Charleston Syllabus: Readings on Race, Racism, and Racial Violence

Review Number: 2030
Publish date: Thursday, 1 December, 2016
Editor: Chad Williams
Kidada E. Williams
Keisha N. Blain
ISBN: 9780820349572
Date of Publication: 2016
Price: £75.50
Pages: 336pp.
Publisher: The University of Georgia Press
Publisher url: http://www.ugapress.org/index.php/books/charleston_syllabus/
Place of Publication: Athens, GA
Reviewer: Lydia Plath

Just after eight o’clock in the evening on 17 June 2015, 21-year-old white supremacist Dylann Roof walked into the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, carrying a semiautomatic handgun. He sat with 12 parishioners and their pastor, South Carolina state senator Rev. Clementa Pinkney, for about an hour, as they prayed and read from the Bible. Then, Roof announced that he was ‘here to kill black people’ (p. 1) and began firing. Roof murdered nine people – Cynthia Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, Depayne Middleton-Doctor, Clementa Pinkney, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Simmons, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, and Myra Thompson – because, as he explained on his personal website, he wanted to start a race war and ‘someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me’ (p. 2). Roof’s website also included images of him posing with both the Confederate battle flag and the flags of Rhodesia and apartheid-era South Africa.

Upon hearing the news of the massacre – one of the worst in American history – Chad Williams, Keisha Blain, and Kidada Williams became frustrated with the ways in which Roof, his white supremacist beliefs, and the events in Charleston were being depicted in mainstream media. Rather than seeing the shooting as part of a long history of racial violence perpetrated by those invested in maintaining white dominance, Roof was portrayed as a loner – an exception – whose understanding of the Confederate flag as a symbol of ‘hate’, for example, was at odds with its meaning as ‘heritage’ in the minds of those southerners who continued to display it with pride. When the victims’ families expressed their willingness to forgive Dylann Roof, the African-American community more broadly was implored to do the same, and to ‘move on from [America’s] troubled racial past’ (p. 2).

Charleston Syllabus, the book, began as a hashtag on the social media site Twitter (twitter.com [2]). On 19 June 2015, Chad Williams tweeted in frustration about the ‘ignorance running rampant’ regarding the historical antecedents and context for the massacre, and called for a ‘#CharlestonSyllabus’. The idea of a ‘hashtag syllabus’ was not new; Williams was inspired by the #FergusonSyllabus created by historian Marcia Charletain the previous year, when, on 9 August 2014, unarmed African American teenager Michael
Brown was shot and killed by a white police officer, Darren Wilson, in Ferguson, Missouri. The protests that erupted in the wake of Brown’s untimely death led, on the one hand, to military-style force from local law enforcement, and, on the other hand, to an explosion of civil rights campaigning under the banner of ‘Black Lives Matter’ (an organisation – and hashtag – established in 2012 as a result of the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of yet another black teenager, Trayvon Martin, in Florida).

Since the #CharlestonSyllabus, there has also been a (controversial) ‘Trump Syllabus’ and a #PulseOrlandoSyllabus, amongst others, and it appears that the notion of a crowdsourced list of readings to facilitate public understanding of current events is proving to be a fruitful endeavour.(1) Historians are increasingly turning to social media in their teaching, in particular using Twitter to create learning communities beyond the classroom and to enable participation in discussion.(2) As Chad Williams has pointed out in his reflections on the #CharlestonSyllabus, ‘hashtag education’, when used responsibly, reflects an ‘ethos of shared communal knowledge production that is at the core of the black intellectual tradition’. (3) Social media can, and should, be harnessed by historians for education and public engagement. Indeed, the editors of Charleston Syllabus saw the opportunity to harness Twitter’s power for the purposes of education. As they explain, hashtag education has great potential to ‘address moments of racial trauma’ (p. 3), and as historians and as educators they felt they had a ‘unique responsibility’ (p. 2) to help the public understand the deeper meaning of the Charleston shooting and its place in American history. #CharlestonSyllabus was intended to bring together a list of books, articles, and primary sources that would serve this purpose.

The community of historians on Twitter (or, ‘#twitterstorians’) responded. (4) Within an hour, #CharlestonSyllabus was trending, and within a few days, 10,000 tweets had been posted (I should note that I was one of the historians who contributed to the list). Keisha Blain, a blogger for the African American Intellectual History Society (www.aaihs.org [3]), kept track of the recommendations, and a number of librarians aided her in linking the suggestions to the WorldCat Library Database (www.worldcat.org/tags/charlestonsyllabus [4]). Charleston Syllabus was published in book form in order to develop this long list of resources into something more tangible, manageable, and accessible.

The book is a selection of texts from the crowdsourced list, and comprises 64 sources that are intended to provide general readers with a ‘better understanding of the histories feeding into the massacre’ and the responses to it (p. 5). The texts are a combination of primary and secondary sources, including extracts from scholarly books and articles, speeches, op-eds, and song lyrics that range in date from the 18th century to the present. 24 are written by women. The book is divided into six parts: ‘Slavery, survival, and community building’, ‘Religious life, spirituality, and racial identity’, ‘The Civil War and Reconstruction in history and memory’, ‘Jim Crow, racial politics, and global white supremacy’, ‘Civil Rights and Black Power’, and ‘Contemporary perspectives on race and racial violence’.

Each part has a brief introduction to the material, and each directly links the events in Charleston to an aspect of African-American history through the inclusion of op-eds written in the aftermath of the massacre. Aside from some of the op-eds, scholars of African-American history will find few sources with which they are likely to be unfamiliar, but of course that is to be expected in a volume of this nature, as it is aimed at the general reader. That said, some of the editorial decisions are intriguing. Missing from the volume are words from some of the most well-known African Americans in United States history: it does not include words from Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Booker T. Washington, or Frederick Douglass. For university educators, this is not at all a problem, but it does perhaps raise a question about the level of knowledge general readers are expected to have, as well as the pitfalls of a crowdsourced list in which historians might feel inclined to reach beyond the ‘obvious’ sources.

However, for those already familiar with African-American history and culture, the editorial choices are actually rather refreshing. Instead of encountering Frederick Douglass learning to read, or heroically beating the slave-breaker Covey into submission and declaring his manhood, in the first section on slavery readers meet former slave Charles Ball. And they do so at Ball’s lowest ebb, in a section of his 1837 narrative Life and Adventures of Charles Ball.
in which he is considering suicide. ‘What is life worth’, Ball asks at the end of the extract, ‘amidst hunger, nakedness and excessive toil, under the continually uplifted lash?’ (p. 19). The horrors of slavery are clear in these extracts, but so is the determination of enslaved people to resist the peculiar institution.

In part two, on black religious life, it is poet Claudia Rankine’s op-ed, originally published on 22 June 2015 in the New York Times, which stands out. ‘The condition of black life is one of mourning’ challenges white readers to understand that they cannot empathise with ‘the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black’ (p. 71). As she points out, ‘dead blacks are a part of normal life’ (p. 72) in the United States, and only through insistence on national mourning might activists interrupt that momentum. Reading Rankine’s powerful words alongside the lyrics to the 1779 hymn ‘Amazing Grace’ allows the dignity and grace of the Charleston massacre victims’ families to take on a deeper meaning and reveals the strength of black spirituality.

In March 1861, the 13 states of the newly formed Confederacy published their Constitution. Similar to the United States Constitution in many ways, the Confederate Constitution (unlike the US Constitution) explicitly included reference to slavery by prohibiting any ‘law denying or impairing the right of property in negro slaves’ (p. 115). The editors of Charleston Syllabus, by including extracts of the Confederate Constitution annotated by historian Stephanie McCurry in the third section of the book, do not leave this clause open to interpretation. McCurry describes it as the ‘centrepiece’ of the Confederate Constitution, and rightly argues that its inclusion makes the document ‘explicitly proslavery’ (p. 115). Debates over the meaning of the Confederate battle flag became headline news in the wake of the Charleston shooting, as African American activists insisted on drawing a straight line between Dylann Roof’s photographs and the flag flying over the South Carolina State House. When South Carolina legislators refused to act, black activist Bree Newsome climbed the flagpole and removed the flag herself whilst reciting the 27th Psalm. Brittney Cooper, in an essay later in the collection in which she describes her devastation at the news of the massacre in Charleston, explains how she found her faith again in Newsome’s act of feminism, resistance, and theology: ‘faith can look like a Black girl climbing a pole’ (p. 303).

Dylann Roof did not only fly the Confederate flag, of course: he also seemed to support a return to apartheid in South Africa and to the violence of colonial Rhodesia. The internet has been a boon for white supremacists all over the world to connect with each other, and Roof seems to have been part of this network. But the global contours of white supremacy long pre-date the internet, and part four of Charleston Syllabus seeks to place racial violence, Jim Crow segregation and black resistance in the United States in an international context. Indeed, perhaps the most intriguing inclusion in part four is by W. E. B. Du Bois. Readers might be expecting the first few paragraphs of The Souls of Black Folk (1903), in which Du Bois famously explained the ‘revelation’ and ‘strife’ of double consciousness and predicted that the ‘problem’ of the twentieth century would be ‘the color line’. Instead, they will find a lesser-known piece titled ‘The souls of white folk’. Written in 1920, in this essay Du Bois offers a piercing indictment of whiteness, global white supremacy, and what we might now call ‘white privilege’: As white folk ‘preach and strut and shout and threaten, they go twisting, flying by my tired eyes and I see them ever stripped, – ugly, human’ (p. 177). The ugliness of whiteness, for Du Bois, was responsible for the worst sins of European colonialism, as well as discrimination in the United States.

In the fifth section ‘Civil Rights and Black Power’, readers will not find Martin Luther King, Malcolm X or the Black Panther Party, but instead will encounter Fannie Lou Hamer’s testimony to the Democratic National Convention in 1964 and the Declaration of ‘The Black Agenda’ at the National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana in 1972. Rosa Parks appears, but, through the writing of Danielle McGuire, she becomes an antirape activist and a precursor to the #SayHerName campaign to end violence towards women of colour. As McGuire puts it, Parks and the other women who organised the Montgomery Bus Boycott ‘fought for more than a seat on the bus’ (p. 239).

It is perhaps only in a collection like this one that a moving eulogy by President Barack Obama would be placed next to the explicit lyrics of rapper Kendrick Lamar. But in part six of Charleston Syllabus, these
texts complement each other as they both speak to the present moment and challenge us to open our eyes to racial violence and take responsibility, individually and collectively, for social justice. In ‘Blacker the Berry’, Lamar reflects on our inclination to passivity as he repeatedly declares himself ‘the biggest hypocrite of 2015’ (pp. 280–2). Invoking ‘Amazing Grace’ in his eulogy for Clementa Pinckney, Obama, like Lamar, laments that ‘for too long we’ve been blind to the way past injustices continue to shape the present. Perhaps we see that now’ (p. 277).

Despite the range of texts chosen for inclusion in Charleston Syllabus, only a few of which I have mentioned above, no doubt some readers will find ‘key’ texts missing. For example, early Americanists might find there are not quite enough colonial sources: despite two scholarly excerpts – one by Stephanie Smallwood on the Atlantic Slave Trade and one by Leslie M. Harris on slavery in New York during the Revolution – there are no primary sources written before the 1830s except for ‘Amazing Grace’ (which, after all, was written by a white slave trader). Plenty of 20th-century black intellectuals didn’t make the cut either – James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Angela Davis, Sonia Sanchez. This is not really a criticism; but rather a recognition of the difficulty the editors must have faced in making their selection, which in turn demonstrates the richness of the material available to understand black history and the history of racial violence. For those who want to read further, the full #CharlestonSyllabus list appears as an appendix, along with links to further resources. As the editors point out, this book is only intended to be ‘a starting point’ (p. 6).

The pedants amongst us might also point out that the book is not quite technically a ‘syllabus’ – indeed, the editors have already faced, and responded to, such a criticism of the hashtag. However, whilst they aren’t framed as such, Charleston Syllabus certainly has learning outcomes. First, the editors aim for their readers to gain ‘knowledge, strength, and inspiration’ (p. 8) in the cause for racial justice, and second, for this increased understanding to serve as a foundation for more constructive conversations about race than were being held in the wake of the shooting at Emanuel Church. In the first, they will likely be successful. As a reader, I was humbled and inspired by the strength, dignity, and grace of the writers collected together in Charleston Syllabus. Students in my classrooms, and I’m sure in many others, should expect to see this book on their reading lists in the future.

The second aim will be more difficult to achieve, as unfortunately, those who most need the Charleston Syllabus will likely never read it. Over a year has passed since the massacre in Charleston and the inauguration of #CharlestonSyllabus, and, at the time of writing, Charlotte, North Carolina, is in the midst of an uprising due to yet another shooting of a black man (Keith Lamont Scott) by police officers, and a racist demagogue has a good chance of being elected President of the United States. But a determination to confront racism and racial violence is at the heart of Charleston Syllabus. Ever-prescient, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in 1920:

Eastward and westward storms are breaking, – great, ugly whirlwinds of hatred and blood and cruelty. I will not believe them inevitable. I will not believe that all that was must be, that all the shameful drama of the past must be done again today (p. 181).

He could have been writing about 2016.

Notes


Source URL: https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2030

Links
[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/187027
[2] https://twitter.com