
Overview:

In his lecture, “Racial Politics,” Jason Jordan, a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Toledo, asks critical questions about how Tom Lee’s portrayal by white politicians played into the racial politics of the time.

Summary:

The excerpt, “Tom Lee and the Racial Politics of Jim Crow Memphis,” uses the examples of Tom Lee, a black man in Jim Crow-era Memphis, Tennessee, who saved many lives in a steamboat disaster, to illustrate the manner in which Lee was portrayed as a hero by the white elite politicians following the event. Jordan contends that such a response was largely an effort to further subdue the black population of Memphis by projecting the “proper” image for black individuals as “docile, self-sacrificing, [and] self-deprecating... worthy”.

ODE 9-12 STANDARD 1: *Social Studies; Course, American History; Topic 1, Historical Thinking and Skills*

ODE 9-12 STANDARD 1: *Social Studies; Course, American Government; Topic 1, Civic Involvement; Topic 2, Civic Participation and Skills; Topic 3, Basic Principles of the U.S. Constitution; Topic 4, Role of the People*

Discussion Questions:

1. Jordan argues that white politicians used their treatment and respect for Tom Lee as a way to both relate with and subdue the black community in Memphis. How do you think these politicians used Tom Lee’s story to continue to establish their political dominance over the black community?
2. Identify some modern instances where racial politics have subdued an ethnic community.
3. Has the U.S. government grown away from racial politics like the Jim Crow-era? In what specific ways? What issues exist in racial politics today?

Activity:

Give the class the list of words below. Each word was used in Jordan’s analysis or quotes for the white elites’ expectations of the black community in Memphis after Tom Lee’s heroism. Have students discuss why white politicians might want black individuals to regard themselves in such terms. After discussing, ask students to generate a new list of words that may better describe racial equality.

- a. Docile
- b. Self-Sacrificing
- c. Self-Deprecating
- d. Unassuming
- e. Humble
- f. Meek
- g. “A Very Worthy Negro”

Resources:

Jim Crow Laws: <http://www.pbs.org/>

The Story of Tom Lee: <http://www.memphismagazine.com/>

