I am ashamed of our country for electing Donald Trump. As a candidate, he stirred the electoral pot, licensing people harboring all kinds of ugly hatefulness against people of color, Muslims, immigrants, the LGBTQ community, and women, to come out menacingly into the open. The election gave me a new sense of futility as a teacher and a scholar. Election night, I found myself getting in touch with my inner Federalist—you know, the party that wanted to limit the direct political power of the people—and not liking the person I was becoming.

Like all elections, I believe this one can teach us something, yet these are not lessons to be learned at our leisure in the classroom—these are urgent lessons that require us to take action as we learn and in our daily lives.

Our politicians started ignoring the white working class and talking only about the middle class during the 1990s. Bernie Sanders stood out for bucking this trend. Many working class white women believe that the men in their lives do talk and act like Donald Trump, and they don’t think this is the worst problem they...
face. Books like Nancy Isenberg’s *White Trash* provide a view of the long history of class and its impact on the lives of working white people who have been treated as dispensable and disposable fodder for the projects of empire, nation, and corporation.

But the notion that the working class is white is an analytic blind spot with a long history. As a nation, we have failed to acknowledge the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, redlining, and the resultant poverty weighing down generations of African Americans. Violent acts of racism and a gentrified “institutional” racism still injure the bodies, psyches, and paychecks of African Americans every day.

I heard one of Trump’s fellow travelers glibly assert that any effort to curb white supremacist speech is racist. Have we taught enough students to understand the problem with this kind of simplistic notion of equality as sameness? Can they talk fluently about inequality? Can they explain that all such comments occur within a skewed grid of power, making it crucial to insist that “Black Lives Matter?”

A historian who should know better—Jon Grinspan, a scholar affiliated with the Smithsonian and the author of *The Virgin Vote: How Young Americans made Democracy Social, Politics Personal, and Voting Popular in the Nineteenth Century*—used the eruption of liberal despair around Trump’s election to wax nostalgic for the saloon politics of the nineteenth century in last Sunday’s *New York Times* Op-Ed pages. He interprets the nineteenth century as one of direct political engagement by ordinary people within an accessible public sphere, but I don’t see it that way. Grinspan’s political participants are white men and the time he celebrates was one when people of color, queer people, and many women were excluded from the formal political process and frightened. Grinspan feels nostalgia for a time before women had the legal vote, when most African Americans lacked the actual vote, when lynch mobs strung up Chinese laborers as well as ambitious African Americans, and when walking into saloon patronized by a racial, ethnic, political, or religious constituency other than one’s own could
get a man killed. Where working class men drank with friends from the same workplace, the same neighborhood, the same church, and with origins in the same village in the Old Country. They drank to make the tedium, the bone-crushing danger, and the claustrophobic conditions of their work slip out of their bodies and into their barstools. Upon returning to their homes, having drunk a portion of their paychecks, they might catch some hell from those wives who were not afraid to be noticed by men who might strike them or get them pregnant again. Ah yes, the good old days of saloon politics.

History is not much comfort at the moment. I take no comfort in knowing that the cultural elites of the 1820s found Andrew Jackson appalling (he was, and the presidency did not tame him). Nor do I have any nostalgia for the lost days of saloon politics. I am sad that we had a near miss electing a woman to be president, but this is not my dominant concern. Every day there is fresh reason for fear and anger: the heterosexual men who beat up a young gay man with the taunt, “there is a new president, faggot,” the young Muslim woman ordered to remove her hijab, and the Penn freshman who told me she had really been enjoying her life at Penn until the hideous Facebook postings by the University of Oklahoma racist bully menaced her carefully managed and balanced life.

So I am not mourning the fact that we did not elect a female president, any more than I am counting Harriet Tubman’s face on U.S. currency as a victory for women (although it is a sweet moment). What I do mourn, and feel shame for, is the fact of a president-elect who has given white supremacists a knowing wink, who seems intent on using his bully pulpit to continue to bully immigrants and Muslims, and who will allow the architecture of women’s reproductive rights and LGBTQ rights to be taken apart. History tells us that this is the time to take a deep breath and get back to work.