them. As a student of history and a student of the black freedom struggle myself, I often utilize this intellectual framing to help me make sense of my world.

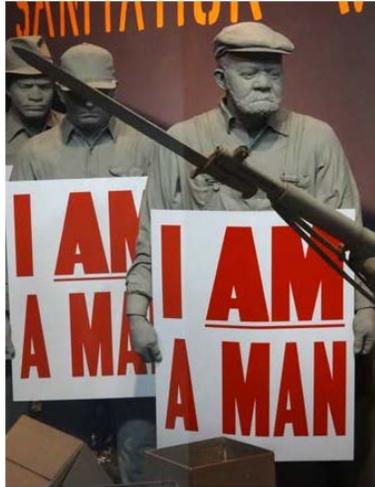
Over the last two weeks, my personal responses to current events have fluctuated from my heart to my head. My heart laments the unnecessary loss of life. My head returns again and again to examples in history. When it was announced that Darren Wilson, a white police officer, would not be indicted for the killing of Michael Brown, a black teenager, it made me think about how mechanisms of law have been used throughout history to present an image of due process and fairness. I remembered my reading of "[Stories of Scottsboro](#)" during my first year in graduate school. The author argued that while the sentencing of [nine black youths](#) for the alleged rape of two white women in 1931 was, indeed, an abuse of state power, it marked a turning point in the use of extralegal violence against black men. Rather than stand complicit with a public lynching, officials guarded the prisoners and ensured a trial, one which ultimately incarcerated innocent young men. I also thought about how in the [summer of 1964](#) Mississippi police claimed no knowledge of the disappearance of three civil rights workers who were killed by Klansmen after being released from police custody.



The Scottsboro Boys, with attorney [Samuel Leibowitz](#), under guard by the state militia, 1932. Author unknown. Found at <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/trials/trialheroes/HORTON.jpg>

As I read the social media responses to the events in Ferguson and the subsequent failure to indict a police officer in the killing of Eric Garner, a black New Yorker, I also began to place the hashtag [#blacklivesmatter](#) within a broader historical context. I immediately thought about the "[I AM A MAN](#)" placards that strikers in Memphis wore in the days before Dr. King was assassinated. I thought of the steadfast reporting of [Ida B. Wells](#) to document lynching, to make these extralegal acts of violence known beyond the isolated communities from which they occurred. And, I thought about [Dred Scott](#)'s claims to citizenship. These examples connect me to an intellectual path of trying

to make sense of the present through a broad historical context, not receiving each event as an isolated incident, but rather as part of a much larger story of racism in American history.



"I Am a Man - Diorama of Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike - National Civil Rights Museum - Downtown Memphis - Tennessee - USA" by Adam Jones, Ph.D. - Own work. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution

As I sat with 8th grade teachers at our [History Blueprint conference](#) this Saturday, I was struck by two examples from the [Civil War unit](#). Our teacher leader had devised a [mini-lesson](#) to teach her students the skill of “perspective taking” prior to exploring a multitude of [perspectives on the slavery and the Civil War](#). In the quote provided, George Fitzhugh, a Virginia planter, argued that “slaves are all well fed, well clad, have plenty of fuel, and are happy.” In a contrasting quote, Frederick Douglass, who had been born into slavery before escaping and becoming one of the nation’s leading abolitionists, asserted, “We were worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow [windy], hail, or snow too hard for us to work in the field.” These two men, born of the same time but with disparate experiences and interests, saw the world from drastically different perspectives. Today, most would ridicule Fitzhugh’s statements and side with Douglass. However, though we may wish otherwise, I remain convinced that we all would not have been abolitionists. And, so, I wonder how we can use an exercise like this to allow students to explore

perspective, learn about the past, and gain the skills to make sense of their own inherent biases and the world they live in.

While it cannot solve it all, through deliberate history instruction, I hope we can work to foster greater context, analysis, and empathy for the human condition.

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