Teaching “Segregation” and the Black Liberation Movement in the Age of Obama

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Soul/R&B legend, Wilson Pickett was nominated for a Grammy in 1999 for the song “It’s Harder Now.” Pickett’s soul classic resonates with me in part because I find teaching African American history “harder now.” It is especially difficult to teach the sociohistorical period known variously as “the age of Jim Crow” or “Segregation.” Students don’t see the segregated South of the post World War II era as harrowing as Slavery or as rancorous as the Nadir, 1877-1923. Why is teaching African American history to this generation of college students such a difficult task? Why is the era of “Segregation” and the liberation movements it spawned so difficult for today’s youth to understand?

There are myriad reasons for students’ confusion about the history of “Segregation” and the civil rights and Black Power movements. I think the two most important are: 1) the inaccuracy and impotence of the terms used to describe the phenomena and the period; and 2) contemporary students’ faith in the market and U.S. law, and conversely their lack of faith that ordinary Black people can change things. These perspectives lead them to question the necessity for and legitimacy of social movements and protest.

Because that moment and the race relations encompassed by it have largely been misrepresented, it is not surprising that many white students view the period’s inequities as “irritating,” rather than as fundamentally oppressive. According to one white male student in the course on the Black Freedom Movement I teach, “the market would have soon eliminated “Segregation”; it wasn’t profitable.” From his vantage point there was no need for disruptive unlawful protest activities.

On the other hand, many contemporary Black students like an African American female in that same Black Freedom Movement course, mistakenly believe “blacks fared better” when “we owned our own segregated institutions.” Focused on the few successful individuals that Black teachers and administrators heroically prepared despite working in under-resourced institutions, students like this mistakenly view the period far more positively than it was. Their focus on “exceptional” men and women leads them to ignore the overwhelming majority of Black youth that “did not overcome.” Most were relegated to an adult life of exploitation in the Plantation Economy, poverty in demeaning menial service jobs, and repression in barbarous prisons (See Charles S. Johnson, Growing Up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South, Allison Davis, Burleigh B. Gardner, and Mary R. Gardner, Deep South, Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, American Congo, Gail Williams O’Brien, The Color of Law, and Khalil Gibran Muhammad, The Condemnation of Blackness).

What’s the problem with the dominant terminology? Essentially, it emphasizes form over content, that is, it stresses racial separation rather than analyzing a system of white supremacy in which whites made all of the decisions about the accumulation and allocation of resources. In my experience, the emphasis on “separate” drinking fountains, schools, etc., and the relegation of Blacks to the back of the bus leads most students to mistakenly equate African American Studies units, Black cultural centers, and even
Black students’ in-group socializing with “Segregation.” Simply put, the term “Segregation” does not accurately convey the system of racial oppression that existed from the 1880s until it was outlawed in the mid-to-late 1960s (See Winston A. Grady Willis, Challenging U.S. Apartheid).

What’s missing is an emphasis on power relations, the dominant and subordinate positions occupied by whites and Blacks in the racial order. In that system of racial oppression, whites controlled all public institutions. For instance, all-white state and local superintendents and school boards decided that African American schools would receive 10-33 percent of the resources that white schools received. They hired all personnel, set policy, and selected the textbooks. These same entities determined to pay Black teachers with the same credentials as whites approximately 65 percent of whites’ salary (See Horace Mann Bond, Negro Education in Alabama: A Study in Cotton and Steel and James Anderson, The Education of Blacks in the South, 1880-1935). As we can see, the heart of this system was not that it separated African and European Americans, but that whites had exclusive power over all decision-making processes. And of course, they enacted policies that insured unequal outcomes. Given this, “Segregation” does not begin to describe how this system functioned.

The Apartheid concept better captures that system of racial oppression. Technically, both terms have the same denotation, but they have very different connotations. What we in the United States call “Segregation” is referred to as “petty apartheid” in South Africa. That is those aspects that mandated and enforced separateness in social relations. However, general Apartheid, whether in South Africa or the U.S., is recognized as a system of white supremacy, which entailed the exploitation of Blacks’ labor, political subjugation, social ostracism, and a combination of cultural destruction, appropriation, and assimilation that is buttressed by violence.

On Thursday April 28, at a commemoration of the 50th anniversary of 1961 Freedom Rides, I along William Patterson, Office of Inclusion and Inter-Cultural relations, Carol Ammons, co-founder of C-U Citizens for Justice and Christine Adrian, Jefferson Middle School Teacher will dissect the structural and ideological underpinnings of American Apartheid and examine civil rights campaigns and battles for Black Power by the Black liberation movement during the 1960s (1955-1977). The Freedom Rider event and other popular programs will make it less hard to teach contemporary youth about Blacks’ struggle for freedom, justice, equality, self-determination and social transformation.