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Telling Fact From Fiction in Campaign Rhetoric Fueled by Race

Jim Dwyer

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History can come back not only as echoes, but also in ricochets.

Many, many years ago — like, five — long before Donald J. Trump got so lurid that he was telling an apocryphal story about the deterrent effect of executing 49 Muslims with bullets dipped in pig's blood, he trafficked in claims that seemed much tamer. In 2011 he argued that President Obama was actually born in Kenya, not in Hawaii. Mr. Trump said his private investigators “can’t believe what they’re finding.” When the president produced his birth certificate, issued in Honolulu in 1961, Mr. Trump remained skeptical. “We have to look at it,” he said, “we” being a word he appears to use interchangeably with “I.” The findings of his flabbergasted private detectives have yet to surface.

“The birther movement, in which Obama is secretly a Muslim, is just another way to use the N word,” said Ken Burns, the documentary filmmaker, whose documentary on Jackie Robinson — made with David McMahon and Sarah Burns — will be broadcast on PBS in April.

Mr. Burns and Prof. Henry Louis Gates Jr., a literary historian and filmmaker, are speaking on “The American Fault Line: Race and the American Ideal” at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on March 16. They began public discussions after the massacre of nine people at a black church in Charleston, S.C., in June. A young man said to have been obsessed with white supremacy fantasies has been accused in the killings.

In the nine roiling months since, the voltage of race has charged the presidential campaign, with Mr. Trump, a product of one of the world’s most diverse cities, describing a roster of enemies jammed with nonwhite peoples.

“We have a long history of racially based demagoguery,” Professor Gates said. That rhetoric is often employed to appeal to poor people, he said.

Mr. Trump rhetorically clubbed Mexican immigrants, many of whom, he claimed, were criminals. “The Mexican government is forcing their most unwanted people into the United States,” he said. “They are, in many cases, criminals, drug dealers, rapists, et cetera.” Nearly all the scholarly evidence shows that immigrants — including Mexicans, here legally or not — are “less crime-prone than natives or have no effect on crime rates,” the Cato Institute wrote in a summary of studies.

When it comes to race, Mr. Burns said, “We have a tendency to let the heavy lifting take place in the past.”

That comforting illusion has been upended by the free-range history made possible by tens of millions of cellphone cameras.

It has not slowed Mr. Trump, however. In November, he posted a graphic on Twitter that supposedly showed that 81 percent of white murder victims were killed by blacks. Actually, in most serious crimes, the criminal and the victim are the same race; 82 percent of whites are murdered by white killers, according to federal crime statistics. Confronted by Bill O’Reilly about his false numbers, Mr. Trump disowned them. “Hey Bill, Bill,” he said. “Am I gonna check every statistic?”

Back in 1989, after teenagers confessed — falsely, it would turn out — to a heinous attack on a jogger in Central Park, Mr. Trump bought newspaper ads and held a news conference, saying: “I want to hate these muggers and murderers. They should be forced to suffer and, when they kill, should be executed for their crimes.” Even after the convictions of the five teenagers were overturned, and after a report from the Manhattan district attorneys said they almost certainly had not been involved, Mr. Trump had no regrets. “Tell me, what were they doing in the Park, playing checkers?” he said in a Twitter post.

Professor Gates, whose film “Black America Since MLK: And Still I Rise” is scheduled for broadcast on PBS in the fall, said that poor whites and poor blacks had much in common.

“We need the moral integrity of leaders who say no, your problem is not because of a person who is a Muslim, or a person who is a Mexican, or a person who is Hispanic, or a person who is black,” Professor Gates said.

It helps no one to color-code poverty, Professor Gates said. There are about twice as many white Americans in or around poverty as there are African-Americans, he noted.

And he said yet another reason has emerged to nullify race rhetoric: At the genetic testing company 23andMe.com, about 22 percent of the DNA of tested African-Americans has been of European origins. “There is a lot in common,” he said.