

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Introduction: Teaching Black Lives Matter

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BLACK LIVES MATTER WINDOW BANNER, GREENWICH VILLAGE, NEW YORK. 2014 (IMAGE: BILLIE WARD)

While civil rights warriors from decades ago believed that showing America its darkest and most unequal underbelly would challenge apathy and produce policy, activists today take a different view of the role of education. Since its beginnings in the summer of 2013, the goal of #BlackLivesMatter (#BLM) and the movement it inspired has not been to show, shame, or to teach people how and why Black lives matter, but rather to create the conditions for Black lives to thrive. Although technology, cell phone videos, and live streaming have provided a grim chronicle of violence against Black and Brown bodies, activists involved in #BLM have remained focused on structural change, accountability, and alternatives. Education is central to that. From the various organizations under the #BLM umbrella producing intellectual treatises and policy papers, to individual activists' deep commitment to the study of Black social protest movement tradition, to a commitment to educate people on the ongoing toll of racism, heteropatriarchy, and imperialism, #BLM has taken the United States to school.

This issue of *Radical Teacher* brings together a diverse collection of articles exploring educators' responses, strategies, and stories on how #BLM has informed their teaching practice, the content of their courses, and their personal relationship to colleagues, family, friends, and self. The editors have interspersed personal reflections throughout this introduction to highlight our multiple identities as educators, scholars, and activists, acknowledging there are no easy answers and daily infractions are real. At the moment of writing this, Terence Crutcher, a community college student in Tulsa, Oklahoma, was killed by police while driving home on September 19, 2016 and Keith Lamont Scott was killed in Charlotte, North Carolina.

We recognize the vulnerability of students outside of the classroom, and question how to keep the classroom a space of critical learning often in defiance of the mainstream topics and themes we are asked to teach. In reading each article and corresponding with contributors, we've come to understand that classrooms have become one of the crucibles for the #BLM movement to thrive, and that educators have transformed their pedagogy to create a nexus between the classroom and the streets. Finally, it was important for us to acknowledge that ongoing crisis and killings are happening all around us and shape the publication of this very issue. As such, this issue opens a conversation, and does not try to be definitive. We hope it will inspire further exchange and debate, and point to other paths of learning, activism, and struggle for social change.

## A Politics of Reflection

The Black Lives Matter movement is being experienced in deeply personal and political ways. It is an embodied response to a political moment where the fate of Black and Brown bodies hang in the balance. Many of the articles offer personal reflections and calls to action, highlighting the role of social media, protest, and dialogue in and outside of the classroom.

*In the fall of 2014, I was teaching African American History for undergraduates in Hunter College's Department of Africana and Puerto Rican/Latino Studies. Michael Brown had been killed some 3 weeks before the semester began and as the fall semester took shape, students in my course emailed me to say they would miss our late afternoon class meetings because there was a demonstration. Many afternoons, as I got to the building, students gathered in the tiny space between the subway entrance and the front doors, and readied to march to Union Square. I spotted several of my students amongst them. It was New York City, my city, where I had grown up, come of age, collecting a diverse set of friends, putting together a variegated community of folks. The students who rallied outside the building were also diverse. This was the semester that I began to rethink how I taught the African American survey course – the course that starts with the 1619 arrival of the "first Africans" and ends with our contemporary moment. I realized two things that semester. Students (black, Latino, white) had very different ideas and experiences with "race" conceptually. They fully understood it as a constructed notion and seemed to have widened their ideas about the categories of race the United States had come to take for granted. At the same time, while many had accused them of being (well, thinking) that the United States was post racial, when I asked them, they all said "no." They experienced and saw what I would have called racism, but that they weren't always sure what to call it because of their new understanding of race and how it functioned presently. I was challenged to think about how I would teach the emergence of these concepts in the burgeoning United States of the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the policies and practices that developed— how white supremacy and structures of race became entrenched and bolstered in the United States. As I pondered this, the #BlackLivesMatter movement took on meaning, providing me with so much material with which to end my semester-long look at what was rapidly becoming a course on a long struggle for black liberation and the development and constant evolution of structures and ideologies of white supremacy in the United States. Always wanting to challenge students who make generalized statements like "nothing's changed," I want to spend the necessary time on the nuances of relationships between the pasts and presents of Black life. The essence of my Black History courses and my own research has always assumed that black lives mattered, but it is an interesting assertion— the backlash to which has made it all the more necessary. Since we collected articles for this issue, the Movement for Black Lives put out a vision statement, reminiscent of the Black Panthers' 10-point plan, but oh so much more than that. The African American Intellectual History Society recently had*

*a virtual roundtable of scholars reflecting on the document and its place in our history. These essays are incredibly valuable to me as a historian and an educator and many of them will find their way onto my syllabus this semester. (Paula Austin)*

One of our intentions for this issue is to manifest the intersections made clear in the above reflection, those between the personal, the intellectual, and the pedagogical. Heather Moore's article "Teaching in Grief," explores her struggle to cope with the death of a family member in police custody, and how her grief informed both pedagogical strategies and understandings of her own identity as a scholar and educator. Ileana Jiménez highlights her experience working with youth of color at the Little Red Schoolhouse, and how the creation of poetry and film offered a space for response and activism in New York City. Similarly, Prudence Cumberbatch and Nicole Trujillo-Pagán's article "Hashtag Activism" discusses the role social media plays in activist movements like Black Lives Matter, and their efforts to integrate these strategies into their syllabus, describing the use of Twitter and other platforms as a kind of "politics of interruption." And, finally, an interview with the co-authors of the #CharlestonSyllabus, Chad Williams, Kidada E. Williams, and Keisha N. Blain offers a real world example of how a series of tragic events and the massacre at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina prompted a new model for socially-engaged scholarship that continues to spark dialogue on everything from racial justice, civil rights, and white supremacy to the African American church as an institution.

## Confronting Systemic and Structural Issues

Black Lives Matter organizers have consistently pointed to a number of structural and systemic issues – such as institutional forms of racism, the school to prison pipeline, mass incarceration, redlining, the repeal of the Voting Rights Act -- as central to understanding the ongoing violence on Black communities in the United States and globally. School segregation is still very much an issue as well, with large school systems like New York City's amongst the most divided in the country. All this despite the Pew Research Center<sup>1</sup> pointing out that in 2014 the majority of students enrolled in the public school system in the United States are non-white. Yet, the reality is that the teaching population in the United States often looks quite different from the Black and Brown students found in many classrooms. Considering this, how do teacher allies make space for both white students and students of color, and explore the complexity of the Black Lives Matter movement and other civil rights struggles happening worldwide? Donna Troka and Dorcas Adedaja look at this from Emory University in Atlanta, GA., as does Reena N. Goldthree and Aimee Bahng at Dartmouth College in Hanover, NH.

Gender and sexuality are also central to this conversation. As a reflection on the tangled patterns of misogyny in the civil rights movement, the guiding

principles<sup>2</sup> of Black Lives Matter are explicitly centered on gender inclusive actions, de-centering heteronormative thinking and values that were customary at the beginning of the movement. As an editorial collective, we prioritized these principles and have chosen our cover design to reflect this evolved perspective on Black Civil Rights. Artist Chitra Ganesh has rendered a portrait of Black Transgender teen, Blake Brockington, who took his life on March 23, 2015. We honor Blake's life as a victim in the struggle and acknowledge the diversity of gender in the Black community and beyond. Additionally, our collective, primarily comprised of Black female contributors, relate to or feel strongly about the erasure of Black women as victims of violence and as movement builders within civil rights history—past and contemporarily. Contributors such as Ileana Jiménez, in "#SayHerName Loudly," and Danielle M. Wallace, in "Teaching Black Lives Matter in Africana Studies," share student narratives, academic writing, creative work, and personal experience critiquing the exclusion of queer and straight Black women and girls.

Other contributors also offer systemic critiques and analysis of larger socio-cultural, economic, and political systems that continue to marginalize and oppress communities of color in the United States and abroad. Erica Meiner's article, "Refusing to be Complicit," delves deeply into the politics of mandated reporting and other K-12 policies and practices that perpetuate racialized surveillance and forms of criminalization that disproportionately impact students of color in the United States. Richard Hughes and Catherine Zipf discuss Black Lives Matter in relationship to space and architecture, exploring how particular housing policies and urban planning strategies have historically targeted and continue to displace communities of color in cities across the country. Hughes's piece, featured in the Teaching Notes section, discusses the 1938 Federal Housing Association's Underwriting Manual as a pedagogical tool for examining both recent and historic concepts like gentrification and redlining. Other contributors such as Angela Pashia and Lora Vess address forms of institutional racism in higher education. Pashia, also featured in the Teaching Notes section, focuses on the field of information literacy as a critical site for examining the exclusion of diverse voices in libraries and scholarship at large, while Vess discusses a qualitative research project that investigates issues of colorblindness, racial identity, privilege, and racialized experiences amongst students and faculty at the University of Alaska.

## Pedagogical Strategies and Campus Activism

As many of the contributors point out, teaching about the Black Lives Matter movement requires a consideration of pedagogical approach, positionality, and politics. Aimee Bahng and Reena N. Goldthree's article, "#BlackLivesMatter and Feminist Pedagogy," offers an in-depth view of their organizing efforts at Dartmouth College in creating a #BLM course in the spring of 2015 that

evolved into a campus-wide movement for social and racial justice. Bahng and Goldthree outline a number of obstacles, some logistical, others conceptual, in developing an interdisciplinary and feminist course at a predominantly white Ivy League Institution. They describe their process as a “performative intervention of syllabus-creation-as-political-act.” They further elaborate on the complexities of adjunct labor, involving students in developing the course, and the organizing and activist efforts the course inspired. As many of the articles highlight, this work is complex and difficult, and necessitates more than merely compiling a list of resources for a syllabus, but rather inclusive and dynamic pedagogical approaches that are democratic, critical, and open-ended.

*When I started to teach at Pratt Institute in late 2014, one of the first things I noticed was the large wrought-iron gate encircling the main campus. The gate seemed to separate the school from the surrounding neighborhoods of Clinton Hill and Bedford-Stuyvesant. These neighborhoods are still predominantly communities of color and yet do not represent the majority of the student body. I would later learn locals at one time referred to Pratt as “The Plantation.”*

*Since I worked directly with pre-service teachers, issues of class, race, and privilege were certainly a part of our classroom conversation, but the more time I spent on campus, the more I realized this was perhaps an exception. Toward the end of my first semester teaching I was invited to join the Social Practice Seminar, a group of faculty who meet bi-monthly to discuss issues of social justice and politics on campus. As a relatively new group, we organized listening sessions with students and staff to get a better idea of what was happening on campus, how issues of race and class were being discussed or silenced, and what students felt like was needed to move forward.*

*In the fall of 2015, we decided to dedicate the entire school year to supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, and to open a space to explore the increased violence on Black bodies. Together with students and staff, we decided to organize an Institute-Wide Teach-In, drawing from the progressive pedagogies of Vietnam War-era peace organizing. The aim of the Teach-In was to inspire conversation and empower the entire campus to consider students’ well-being in relation to social and racial justice. As an art and design school our goal was to also analyze and celebrate Black aesthetics, and to consider Black Lives Matter more broadly, from a historic and contemporary politics of racial capitalism.*

*The organizing collective, made up of staff and faculty from around the campus, invited*

*dozens of speakers, artists, and designers to share their experience and knowledge. These offerings ranged from a presentation about a multimedia art project called “Question Bridge: Black Males in America” and a performance workshop called “Between Me and You: WHO SHOT YA?” to a lecture from Sheila Pree Bright on her recent work “#1960Now,” reflecting on current and historic civil rights movements; a workshop called “Disrupt the Police by Knowing Your Rights,” hosted by FIERCE, an LGBTQ activist organization; and a working group dedicated to developing a series of Institutional Demands that would be presented to the president and board. This was just the first day of a 3-day event, which began with a reading of the names of individuals who had been unjustly killed by police violence in the past 10 years (a process that took nearly 40 minutes).*

*There were a lot of things that worked and some that didn’t. By hosting the workshops across the campus we certainly interrupted the daily flow for many. Some professors brought their entire classes to our opening panel discussion, while some workshops were poorly attended, if at all. Yet despite these stumbling blocks, we made clear from the beginning that this event was simply the start of a long-term effort to ensure Pratt embraces a culture that goes beyond so-called “diversity” and actually provides substantial funding and resources toward scholarships for students of color, long-term support systems for accepted and enrolled students, coursework inclusive of the history and content of race/class struggle, and a commitment institutionally to assess and track these changes. While it’s too soon to know what kinds of impacts the Teach-In has made, it was certainly a step in the right direction and was transformative for me personally. (Christopher Kennedy)*

Specific texts, artifacts, and archives also played a substantial role in contributors’ discussions and reflections of teaching connected to Black Lives Matter. Brandon Byrd’s piece, for instance, uses the story of Celia, an enslaved young woman who was executed in 1855 for killing her master after years of sexual abuse, as a way to make connections to historical and ongoing state-sanctioned violence against communities of color, and lay foundations for the study of black radicalism and resistance in the United States. Jesse Kohn discusses his use of Ta-Nehisi Coates’s “The Case for Reparations” and Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman* to inform an ongoing conversation about the Black Lives Matter movement in his U. S. survey course, describing his students’ coming to terms with a range of issues from the complexity of white privilege to a recent incident of racism on campus. In “Liberation Through Education,” Danielle Wallace details her approach to teaching about #BlackLivesMatter in several seminar

classes for students in Africana Studies. She describes her pedagogical method as a liberatory process, empowering students to think critically about the larger socio-economic and political systems that play a role in the ongoing struggle for equity and social justice.

## In Solidarity

As an editorial collective, we found the process of reviewing and editing each of these articles both deeply emotional and inspiring. We hope this collection of stories and essays, artworks and reflections, will inspire further action, inquiry, and research on the Black Lives Matter movement worldwide. We encourage you to also look elsewhere at vital resources like the book reviews featured here in this issue, the Ferguson Syllabus, the African American Intellectual History Society's blog, and the Movement for Black Lives vision statement, among many

others. Finally, we want to further recognize this collection is incomplete, but will hopefully open a space to further dialogue and exchange.

In solidarity,

Paula, Robyn, Erica, and Christopher

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/18/u-s-public-schools-expected-to-be-majority-minority-starting-this-fall/>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://blacklivesmatter.com/guiding-principles/>.



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