

RADICAL TEACHER

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Making it Matter: Reframing the U.S. Survey

by Jesse Kohn



BLACK LIVES MATTER PROTEST AT UNION SQUARE, MANHATTAN (IMAGE: THE ALL-NITE IMAGES)

Black Lives Matter changed the way I teach American history. BLM has raised pivotal questions that conventional histories of African Americans simply cannot answer with nuance and complexity. It has made us painfully aware of the wide gulf between our noblest ambitions, our “Empire of Liberty,” and the brutal reality of many people’s experiences, especially those of color. The African-American story has always been central to my course, but BLM made me realize the necessity of emphasizing this gulf to my students, many of whom were taking the U.S. survey for the first time.

I resolved to situate BLM’s spirit and critique at the beginning of my survey by placing the deceptively simple questions BLM raises front and center. Answering essential questions such as “Why are African Americans so often treated as second-class citizens in their own country?” and “Has our country made any of the progress we so often claim?” compelled a redesign of the course, placing race relations in the foreground and shifting the emphasis on African-Americans from being just victims of injustice to agents of change. Ultimately, my goal became to reshape my students’ understanding of the American story as a constant and precarious battle for equality, not just the perfection of an abstract union. In doing so we were forced to rethink many of our own progressive assumptions.

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I opened the course with a unit on Black Lives Matter bookended by two texts: Ta-Nehisi Coates’s 2014 “The Case for Reparations” from *The Atlantic* and Amiri Baraka’s 1964 play *Dutchman*. Both these sources are deeply painful and always unflinching in how they question and complicate traditional and liberal narratives of American history. Furthermore they are both a call to action, a call to action now embodied by Black Lives Matter. Coates’s article gives a sweeping view of African-American history as a series of struggles for legal and social justice. He refuses to present African-American history as a positive story of uplift; instead, it becomes a long, continuing and never-guaranteed fight for denied rights. As convincing and evocative as Coates is, I knew that my class would politely agree with most of what he said, so I wanted to end the unit with a provocative text that would speak to issues of racial tensions from a different and surprising perspective. I chose Baraka’s *Dutchman* because it dramatizes events in such an inescapably searing way. It is a compelling, intense play, and one that I knew would challenge my students specifically. Starting the course with two scathing social critiques compelled us to question the typical narrative of African-American history and allowed us intellectual space to discuss the core questions that BLM raises in ways that would pay dividends throughout the year. Quickly, my students and I came to appreciate that the unit and these readings were paradigmatic of a

recurring theme: the glaring inconsistency between America’s ideals of equality and the reality of state-sanctioned exploitation, discrimination, and violence in U.S. history. The discussion of Black Lives Matter set the stage for more conversations about American power structures and the enduring legacy of white supremacy, ignored in textbook narratives that tend to depict American history, and African-American history in particular, as a triumphant (if at times uneven) march towards progress. Not only did students refer back to the readings throughout the year, but they also recognized with stunning clarity the unshakable connection between America’s history and today’s most urgent issues.

A note about where I teach. Saint Ann’s School, located in Brooklyn, takes pride in being a very progressive pre-k through 12th grade independent school, both in pedagogy and politics. We have no grades, very few rules, and remarkably little structure. This lack of structure, including near autonomy in developing curricula, has come under question as the school grapples with a history of marginalizing students of color. The vast majority of students and teachers at the school are white, and many are wealthy. Students of all races have demanded more inclusive history and English curricula. This campaign has dovetailed with student activism in BLM. When a handful of students were arrested in protests after the failure to indict Eric Garner’s killer, they were treated like conquering heroes after spending a night in lockup. Later that week, students cut classes (accompanied by many of their teachers) to protest NYPD tactics. In other words, I teach highly engaged and political students. Yet few of these students face any discrimination by the police nor do they have a deep understanding of how BLM and the problems it seeks to redress fit into the larger scope of American history.

I start the first day of class with a little experiment. I ask my sophomores to draw an American. All of them draw a generic white person. Every year. This quickly leads us to ask who is “American” and who is not? Who does history honor and who does it ignore? Who is served by the way we tell our history? These questions bring us to Coates’s essay because it addresses the central historical claim of Black Lives Matter: African Americans have faced a specific and particular history of oppression, especially in regards to law enforcement and the judicial system. While all of my students are nervously embarrassed by their drawings, some argue that while certainly black lives matter, really all lives matter. But Coates’s essay challenges this perception by detailing the unique struggles of blacks as they faced and resisted “plunder” at every moment in American history. According to Coates, this plunder, in which African Americans’ labor, wealth, and opportunity were stolen, was the result of systemic injustice inherent to the American capitalist and legal structure, not just a few southern racists. Moreover, Coates claims that our failure to confront our troubled history has led to many of the daunting problems African-Americans still face today. Starting the course this way not only stresses the importance of studying history, but also makes students immediately question whether the United States has made significant progress in race relations.

The debate between BLM and ALM also highlighted to students how African Americans were agents of change, and while many whites (including their teacher) sympathized with and protested alongside these activists, black-led action was at the center of the changes transforming the national conversation on race.

The essay compelled us to look at the way our lives—in a city that prides itself on tolerance—have been shaped by structural racism. To make this connection clear we compared old redlining and current demographic maps of a number of cities to see the continuing legacy of these housing practices. We then used the New York City maps to walk through our days and look at the neighborhoods we pass through on our way to school, music lessons, and sports practices. Even I, who knew the point of this exercise, was surprised at how few of the white students—and me for that matter—ever went through a predominantly minority neighborhood. Armed with Coates’s historical lens and the evidence of how his argument impacted their lives, students quickly came to understand that the Youtube clips they had been watching of chokeholds in Staten Island and tear gas in Ferguson were a new manifestation of a long history, not simply examples of overzealous policing. Many of them would later turn this critical eye on their own school’s persistent prejudices as the year continued.

The guiding idea structuring my unit takes its cue from one of Coates’s key points: the significant role African Americans have played as authors of their own liberation, not just objects of victimhood. We contrasted Coates’s article with a counterargument by Kevin Williamson published in the *National Review*, in which he claims that much of the progress blacks have made is due to a change in whites’ opinions and tolerance of African Americans. The question of whether blacks essentially were given rights by white America, as Williamson implies, or secured them through their own activism, was particularly relevant and useful to the students as they challenged the status quo in their school and city. Thus, discussing this in the context of Black Lives Matter did more than just teach them history; it connected the students’ protests to the generations of activists who have come before them.

One pedagogical tool useful in linking the past to the present was mixing historical and contemporary documents. In our BLM unit, for example, students read an excerpt from Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* about how difficult it is for the impoverished to navigate the justice system and defend their basic rights even when they are most certainly innocent. The next day in class, I gave students readings and statistics about African Americans’ interactions with the justice system. These ranged from colonial laws allowing masters to murder their slaves to lynching statistics to one op-ed advocating for the reinstatement of stop-and-frisk and another congratulating the St. Louis County Prosecutor for not indicting Darren Wilson after Michael Brown’s death. Using a jigsaw configuration, students read a single document in small groups and then switched into larger groups to share their impressions of each reading. As a class, we then discussed the connections between the documents and Alexander’s argument. Of course, it is too simplistic to draw a straight line from colonial slave laws to the death of Michael Brown, but it helped students craft a narrative that is distinct from the American exceptionalist model and also taught them to interpret the media around them with a critical eye as they would any primary document in class.

With this long narrative in mind, we began to place BLM in historical context by reading editorials for and against the protest movement. Unsurprisingly the major point of disagreement in the editorials and in the ensuing class discussions essentially mirrored the hashtag war between #AllLivesMatter and #BlackLivesMatter. Working through this point of contention was essential to accomplish my goals in the unit as I wanted students to understand not just the long subjugation of African Americans but the uniqueness of this oppression. To accomplish this we held a formal debate on whether students agreed with BLM activist Julius Jones’s controversial assertion that All Lives Matter was a “violent statement.” At the end of the unit, students wrote papers addressing a similar question. The resulting responses ranged widely in their scope and opinions. One student conceded that in context ALM might be “ignorant” and “unintentionally harmful,” but that All Lives Matter is inherently a statement of concord and peace, not violence. Among the most interesting was a student who at first thought that Jones’s assertion went too far but upon reflection and after more research came to the conclusion that ALM was indeed violent because it “erase[s] someone else’s racial identity.” Another student argued that “#AllLivesMatter becomes a tool for suppression, whose only goal is to maintain the old system.” His essay drew from the country’s founding documents to demonstrate the nation’s long history of using idealistic language to preserve existing power structures. Or as Howard Zinn put it in a reading that followed this unit, the Constitution “enable[d] the elite to keep control with a minimum of coercion, a maximum of law—all made palatable by the fanfare of patriotism and unity.”¹ These types of connections framed today’s news as part of a long historical argument between those the power structure serves and those it does not. While “The Case for Reparations” does not specifically address Black Lives Matter, it provided the historical context that allowed students to weigh the merits of the #BLM and #ALM debate. For example, another student argued that redlining (a major topic in Coates’s essay) had led to police brutality by segregating blacks and concentrating poverty. According to her, “This marginalization coincides with the significant difference in arrests between blacks and whites, as well as the disgusting police brutality that blacks experience day after day.”

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sympathized with and protested alongside these activists, black-led action was at the center of the changes transforming the national conversation on race. This perspective also surfaced in students' work months after we studied BLM. One student's second-semester term paper argued that former slaves, not the Freedman's Bureau, led the charge for post-war, African-American education. She ended the essay by stating that it was important to acknowledge how influential black Americans were in "inspiring and anchoring, through practice and theory, social movements for the liberation of all people." This certainly stands in contrast to how most textbooks treat Reconstruction—where the drama plays out in Congress, not the schools of rural Tennessee and North Carolina.

As we ended the unit, I wanted to present an unexpected source that might sear its way onto my students' memory as we moved to more traditional topics. I chose the play that many credit with starting the Black Arts Movement, Amiri Baraka's controversial *Dutchman*. Not only is the play relevant to BLM, but it provides an example of advocacy that differs from marches and protests: that of the artist as provocateur. In a school that emphasizes the arts, and playwriting in particular, the play offered students an example of how they could turn their own artistic expression into political speech and activism. *Dutchman* is most often interpreted as a personal exploration of Baraka's own transition from beat poet to black nationalist, but I hoped to read the play as an artwork responding to forces that continue to define the American experience of blackness as well as what it means to be a bystander to racial violence.

The play centers on a seemingly chance subway encounter between a black college student, Clay, and a young white woman, Lula. Clay and Lula's witty and flirtatious banter slowly but inevitably descends into a conversation on race that exposes the ever-present, simmering racial tensions that dominate their interaction. In the closing moments of the play, Lula and Clay erupt into open argument. As Clay prepares to exit, Lula stabs him in the back. Within seconds, the rest of the car has disposed of Clay's body. As the passengers disembark the train, another young black man walks in. Lula smiles at him, the curtain falls, and the violent cycle continues. Most critics understand Lula as the temptations of white society and Clay as a thinly veiled stand-in for Baraka. The main characters' dynamic, therefore, represents a microcosm of the power structure that Baraka believed dominated 1960s race relations as Lula consistently denies Clay's racial identity, while simultaneously lording the promise of assimilation and equality over him before ultimately enacting his demise.

Baraka is hardly what students might think of when they envision a Civil Rights activist. Written and produced as the Civil Rights Act was being passed, *Dutchman* flatly rejected the promises that such legislation offered.

Instead, Baraka saw it as another siren call from white America.² Approaching U.S. history for the first time in a classroom, most of my students, thanks to pop culture and the news, think of African Americans as a monolithic segment of society, aimed at improving its lot in a multicultural America despite any number of obstacles. Baraka's rejection of this utopia and of white America in general is harsh, unrelenting, and unapologetic. This spurning can be/feel particularly severe for many of us at Saint Ann's because it is an explicit rejection of our like-minded liberalism. Thus reading *Dutchman* complicates their understanding of the Civil Rights Movement and, in turn, the more revolutionary aspects of Black Lives Matter that seek to fundamentally reinvent American social relations (as opposed to simply change police tactics).

My students were both surprised and disturbed by the play's final scene when Lula kills Clay and the other passengers discard his body. As they came into class, the board read "Why did Lula kill Clay?" Students jotted down answers and shared them with a neighbor and then as a group. Answers included "Because he was black" and "Because whites feel threatened by black males." This lent



STAGING OF THE *DUTCHMAN* AT JACKSONVILLE STATE UNIVERSITY, 2016 (IMAGE COURTESY OF THE DRAMA DEPARTMENT OF JSU)

itself to a discussion of the killings that galvanized the Black Lives Matter movement. For example, they immediately compared Clay's murder to the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin by linking it to an article we read about African Americans carrying freedom papers in the antebellum South—papers that allowed manumitted blacks to go from point A to point B (theoretically) unmolested. The dramatic end of the play was a wake-up call that, in important ways, very little has changed from the days of Clay and Lula to Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman. Hence, like "The Case for Reparations," it demonstrates that the daily and often unpunished violence perpetuated against black Americans is hardly new.

We also debated whether the other people on the subway car, and by extension the audience, are complicit in Clay's murder and its cover-up. In their opinion, Baraka leaves this open-ended. While Lula's actions are clearly premeditated, they questioned whether the other

passengers were part of a conspiracy. This struck many in the class as pivotal in an age before smart phones. The practical reason that Black Lives Matter has gained national attention at this particular moment is because these killings are being caught on camera, but Baraka's play shows what we all know: black lives and deaths have often not "mattered" in the past. To students on either side of the conversation, it was scarier if the white straphangers were not in on Lula's plan because it meant that she knew she could rely on white society to hide her crime. Thus, the end of the tragedy asks what role we have all played in these murders. Just as these issues were thorny for Greenwich Village audiences in the midst of the Civil Rights era, they also challenged my mostly liberal, affluent, and white students to confront their position in America during the Black Lives Matter movement. A few students chafed at this analysis, which they argued accused them of crimes they did not commit. Other students defended Baraka's point, stating that the ability to remain ignorant of these problems was only possible from a place of privilege.

I tried to maintain this method of inquiry and dynamic as we moved to other subjects of study. While the gulf between what America promises and delivers is most acutely seen in the African-American story, this paradigm informed our studies of many topics. Most obviously, it applied to Native Americans, women, and any minority group treated poorly, such as Asian and Irish immigrants. The power structure that pervades Coates's essay and Baraka's play and the shocking simplicity of the phrase "Black Lives Matter" provided students approaching the U.S. survey for the first time a way to connect all these examples of white supremacy. Since they were a group of mostly white "elites," it also gave many students a way to understand the impact and importance of their own privilege.

To keep BLM relevant in the rest of the survey, I knew the transition to our next subject, the Constitution, would be pivotal, so I asked students to write in class about what the phrases "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" and "We the people" mean to them. One prompt was to think about whether these terms hold the same meaning after studying reparations and Black Lives Matter. Some students saw no difference, just an evolution in how we interpret these words to include more and more groups: black men, women, gays, etc. Others had a more cynical reaction. A student even described the opening line of the Constitution as "coded racism." Rather than being an inclusive statement of popular sovereignty, he came to believe that the phrase was actually exclusive. "Everyone knows who they meant," he remarked. While many students were immediately offended by this, others drew a connection between this and the coded racism of "All Lives Matter." As many students had noted in our debate, the phrase "All Lives Matter" is seemingly benign, but it too uses inclusive language to exclude the particular suffering—and history—of non-whites.

To my delight—and the betterment of the course—I did not have to keep forcing Black Lives Matter on to the students. Rather, they frequently made connections to the material throughout the year, most concretely in our study of slavery. While reading Frederick Douglass's memoir,

they immediately saw similarities to Black Lives Matter and *Dutchman* when Douglass recounts the cold blooded murder of Demby, a slave who refuses to come out of a river to be whipped. They came to class eager to discuss how Douglass uses uncannily similar language to Black Lives Matter to describe the impunity of southern whites. About the murder of one slave he states that the "whole transaction was soon hushed up" and that another murderer "escaped not only punishment, but even the pain of being arraigned before a court for her horrid crime."³ As a number of students noted, neither of these sentences sound out of place in today's news.

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By the time we reached the Civil Rights era, students were well prepared to analyze and contextualize the crimes and heroism of the period. Seen through the lens of Black Lives Matter, the murder of Emmett Till, for example, is no longer just a horror from a distant racist past. It is instead one in a long chain of murders by whites trying to maintain "law and order." We also spent significant time focusing on the heroism and bravery of Emmett's mother, Mamie Till, who demanded an open casket and invited the press to take pictures of the mangled corpse. The resulting images, in another echo of Black Lives Matter, changed opinions around the country about the supposedly "benign" nature of segregation. We also spoke about Till's defiant uncle, Moses Wright, who, at great personal risk, testified on behalf of the prosecution and identified the murderers in open court. While comparing this murder to that of Trayvon Martin is obvious, the reactions of Mamie Till and Martin's mother, Sybrina Fulton, demonstrate that African Americans, who are continually and consistently forced to defend the victims of crimes rather than condemn the perpetrators of these violent acts, are the true force behind changing laws and customs that effectively favor whites over blacks. Making these comparisons with Black Lives Matter in mind, students recognized that while Till's murder seems unthinkable today, we are far from the egalitarian society we claim to be, countering the absurd but frequently peddled narrative that after Civil Rights, African Americans shared in the full prosperity of America's bounty.

As African Americans moved to the foreground of the course, so did other marginalized groups. A student in a course evaluation wrote that the unit not only made her understand that "the hardships that black people face didn't end with Civil Rights" but also "what it's like being a woman in a patriarchal society." While Coates and Baraka may well object to comparing these two sets of hardships, using these texts gave her a new perspective on how to

study her own place in the world—her own history, in other words. By beginning the survey with a contemporary and pernicious asymmetrical power struggle, students can begin to see American history as a constant series of struggles for rights and influence, not just a predestined march of progress. While introducing Manifest Destiny, for example, I started a class with a loaded question: “Is the American West ethnically cleansed land?” “Of course,” chimed back my chorus of well trained liberals. “Are we standing on ethnically cleansed lands?” I retorted, to squirms and protests of “I mean, there weren’t that many people living here.” Suddenly Manifest Destiny was not an abstract term existing in the distant past on some homestead in Kansas but rather an example of what Coates potently refers to as “à la carte patriotism”—the disingenuous habit of emphasizing only positive parts of America’s past. Students now recognized they, too, were at risk of becoming “à la carte patriots” complicit in reifying white cultural hegemony. Indeed, sitting in beautiful Brooklyn Heights, students had to acknowledge they benefited from the ethnic cleansing of the Lenape natives. The revelation may have been startling but, as Coates argues, unless we come to terms with this, we remain American exceptionalists.

Needless to say, this way of approaching American history is not without its pitfalls and detractors. A small backlash did grow in the class. Primarily, students came to see me as enormously critical of the United States. One student even prefaced an email, “Mr. Kohn, I know you hate America, but . . .”⁴ When placing Black Lives Matter at the forefront of the course, I made a conscious decision to emphasize America’s failures over its successes. Rather than discussing the tremendous amount of progress America has made in race relations in the past 150 years, we were immediately speaking about the issues left unresolved. My biggest fear was that my more radical statements could be laughed off rather than seriously engaged. I am not sure that I ever solved that problem, but I do believe that I was training my students to approach the world with a critical eye. As so many of us sitting in that room were in a position of privilege, it was important to challenge and sometimes ignore the theory of history that tolerates and exacerbates that very privilege.

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Starting with a contemporary flash point is also a difficult way to begin the year. Rather than building camaraderie, I threw a brand new class into a discussion of one of America’s thorniest issues. Many non-black students were afraid to criticize the style or substance of Coates’s essay for fear of being accused of racism. I was surprised the first year I taught “The Case for Reparations” when well over half the class disagreed with Coates’s argument in their papers since there had been so few reservations

expressed in class. Their essays presented any number of convincing arguments that they did not feel comfortable expressing in front of their peers.

The classroom clearly had not yet become a safe space for fierce debates and arguments. When one difficult discussion occurred so early in the school year, I had to contemplate whether to push forward with the unit or to pull back to safer ground. One of the two African-American students in the class stated that she felt “attacked” by a white classmate, who had questioned the premise of reparations because it treats people as groups rather than as individuals. The African-American student believed that her history and the way she experiences contemporary New York City was being denied. It was hard not to sympathize with both students. On the one hand, it is a perfectly reasonable intellectual position to oppose reparations, and a student should not be castigated for expressing her opinions, especially in a classroom. When I spoke to the African-American student after class, though, I was relieved. She was happy this clash had occurred because these issues were finally coming to the surface in the school. Coates’s article provided an opportunity and framework for this challenging conversation, making it more meaningful for the entire class because the African-American student felt heard in ways not possible without reading the essay.

These simmering problems came to a head in the spring after a sophomore posted a racial slur on Facebook. Disillusioned by what they perceived as the administration’s slow response, students voiced their concern by staging a sit-in at the Head of School’s office. One of the leaders of these demonstrations was a student in our class. Though it is too much to say that Coates, Baraka, and the rest of our BLM unit inspired her protests, it was clear when she spoke to us about her activities that she was utilizing the language of our BLM unit as she turned the critical eye she had honed in class onto her own school. As she was telling us about the challenges she faced every day in our community, I was reminded of how it must have felt to be a white audience member watching *Dutchman* for the first time: complicit, guilty, and suddenly aware of one’s own privilege.

Baraka, in an act of defiance and consciousness raising, intentionally made his audience uncomfortable, and that is exactly where I want my students as we dive into American history. This unit and the themes it established throughout the year forced them to question their progressive assumption that the “arc of the moral universe” always “bends towards justice” and to rethink the way they have consumed conventional narratives of our history and our present. They also provide a usable past, and maybe even motivation, as students contemplate their own role in their community and school during the era of Black Lives Matter.

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Notes

¹ Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States*. (New York, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2003). 99

² In an interview with the *New York Times* Baraka stated that the "civil rights movement has just provided more opportunities for prostitution."

³ Frederick Douglass. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1995). 15



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