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A Political Remix

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Oglethorpe University in Atlanta is listed on Georgia’s Registry of Historic Places, and its Crypt of Civilization, a time-capsule record of what life was like on Earth in the 1930s, is part of the institution’s identity.

But, if the university gives an initial impression of being locked in time, Associate Professor of Politics Kendra King ’94 shatters that façade.

Inside the imposing halls and beneath the stone clock tower, Gothic Revival meets hip-hop in the form of Professor King. On an early-November day, in the aftermath of a historic election, she stands at the scene of what she would call the mash-up of the nation’s old and new politics, adding a voice of tomorrow to this deeply Southern school.
A Political Remix

By John Fleming
Photos by Jenni Girtman
Referring to the importance of youth to the political process in the run-up to the election of Barack Obama, King chooses to quote the hip-hop artists De La Soul: “Stakes is high.”

This is the way King explains the shook-up post-George W. Bush world and, by all accounts, her students get it. The nation’s youth certainly got the broader message in November, pouring forth to canvass, to blog, to vote, she says. But the new, new way represented by King’s discourse is also aimed at bringing something current to the particulars of, say, party politics. Take the Republican Party for example.

“They have to find a way to rebound. They have to create a remix, a hip-hop mash-up,” King said. “Lately the GOP has been looking and acting a lot like it did in the 1950s, with all the old-school rhetoric to go along with it. If that is the future of the party, then I say it’s not going to work.”

It is a line straight out of one of her classes, The Politics of Hip Hop, a course popular with students not only because of the way it connects to the rap generation but also because of its clarity and sense of relevance to the here and now, the essential importance of this moment in our political history.

Explaining politics in the supposed post-racial society, in the midst of a region dripping with racial history, isn’t easy. It takes a nimble mind to assess and articulate the subtleties of the three obsessions of the Deep South—race, religion, and politics. Especially so for someone who grew up in Providence, R.I., and who must do it in a way that captivates the Facebook generation of Oglethorpe.

One of her approaches: ask students to watch The Real Housewives of Atlanta, the Bravo reality show, as a way to better understand the worldview of the South’s most important commercial center. This is the assignment for her class The New American City.

That is the kindly trap she sets. What follows is exploration of the richer cultural and political layers under the South’s façade—and the lesson that this brand of reality TV—devoid of the poor, of conflict, even Atlanta traffic—presents an unreal version of the city.

In the chaos of Oglethorpe’s Oxford-like dining hall, between boisterous encouragements with students and smiling, whispered conversations with faculty, she launches into a vivid explanation of why certain Southern states, and many a rural area of the South, went overwhelmingly for John McCain for president.

“‘There is a strong feeling of traditionalism in rural Georgia and across the South,” she said over chicken and dumplings and green beans. “There is an old value structure, a certain amount of ignorance and xenophobia and, yes, racism. So, yes, it’s complicated.”

So complicated that King herself considered voting for John McCain. And yes, when it comes to Kendra King, it’s best not to be presumptuous.

King was put off by Obama’s seeming inability to pay tribute to Martin Luther King Jr. and the movement that paved the way for Obama’s ascension to power.

She transferred to Colby after a brief period at Clark Atlanta University. That in itself, she says, was something of an extended transition, from urban Providence, to even more urban Atlanta, to Colby.

She was, she recalls, one of only 33 black students at Colby back in the early ’90s and, though she has good memories and cherishes the fact that her fellow students elected her to be senior-class commencement speaker, she has something of an idea of “what it is like to be mistreated.”

“Clearly it wasn’t easy leaving a historically black institution in the warmth of Atlanta to venture to Waterville, Maine,” she said. “What I discovered, however, was that even in what seemed to be one of the strangest places I’d ever been, there were at Colby people of genuine goodwill whose mission was to help me navigate the invisible ice of a new academic and personal environment.”
“She was a great kid when she was here,” Professor L. Sandy Maisel said of his former student, now 35. “What was most interesting to me was to see her come alive intellectually.”

That King has developed an ability to combine passion for politics with a teaching method that beguiles and energizes students isn’t surprising to Maisel, the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Government and director of the Goldfarb Center for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement at Colby College.

King pays tribute to alumnus Richard Abedon ’56 and his wife, Robin, whom she says were largely responsible for her attending Colby, and she heaps thanks on many others, including her family and the people of her upbringing in the Chad Brown Housing Project in Providence’s North End.

In speaking of that chapter of her childhood, she said, “People on the outside tend to erroneously believe that those of us who lived in public housing were devoid of morals and values.”

It wasn’t uncommon, she explained, for people of all races and income levels to give her “that fretful stare and grimace” upon learning where she lived until she was 10. “For me it was different,” King said. “I knew that my mom was a hard-working nurse’s assistant who worked the second shift. I also knew of my loving and supportive family who watched me after school so that my mom could honor her responsibilities at the Rhode Island Medical Center.”

She speaks emotionally of a chance encounter with her estranged father when she was a teen, as well as her reconciliation with him years later, of her loving mother and siblings, and, perhaps most emotionally, of her lifelong connection with the Christian church. Early in her adolescence, she started attending Allen AME Church in Providence. It proved to be crucial in her life.

“I loved worshipping at Allen, in part because it had such an active, vibrant, and exploratory youth ministry,” she said. “I also loved Allen because it felt like home. Because of the rich environment, I grew to deeply love God.”
That connection bubbles up in conversation and in her writings. After all, she argues, it is hard to ignore the fact that the most powerful movement for social change in the 20th century came out of the black church.

In her forthcoming textbook, *African American Politics* (Polity, May 2009), she devotes an entire chapter to the subject, writing that, “The most pivotal institution that spans the entire African-American experience in America is the Black church.”

“**Barack Obama is not the second coming of Christ, nor is John McCain the devil incarnate.**”

It is not only the institution to which she pays homage, but also what it taught and teaches. In the tradition of some of the giants of the civil rights movement, including C.T. Vivian and Martin Luther King Jr. himself, she reaches for scripture, wielding with devastating accuracy the teachings of the prophet Isaiah or Paul’s letter to Timothy as messages of today’s need for social and economic justice.

Maisel, who has followed King’s career since she left Colby to do her Ph.D. work at Ohio State, says that the two or three top textbooks on African-American politics don’t put much stress on the importance of the black church, so King’s work “is an important contribution.”

Her emphasis on and writings about religion pull her off into that unexpected place for some people. In her case, a hip-hop Yankee doesn’t necessarily equate to an automatic Obama supporter. “My colleagues were appalled in June when I told them I was undecided,” she said.

King said she examined the positions and policies of both Obama and John McCain and found herself grudgingly respect-

That Obama did not acknowledge the civil rights icon who preceded him was, for King, “almost a deal killer.”

“I was a latecomer to Obama,” she said. “I’ve studied [Martin Luther] King for eighteen years, and I know [Obama] should have given credit to the man.”

Raised to show respect to elders, Kendra King kept waiting for Obama to acknowledge the leader to whom he owed so much. It didn’t happen. In the end, it was McCain’s reference to his opponent as “that one” at the third debate that tipped her to Obama. The comment was profoundly disrespectful, King felt. “That,” she said, “was what sealed my deal.”
She compares Obama's election to King’s “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech, delivered 40 years ago, on the day before his assassination. Kendra King points out that the children of Israel also wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. “For many in the African-American community in particular, [Obama’s election] is a historic moment, but for many others it is simply unbelievable,” she said. And the post-election future?

But King the realist knows that the performance of the first African-American president will be measured in dollars and cents. If the economy continues its downward spiral, she said, the midterm election will mirror the recent runoff election in Georgia, in which U.S. Senator Saxby Chambliss, a Republican, defeated Democrat Jim Martin.

“In other words,” King said, “Dems will be defeated—and defeated badly.”

It was a big factor, she says, in her decision to leave the University of Georgia, where she was teaching in 2003.

“In making the decision to leave a research-one institution to teach at a liberal arts institution,” she said, “there clearly had to be a draw, a hope, a passion for something beyond political science.”

That something is a curriculum that involves classroom work on developing leadership skills but also involves outreach and service to the community, including volunteering at city schools and work for Habitat for Humanity in New Orleans.

Since becoming director, after she received tenure in 2007, King has sought to “develop young leaders who are congruent both publicly and privately and create a program that transforms the thinking, mindsets, and expectations of our future leaders,” she wrote in an e-mail.

“I try to encourage and inspire my students to make a difference in their life,” she said, “and the lives of others.”

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King speaks of President-elect Obama as “a master of unification, hope, and change.” She expects that the Obama administration will reflect the wealth of intellectual, racial, gender, and ideological diversity of the nation, and she pointed to early cabinet appointments as representative of the cross-section of interests Obama has brought together.