

Black lives on campuses matter: the rise of the new black student movement

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With the growth of #BlackLivesMatter, the widespread racism in US universities is once more being challenged

'Black Lives Matter' as a hashtag call-to-arms and social movement came into being at a moment when a particular set of intersecting shifts in politics, technology and the economy combined to produce a renewed focus on societal violences that target African-Americans. In 2012, a white man's killing of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black boy walking home in the Deep South, went unpunished in a jury trial. In a country with a horrifying tradition of killing black people with impunity, this incident seemed to coincide almost intentionally with the arrival of America's first black president, as a potential retribution for the flagrant rise of black influence and power. The national organising and activism around the killing of Trayvon Martin reignited attention to the high incidence of murders and assaults against unarmed Black people across the USA, and in particular those at the hands of law enforcement officers - the state-sanctioned bearers of violence. The rapid expansion of video recording technologies on mobile phones and their use in social media - a feature

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of neoliberal consumerism - helped to drive activism in areas around the country, providing visual evidence of scene after scene of black men, women, and children being choked, thrown, shot, and brutally beaten by police officers. In one striking case, a passerby filmed a South Carolina police officer shooting a black man - Walter Scott - in the back, and planting a weapon near the his dying body. In another, Tamir Rice, a 12 year-old child playing with a toy gun was killed without warning, left bleeding on the cold winter ground, while his sister struggled to reach the boy's crumpled body and was handcuffed and thrown into the back of a police car. These scenes of murder and grief, set against the background of conspicuous racial progress as symbolised by a Black family in the White House, provided a striking visual and historical juxtaposition. We all wondered whether we were living in the future or the past.

Having become a professor at this moment, for me the political and philosophical assertion that 'black lives matter' is both a call to action and a societal indictment.

I am also a member of the millennial generation - born after 1980 and coming to age in the wake of the greatest recession in America since the Great Depression. As new workers, this generation is faced with an economy that relies increasingly on more work for less pay, a fragmented and tenuous labour force, and education, healthcare, and housing debts that far outpace their earnings. Black millennials, in particular, still disproportionately bear the far-reaching consequences of the 2007 Great Recession. And as neoliberalism takes its toll on the operation, expansion, formation and cost of higher education, the hallowed halls of the Ivory Tower are also bearing the brunt of these intersecting societal and economic shifts. In their search for opportunity and success, millennials on campus have helped lead movements for economic and social justice ranging from the Occupy movement in 2011 to the Movement for Black Lives today. As a Black millennial and academic, I keenly understand the urgency and motivation of both students and peers. Those of us who are working at universities in the midst of the movement for Black Lives must understand that we are inherently implicated in issues of racial inequality on and off campus, and must address these disparities through creative pedagogy, support of student endeavours and intentional civic engagement. For me this includes writing about and analysing the movement.

As the Black Lives matter campaign developed, experienced and first-time

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activists mobilised in protest throughout the country, leading marches, blocking traffic and taking to social media to report on the ground events, uniting disparate groups and action nationwide through the hashtag #blacklivesmatter. The Twitter phrase had been coined, promoted, and circulated by three black women (Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors-Brignac) in 2012, after the jury failed to convict George Zimmerman, the man who had killed Trayvon Martin.¹ #BlackLivesMatter became a useful way to tag protests against police brutality, making the phrase increasingly important and highly visible (to the extent that groups opposing the protests begin to co-opt it with hashtags like #alllivesmatter and #bluelivesmatter to side with police). In 2013, it even appeared as a descriptor for a group of activists in a *Law & Order* episode that riffed on Martin's death.²

The phrase 'black lives matter' calls to mind Sojourner Truth's most famous rhetorical question 'Ain't I A Woman?'. When Truth asked her mostly white audiences if she was a woman, it was not just a simple way to point out the hypocrisy of western thought and political theory (in which 'civilised' modern societies relied on the enslavement and exploitation of women and children), it was a provocation, a challenge to a racial structure that denied humanity to a group of human beings. It was, like Black Lives Matter, a throwing down of a philosophical gauntlet, a way to force political distinctions and bring clarity to the question of the function and manifestations of American oppression, power and domination. In her time, Truth carefully pointed out the ways in which her blackness denied her the customary social privileges of white women or the civil rights of white and black men.³ In a similar way, as BLM co-founder Alicia Garza explains: 'when we say Black Lives Matter, we are talking about the ways in which Black people are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity ... it means that Black lives, which are seen as without value within White supremacy, are important to your liberation'.⁴

This is, however, a movement that is clearly different from previous iterations of Black activist periods, most notably the modern civil rights movement - in fact, co-founder Patrice Cullors-Brignac explains it as a 'network' and *not* a movement. For her #BlackLivesMatter was a 'platform and organizing tool' that mobilised 'organizers and allies' around a specific 'set of guiding principles'.⁵ As a social media hashtag, Black Lives Matter was a way of centralising disparate groups, activists and leaders around the country around a common goal (propelled by the ubiquitous access of consumer electronics). In this way, it is part of a larger 'movement for Black

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Lives'.⁶ The formation of #BlackLivesMatter represented strong female leadership, an insistence on inclusion, and, among some parts of the network, a repulsion of the 'respectability' politics that had been a core feature of civil rights organising. Indeed, many people involved in Black Lives Matter as leaders on the ground outright rejected the hyper respectability that the first Black president and First Lady had come to represent - they were alternately queer, transgressive, loud, and unafraid of expressing rage at what they saw to be an unjust system. For these activists, victims did not have to be perfect in order to be worthy of solidarity. And, too, for many BLM activists, political change did not imply campaigning for political office or even galvanising a base of black voters. This is how one BLM leader, Melina Abdullah, explained BLM's decision to avoid endorsing a presidential candidate in the 2016 election:

We recognise that both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party are controlled by monied interests ... And we're not telling people not to vote, we're simply not endorsing any presidential candidate, recognizing that where we want to put our time and energy is in the development of people to act in their own interests and on their own behalf. And so, we are pushing the real revolution.⁷

Black Lives Matter is loosely made up of various groups and organisations advocating for Black health and progress on various levels of society (including a radical emphasis on self-care that centres the importance of rest, joy and health as vital to activism, a mindset often absent from previous struggles). Pushing back at the police has meant directly targeting the collective violences of a system that upholds state-condoned violence, necessarily implicating all structures that are manifestly anti-black (in practice, if not in name). Garza comments:

[#BlackLivesMatter] is an acknowledgement [that] Black poverty and genocide is state violence. It is an acknowledgment that 1 million Black people being locked in cages in this country - one half of all people in prisons or jails - is an act of state violence. It is an acknowledgment that Black women continue to bear the burden of a relentless assault on our children and our families and that assault is an act of state violence. Black queer and trans folks bearing a unique

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burden in a hetero-patriarchal society that disposes of us like garbage and simultaneously fetishizes us and profits off of us is state violence; the fact that 500,000 Black people in the US are undocumented immigrants and relegated to the shadows is state violence; the fact that Black girls are used as negotiating chips during times of conflict and war is state violence; Black folks living with disabilities and different abilities bear the burden of state-sponsored Darwinian experiments that attempt to squeeze us into boxes of normality defined by White supremacy is state violence. And the fact that the lives of Black people - not ALL people - exist within these conditions is a consequence of state violence.⁸

Working in opposition to the forces that undermined the quality and sanctity of Black life means more than simply dismantling systems of inequality; it also means creating and cultivating spaces that nurture, protect and value Black life.

As the groups and activists organising around the call of #BlackLivesMatter targeted the systematic disenfranchisement of Black people, it was inevitable that their attention would turn to university campuses, which are microcosms (and, in some cases, sources) of these larger societal trends. From inside academia they began to mobilise around and explore the question of how to disrupt institutions that had been created, funded and organised primarily for the preservation of a white wealthy ruling class.

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As America's melodrama of race and injustice played out in grainy phone clips in newsreels and memes, other economic and social forces contributed to the mobilisation of Black people around the country. The neoliberal agenda dominated every sphere of the country. In public education, neoliberal reforms yielded a crisis through the growth of less regulated, semi-private charter schools, and the closures of large numbers of public and neighbourhood schools. These trends disproportionately affect black and brown children in the most resource-deprived communities. The Great Recession at the end of the Bush presidency left an economy even more reliant on temporary and part-time labour, and devastated the wealth and wellbeing of Black people in particular.⁹ The unemployment rate among

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African-Americans reached a high of 15.7 per cent in 2011 and is now 8.8 per cent, still more than twice the rate of white counterparts (4.3 per cent).¹⁰ One recent study showed that the median wealth for Black women is \$100, compared to \$41,500 for white women. In terms of racial disparities in higher education, one study showed that Black women college graduates earn about the same income as white men with a high school education; another study showed that black job applicants with no criminal record were just as likely to get a job as a white felon.¹¹ In hospitals, black patients receive less care for the same injuries. Prisons in America continue to be disproportionately filled with Black Americans, because of sentencing disparities in the criminal justice system: the school-to-prison pipeline leads to devastating ruptures and fissures in Black families, who are torn apart by a system that is more focused on retribution than rehabilitation.

These neoliberal shifts are also evident on university campuses. This is a period in which black women - the highest degree-earning demographic group in the country - are still among the lowest paid.¹² University costs are putting students into debt that will affect their economic mobility for the rest of their lives (and, in some cases, may even land them in jail).¹³ While university student bodies are increasingly diverse, university leadership is almost all white and majority male.¹⁴ According to one *New York Times* report, 25 per cent of all university presidents come from business and not academia.¹⁵ Worse, for-profit colleges saddle their students with debt and provide substandard educations: Matthew McQuire argues that these schools are predatory institutions that target our most vulnerable and under-educated citizens.¹⁶ And they also encourage faculty to treat students as customers and education as a business and commodity that they sell.¹⁷ One notorious example involved Mount St Mary college president Simon Newman, whose career had been spent as a businessman and entrepreneur. As president, Newman fired faculty members who were attempting to form a faculty union and reportedly instructed his faculty to decrease support to at-risk students, telling them: 'This is hard for you because you think of the students as cuddly bunnies, but you can't. You just have to drown the bunnies ... put a Glock to their heads'.¹⁸

In college classrooms (when students do, indeed, attend class in a physical space), the person standing in the front of the room is most likely to be an adjunct or part-time lecturer, a group that makes up more than 75 per cent of university faculties and is less well paid, protected and supported than their fulltime peers;¹⁹

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and if that person is a tenure-track or fulltime professor, it's most likely that he is also white and male.²⁰ Meanwhile, throughout college campuses, students of colour complain regularly about targeting and harassment at the hands of university-employed police and public safety officers. Many of the protests and uprisings around the country have involved young people, in cities including Baltimore, Oakland, and New York, and many of these young folks have been students.

It was always likely that the protests against police violence and brutality occurring off campus would eventually also mobilise against the various manifestations of these different, intersecting violences in university communities. The most visible protests kicked off in fall 2015 at the University of Missouri. After numerous incidents of racial bias on Mizzou's campus - including the smearing of a feces swastika on a campus dorm and a white student yelling slurs at black student actors during a rehearsal - students felt the administration's response was inadequate, and they launched a protest calling for the resignation of University President Tom Wolfe. This demand attracted even greater support after he told a group of protestors that 'systematic oppression is because you don't believe that you have the equal opportunity for success'.²¹ A graduate student named Jonathan Butler, noted in the press as coming from a wealthy black family, went on a hunger strike, getting some media attention for the cause. But it was the support from the University of Missouri football team that lit up headlines around the country. On Saturday 7 November 2015, with a group photo posted on Twitter, players announced that they would not play or train until Wolfe resigned. Their strike included a list of demands that had been released by student activists in October, such as a mandatory diversity curriculum for all students, better mental health support for students of colour, retention programmes for students of colour, and more black faculty. Significantly, the players later tweeted another photo showing the solidarity and support offered to them by their teammates and coaches. Faculty also showed support by announcing a walk-out. On Monday 10 November Wolfe announced his resignation; soon after, the chancellor of the university, Bowen Loftin, did the same. In response to the success of the Mizzou protest targeting university leadership, some people started to threaten to kill Black student activists on the campus, and they came under intense media scrutiny, both inside and outside of the university.

These events at the University of Missouri also brought new attention to a movement of students around the country that has mobilised around various

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hashtags on social media, including #concernedstudents1950 and #studentblackout, and #Istandwithmizzou. There was support and solidarity in the form of walkouts and gatherings at many universities, including Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, Berkeley, Michigan State and University of Washington. Students on these campuses also argued that the university administrations were not responsive to their concerns about the acts of racial discrimination they experienced in all parts of their university lives, including in residential spaces - from the widespread use of racially offensive and culturally insensitive Halloween costumes, to the prejudicial profiling of black students by campus security and local police. One group, the Black Liberation Collective at University of Connecticut, produced a list of demands that included reparations in the form of free college tuition. Student organiser Yameisha Bell asked pointedly: 'If people who work for the university get free tuition, how is it the people who built this university, their descendants, get nothing?'

But more specifically, there were reverberations in college leadership around the country. In November, a dean at Claremont McKenna resigned in response to student protests about her behaviour and comments related to race. Soon after this, graduate students from Brown, Yale and the University of Pennsylvania reported that letters from the college presidents on their own campuses had been released, promising more efforts to increase faculty diversity. At Rutgers in New Jersey, where I work, the college chancellor released letters announcing his attention to create 'an inclusive community', with promises to increase the funding of campus diversity centres, and to form a schoolwide committee on Enslaved and Disenfranchised Populations in Rutgers History.²² (However, the committee membership, announced over the winter holidays, seems to consist of predominantly white male non-tenure track faculty and university staff.)

A Black Lives Matter intellectual

I am currently an untenured tenure-track professor on a flagship state university campus - the only college with its own official Black Lives Matter chapter. I am also living in my home state, in the town where I graduated from high school - close to the under-resourced and poverty-stricken cities in which I largely grew up. My university is, for all intents and purposes, also my community. But I am in a profession that has clearly shown itself hostile to faculty who side with Black

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and marginalised students. In February 2016 the University of Missouri fired Melissa Click, a professor who had been video-recorded while calling for ‘muscle’ to help remove intruders and protect the space of the student activists they were threatening. In 2015, at another public university in Illinois, Professor Steven Salaita was fired from his position after taking to social media to criticise Israeli military strikes. I am in a position of both precarity and privilege.

In thinking about how to act as both an educator and agitator for justice, I look back to what activist scholars in history can teach me. I position myself as a scholar within various political legacies, reflecting on the ways in which public intellectual scholars such as Ida B. Wells and Zora Neale Hurston pushed their research beyond the confines of discipline and medium. Was Wells’s study on rape activism an intellectual project? Did Hurston’s ethnographic centring of black storytelling function as advocacy? I recall that the Montgomery Bus Boycott was started by a black woman professor, using resources and materials to copy pamphlets, create a list of demands and distribute the call for the boycott, meeting with town officials and a community after her own humiliating defeat on a bus. If one were to take Freud seriously (and on this matter, at least, I do), approaching intellectual work from the margins provides an important advantage. ‘Because I am a Jew’, Freud wrote, ‘I found myself free of many prejudices which restricted others in the use of their intellect; as a Jew I was prepared to go into the opposition and to renounce consent with the “compact majority”’. Objectivity and distance are not options for me (when I see my 17 year-old brother’s face in every new police killing, when I have Trayvon’s photo hanging on my refrigerator); they perhaps function as themselves a form of violence.²³ I have been wrongfully arrested by police on my way to work, accused of having drugs (the police were disappointed to find out that the only substance in my car was ibuprofen). I have been singled out and physically assaulted by police officers while protesting against anti-homeless laws. I understand my experience and study of race as being mutually critical to my work.

I often find myself trying to squeeze personal essays or commentary on current events in between my more traditional scholarly activities. At professional conferences I occasionally do phone interviews with newspaper reporters about the latest incident of viral racism tearing through social media, hunting for a quiet hallway corner to chat. At home, I sometimes wake up early to discuss race and gender on a local black-owned radio station. Last year I volunteered a few times

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with a group delivering breakfast and books to underserved kids and their parents. Once, I marched across campus with my students who were calling for racial justice, restraining myself from engaging white fraternity brothers who jeered at us as we passed by. In autumn 2015 I organised a teach-in focused on the Black student organising that was happening around the country. My aim was to continue a long tradition of creating space in which to discuss important political events, protest certain actions on the societal level, and oppose injustice. (Later, Rutgers University Chancellor Richard Edwards cited the teach-in in his letter on new school-wide diversity initiatives.) Recently, I started a book club in my home that discusses works written by people of colour. For me, actively engaging with Black Lives Matter redefines the boundaries and limits of intellectual spaces and scholarly confines. I agitate for social justice wherever and however I can. As Stuart Hall noted, cultural studies was never intended to be just about theory.

Being a professor and scholar at this moment calls for support and solidarity on multiple levels. It means advocating for black students and faculty members for resources and opportunities. In terms of pedagogy, it requires centring Black Lives Matter within discussions of politics, justice, activism, media and culture. It means defining and dissecting the influence of white supremacy. For those with tenure and (at least, theoretically) more institutional protections, it means taking bigger risks on behalf of those who cannot. That might mean standing up to a bigoted administrator or standing in solidarity with students engaging in civil disobedience. Our syllabuses should reflect the diversity that we as educators claim to hold dear - black authors, theorists, and writers should be part of class curricula. For me, education also takes places outside of the classroom, in forms that are accessible to non-academic audiences, including through the use of film and visual storytelling. Donations to young people working for justice are also extremely important, especially for bail and legal defence. But mostly this all involves thinking creatively about being a part of the movement, wherever you may be.

In reflecting on this moment, we must recognise that the rise of Black activist voices is a response to economic, social and political conditions that are present on college campuses, as elsewhere. As scholars, we need to transform the ways we approach and invest these movements - even as we face our own onslaught. We are both inside and outside of the Ivory Tower, and, as such, must configure the work of scholarship to reach both spaces.

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