

Barack Obama and American Democracy

Dr. Peniel E. Joseph

Fall 2018

HIS 350R (unique# 39227)/AFR 372F (unique# 30702)

GAR 0.128 M 3:00PM-6:00PM

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Course Description

This undergraduate seminar focuses on the impact of Barack Obama's watershed presidency on American democracy.

The course utilizes President Barack Obama's personal biography and political trajectory as a prism to view larger conflicts, debates, transformations, and setbacks in the black freedom struggle and the relationship between race and democracy at the local, regional, national, and global levels. Barack Obama's watershed 2008 presidential election inspired hopes for a "post-racial" future that confronted harsh political, cultural, and economic realities that at times reinforced entrenched racial divides. In other instances, Obama's election opened new opportunities for Americans and citizens around the world to forge a more radically multicultural, multiracial, and multiethnic future.

Students interested in black politics, civil rights, social policy and the deep connections between the historical development of racial justice struggles and contemporary policy debates and challenges would find this course of interest.

Students will be evaluated based on four criteria:

- 1) Weekly three-paragraph critical analysis of the readings.
- 2) Five Page Book Review of Obama, *Dreams From My Father*
- 3) Five Book Review of Dyson, *The Black Presidency*
- 4) Class participation

Readings: We will a total of four books during the semester

The course books will focus on Obama, the historical and political context that shaped him, and the one he helped to transform as a student, community organizer, state senator, U.S. senator, and two term president. We will read, study, discuss, and critique several different kind of works related to Obama including his own memoir; a critical political and intellectual biography; the first policy assessment of his presidency by a group of historians; and the meaning of his iconography to black Americans.

Assignments

A weekly three-paragraph response on the assigned reading is due by 5 PM the day before our seminar. Each student should read everyone's essay before the start of class and provide comments, both positive and critical, that will be used for class discussion. Your responses should be submitted in the "Discussion" section of Canvas which will allow you to post your response as well as comment on the responses of others.

Each paragraph should be five sentences and consider the following:

1. How does the author **approach race and democracy in shaping Obama**? How does the history being explored connect to our **contemporary understanding of black and Africana identity** and what are the **theoretic and political implications** of the work, both **historically and contemporaneously**?
2. What's the argument being laid out and how persuasive do you find it to be? Examine the sources in the bibliography and endnotes to consider the way in which the author has marshaled their evidence.
3. How does the work (book chapter) merit analytically and stylistically? Does the author's analysis seem persuasive and insightful, even when you disagree?
4. Think about the readings in tandem, both thematically, chronologically, and theoretically. How does America's complicated racial history and legacy shape the social, political, and cultural contexts that Obama imbibes on his journey intellectually, personally, and politically?
5. **Meetings with Professor Joseph:** All students are **required** to meet with Professor Joseph one-on-one once during the semester.

Midterm Assignment: Complete rough draft of final essay.

Final Assignment: Barack Obama, Race, and American Democracy: A Critical Historical Assessment

Students are required to write a critical 10-15 page essay assessing President Barack Obama's impact and influence on American democracy as both a political leader and symbolic figure.

Based on our readings this semester, what makes Barack Obama such a historic figure? What are his most important successes and failures? Did Obama's presidency lead to greater racial progress in the United States and around the world? If so, provide three specific examples of why. If not, provide three examples of why not. If, as I suspect, his presidency proved a more complicated and contingent phenomenon, outline the nuances here as well. As a candidate in 2008, Obama offered himself as part of the "Joshua Generation" standing on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s shoulder. Yet many critics alleged that President Obama's use of drone strikes, his failure to prosecute Wall Street crimes, and his unwillingness to promote radical policies to promote racial and economic justice betrayed King's legacy. Others countered that his support for equal pay for women, the passage of the Affordable Care Act, promotion of environmental protection, and effort to scale down mass incarceration offered definitive proof of Obama's social justice commitments. Given what we have read in great detail this semester about the world that shaped Obama—from both his and various critics, journalists, and historians' perspective—what will future Americans and world citizens define as his enduring legacy?

Our semester reading list provides a sample of many of these issues, but of course is not exhaustive. How has this scholarship impacted the real world and what are its flaws, omissions, strengths, and weaknesses?

Please source your speech/policy paper with a bibliography and endnotes. This final project is due in Professor Joseph's GAR office by **6PM on Monday, December 10, 2018**

Class Schedule

Part 1. The Making of Barack Obama

- September 10 Obama, Dreams From My Father, Ch. 1-3
 Baker, Obama: The Call of History, Ch. 1.
 Zelizer, The Presidency of Barack Obama, Ch. 1-2
- September 17 Obama, Dreams From My Father, Ch. 4-6
 Baker, Obama: The Call of History, Ch. 2
 Zelizer, The Presidency of Barack Obama, Ch. 3
- September 24 Obama, Dreams From My Father, Ch. 7-10
 Baker, Obama: The Call of History, Ch. 3
 Zelizer, The Presidency of Barack Obama, Ch. 4
- October 1 Obama, Dreams From My Father, Ch. 11-14
 Baker, Obama: The Call of History, Ch. 4.
 Zelizer, The Presidency of Barack Obama, Ch. 5

Part 2. Barack Obama, Race, and American Democracy

- October 8 Dyson, The Black President, Ch. 1-2
 Baker, Obama: The Call of History, Ch. 5
 Zelizer, The Presidency of Barack Obama, Ch. 6
- October 15 Class Does Not Meet
- Dyson, The Black President, Ch. 3-4
 Baker, Obama: The Call of History, Ch. 6.
 Zelizer, The Presidency of Barack Obama, Ch. 7

Part 3. A Place Where All Things are Possible: The Black Presidency, Part 1

- October 22 Dyson, The Black President , Ch. 5
 Baker, Obama: The Call of History, Ch. 7
 Zelizer, The Presidency of Barack Obama, Ch. 8.
 Obama Dreams From My Father Book Review Due
- October 29 Dyson, The Black President, Ch. 6
 Baker, Obama: The Call of History, Ch. 8

Zelizer, The Presidency of Barack Obama, Ch. 9

November 5 Baker, Obama: The Call of History, Ch. 9
 Dyson, The Black President, Ch. 7
 Zelizer, The Presidency of Barack Obama, Ch. 10

November 12 Baker, Obama: The Call of History, Ch. 10
 Dyson, The Black President, Ch. 8
 Zelizer, The Presidency of Barack Obama, Ch. 11
 The Black Presidency Book Review Due

Part 4. The Age of Obama is the Age of Ferguson and Mass Incarceration: The Black Presidency, Part 2

November 19 Baker, Obama: The Call of History, Ch. 12 and Epilogue
 Zelizer, The Presidency of Barack Obama, Ch. 12
 Obama, Dreams From My Father, Ch. 15-19

November 26 Zelizer, The Presidency of Barack Obama, Ch. 13
 Coates, "My President Was Black"

December 3 Zelizer, The Presidency of Barack Obama, Ch. 14-15
 Coates, "The First White President,"

December 10 Zelizer, The Presidency of Barack Obama, Ch. 16-17

Assigned Readings

Books can be found at the **MAIN** Co-op, on Guadalupe, under HIS 350R/unique# 39227. They are also on reserve at the Benson Latin American Collection Library in SRH 1 and can be borrowed for 24 hours. In addition, those that are offered as e-books for checkout from UT are noted below.

Dyson, Michael Eric. *The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

Baker, Peter. *Obama: The Call of History* (New York: Callaway, 2018).

Obama, Barack; *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004).

Zelizer, Julian E., ed., *The Presidency of Barack Obama: A First Historical Assessment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

Students with disabilities may request appropriate academic accommodations from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities, 512-471-6259 (voice), 512-410-6445 (video phone) or via email ssd@austin.utexas.edu For more information on available services, please see <http://diversity.utexas.edu/>

By UT Austin policy, you must notify Professor Joseph of any pending absence to observe a religious holy day at least 14 days in advance of the day you wish to take an absence. If you miss a class to observe a religious holy day, you will be given an opportunity to complete any missed work within a reasonable time after the absence.

For information on UT policies on Student Conduct and Academic Integrity, please see <http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/conduct/>