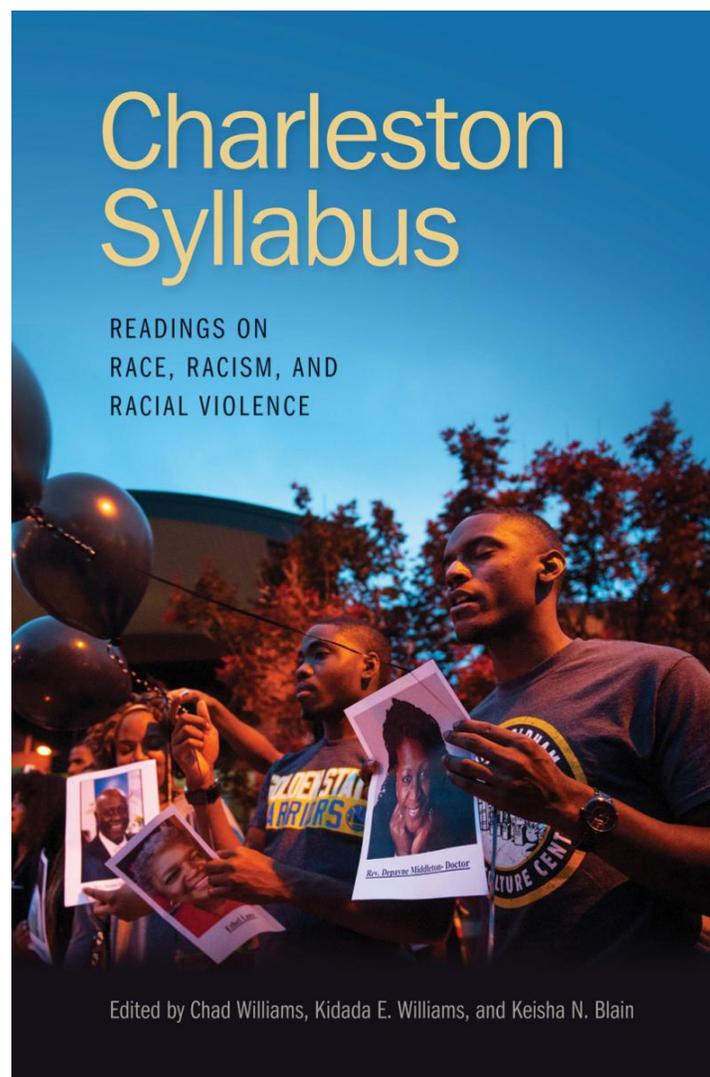


# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Interview on the #Charlestonsyllabus

by Chad Williams, Kidada E. Williams, and Keisha N. Blain



COVER OF THE CHARLESTON SYLLABUS, 2015 (IMAGE COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA PRESS)

## Introduction

On June 17, 2015, a white supremacist entered Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and sat with some of its parishioners during a Wednesday night Bible study session. An hour later, he began expressing his hatred for African Americans, and soon after, he shot nine church members dead, the church's pastor and South Carolina state senator, Rev. Clementa C. Pinckney, among them. The ensuing manhunt for the shooter and investigation of his motives revealed his beliefs in white supremacy and reopened debates about racial conflict, southern identity, systemic racism, civil rights, and the African American church as an institution.

In the aftermath of the massacre, Professors Chad Williams, Kidada Williams, and Keisha N. Blain sought a way to put the murder—and the subsequent debates about it in the media—in the context of America's tumultuous history of race relations and racial violence on a global scale. They created the *Charleston Syllabus* on June 19, starting it as a hashtag on Twitter linking to scholarly works on the myriad of issues related to the murder. The syllabus' popularity exploded and is already being used as a key resource in discussions of the event.

The organizers have recently developed a reader inspired by the #Charlestonsyllabus<sup>1</sup> project, a collection of new essays and columns published in the wake of the massacre, along with selected excerpts from key existing scholarly books and general-interest articles. The collection draws from a variety of disciplines—history, sociology, urban studies, law, critical race theory—and includes a selected and annotated bibliography for further reading, drawing from such texts as the Confederate constitution, South Carolina's secession declaration, songs, poetry, slave narratives, and literacy texts. As timely as it is necessary, the book is a valuable resource for understanding the roots of American systemic racism, white privilege, the uses and abuses of the Confederate flag and its ideals, the black church as a foundation for civil rights activity and state violence against such activity, and critical whiteness studies.<sup>2</sup>

The editors of this issue of *Radical Teacher* asked the authors to reflect on their efforts, and the *Charleston Syllabus'* relationship to the Black Lives Matter Movement. The following details this exchange:

### **How has your understanding of a "syllabus" shifted or changed as the #Charlestonsyllabus has evolved and developed?**

**Kidada E. Williams:** I wouldn't say my understanding of a "syllabus" has changed or shifted. I have always believed in sharing and translating the work I do in my classes with popular audiences. However, I will say that in shifting from the online version of #CharlestonSyllabus to producing a book for a general audience, we had to discount a lot of scholarly books and articles because the intended audience was other scholars and not ordinary people. In our college and university classes, professors have the time and

energy to decode and slash through jargon but the nonacademics attempting to improve their knowledge of histories of race, racism, and racial violence by reading this scholarship might not want to navigate dry "academese" and shouldn't be expected to. If we're being honest, some of us might not want to, either.

Considering the many inaccessible texts we declined to include made me think that more scholars, especially those who see themselves as racial justice activists, should not simply make their research available to the public but also produce more of it with them in mind. Black publics have been a driving force behind scholarship produced in the academy or adjacent to it. Writers of African American history and a more critical, honest history of the United States have usually come *from* black communities. Formally and informally trained scholars researched what happened and shared it widely, connecting the past with the present day, with the hope of improving the conditions of black people.

For me, the fact that we needed a #Charlestonsyllabus suggests that academics need to do more to ensure our work is reaching the people generally and in our communities particularly. In teaching our classes, we provide a critical public service, hopefully enlightening our students and training future educators. Many of us have been and still are giving community talks, serving as advisors for museums and exhibitions, writing op-eds, and sharing sources on social media. Unfortunately, this work was not sufficient to produce a historically knowledgeable public that could contextualize the Charleston massacre or police killings and African Americans' and their allies' historically-informed and heartbroken reactions to it. The deficiencies in so many Americans' historical educations were revealed in denials of slavery's role in Confederate secession and uprisings in Ferguson, Baltimore, or Milwaukee. This is why we decided to build upon the success of Marcia Chatelain's work in #Fergusonsyllabus<sup>3</sup> by creating #Charlestonsyllabus. Historically-informed people responded in droves, creating a global learning community that will hopefully advance change.

These online syllabi revealed the power of collaboration. So, while my idea of a syllabus has not changed, this project's initial success has made me think more about how historians can and should continue using technology and social media to harness our collective energies and foster more communal teaching and learning.

### **How have educators utilized the Charleston Syllabus thus far? Has it been used in non-traditional educational settings or classroom spaces? How can the information contained within spread to community education and even carceral settings?**

**Keisha N. Blain:** Educators across the country, and indeed the globe, have been using the Charleston syllabus—both the reading list and the book—in a variety of exciting and innovative ways. Since its debut, we have witnessed scholars in various fields and disciplines utilizing the list in a wide range of high school and undergraduate courses including History, Sociology and Political Science.

By some accounts, teachers ask students to select a primary source from the list and then write a response to the document, examining what it reveals about the history of racism and racial violence in the United States. In other cases, instructors ask students to journal about selected op-eds or other resources on the list—disclosing their personal thoughts and reactions to these texts. Some instructors asked students to follow the #CharlestonSyllabus on Twitter as a way to generate in-class discussions about the use of hashtag syllabi and their effectiveness for sparking public conversations on key social issues.

Beyond the traditional classroom setting, we are amazed by how the list has been used by religious leaders across the country to encourage parishioners to learn more about the history of race relations. One pastor not only created a webpage on his website to encourage church members to consult the list but also collaborated with the church librarian to create a display of some of the books in the lobby. Bookstores and libraries across the country have followed suit. Within only a matter of weeks of releasing the list, Charleston syllabus displays could be found in major libraries and bookstores across the country. Several librarians disclosed that they even relied on the reading list to order new books and resources for their institutions.

Now that the book has been released, we're excited to see it being used in a variety of settings in the United States and abroad. Someone recently sent us a picture of the book being used in International Baccalaureate (IB) classes at the Taipei American School in Taiwan. Several activists recently shared with me their plans to utilize the book as an educational resource in the local communities in which they organize. Officials at one correctional facility in Indiana are using some of the selections from the Charleston Syllabus in educational programs for inmates. They learned about the syllabus through a professor we connected with on Twitter who made significant contributions to the reading list. In the months and years ahead, the book as well as the list will continue to be a valuable resource for members of the public and we anticipate that they will both be used in many more community educational and carceral settings.

### **How do you feel radical educators and organizers can best make use of the resource— pedagogically, politically, culturally?**

**Chad Williams:** In the immediate wake of the Charleston shooting, we faced the question of how do historians respond to radical acts of white supremacist violence. The #CharlestonSyllabus emerged as an act of radical consciousness raising and protest against historically narrow or flat-out distorted understandings of the massacre, why it took place and its deeper significance. In this sense, educators and organizers should approach using the book as, on the one hand, a source of personal and collective empowerment and, on the other hand, a form of resistance. Indeed, centering race, racism and racial violence in how we teach and learn United States history is a bold endeavor. Doing so challenges romanticized notions of the American past and core conceptions of the nation's

identity. Recognizing that black people have grappled with, suffered from and survived the horrors of white supremacist violence since the beginnings of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the present compels a shift in how we view American history and black people themselves. This has important political and cultural implications for our current racial moment. For those seeking to understand the roots and substance of the claim "Black Lives Matter," the Charleston Syllabus is a useful starting point.

### **What are some of your favorite, and perhaps most radical examples of readings or resources students/teachers should know about?**

**Keisha N. Blain:** *The Charleston Syllabus* book includes 66 crucial texts that we believe represent key primary sources and some of the best and accessible secondary works published on race, racism, and racial violence. One of my favorite texts in the book that may also be described as "radical"—insofar as it shatters many public perceptions about the black experience in the United States—is an excerpt of Akinyele Umoja's *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement*<sup>4</sup> (2013). Oftentimes when we think about the black freedom struggle, we tend to romanticize nonviolent activism and forget that black people also embraced armed resistance in the struggle against white supremacy. Umoja's text offers a corrective on that point. But, even more, it charts the grassroots political activities that were vital to the movement—the stories of the courageous men and women who literally placed their lives on the line to protect others against racial terror. As Umoja's work demonstrates, armed self-defense played a critical role in the black freedom struggle and had deep roots in black politics long before the Black Power movement.

Alongside Umoja's excellent work, readers will find a vast array of resources—including scholarly essays, song lyrics, poems, and op-eds—addressing a variety of key topics in U.S. and global history such as slavery, religion, and racial identity. A significant number of the texts in the book (like the reading list) are specifically about Charleston or South Carolina in general. One of my favorite pieces on South Carolina is Cherisse Jones-Branch's essay, "To Speak When and Where I Can," which charts black women's political activism in South Carolina during the 1940s and 1950s. These women understood that the fight to end racism and racist violence could not be won without equal access to the vote. To that end, they utilized a myriad of strategies and tactics during the Jim Crow era in an effort to transform South Carolina's political system. This resiliency even in the face of resistance and discrimination is evident in so many of the texts included in the Charleston Syllabus.

### **How has the role of social media influenced educative practices and ways of facilitating exchange, especially in light of activist movements like #blacklivesmatter, #sayhername and others?**

**Kidada E. Williams:** I think social media is simply the latest incarnation of the community work or scholar activism many historians have always done. Scholars want to understand what happened in the past and see it as

their responsibility to share that information with the public. Sometimes that understanding of what happened or its significance for today comes from listening to people in the community. The technology simply connects more disparate people across great geographic or social distances.

What is also different today is that we are working and living in an era where the social activism of The Movement for Black Lives and African American Policy Forum<sup>5</sup> is intensified. Many organizers already know a lot about the histories we research and teach. Indeed, their historical educations and radical imaginations for the possibilities of a world in which black people are free are informing their organizing. In many ways, historians are simply filling in some gaps, clarifying existing knowledge, while lending to it the weight of historical evidence on such topics as police and vigilante violence, mass incarceration, the school to prison pipeline, violence against black women, and medical apartheid. Social movement historians are also sharing their expertise about successful practices and debilitating problems that aided or troubled earlier movements. Some of us are also using our platforms to support activists.

One thing I think crowd-sourced social media projects like #SayHerNameSyllabus, #WelfareReformSyllabus<sup>6</sup> #FergusonSyllabus has done is inspire and perhaps call on some educators to do a better job educating themselves, their students, and the public about the histories covered. The texts listed on these syllabi are not locked away in hidden history vaults; they're widely available. Indeed, many texts are available free in public libraries, digital history projects, or online at national history institutions like the Library of Congress, National Archives, and Smithsonian. And yet, each "syllabus" exposes educators (even some U.S. history teachers and professors) as lacking basic historical knowledge about black people in America. So what I hope is that educators will incorporate into their teaching<sup>7</sup> more texts to help students and the public understand the past or contextualize contemporary events and encourage their colleagues to do the same. I also hope that students who access the syllabi can ask their instructors to engage this work and these topics. If we can get more people to learn about the professionally researched history then our work of having a more historically enlightened public is done.

**Please share student responses. For example, as students reflect on historical forms of resistance, have they discussed a shift in contemporary movement building (i.e. social media/Internet), and what are their thoughts?**

**Chad Williams:** We are eager to see how students respond to the Charleston Syllabus book. The publication of the book was ideally timed for the 2016-2017 academic year. We know that faculty at a number of different colleges and universities plan to use the book in their classes. We hope to develop ways, whether through continued use of the #CharlestonSyllabus hashtag or other means, to foster student engagement around the book and the issues it explores.

Beyond the book itself, the #CharlestonSyllabus hashtag and its impact has inspired what now might rightly be described as an online syllabus movement. We have always credited Professor Marcia Chatelain and her #FergusonSyllabus for inspiring our initial idea for the #CharlestonSyllabus. The success of these two projects has subsequently motivated other scholars to create various syllabi of their own in response to issues ranging from the 2015 Baltimore uprising, the University of Missouri protests, the death of Sandra Bland, to the rise of Donald Trump. These resources demonstrate the potential of social media crowdsourcing and digital technologies as a form of radical pedagogy geared towards a larger public outside the narrow confines of academia.

Many students have embraced idea of the syllabus as a tool of critical consciousness raising and applied it to their activism as well. For example, in November 2015, students at Brandeis University occupied the campus administration building for twelve days in protest against the institutionalized marginalization of students of color. They labeled their movement "Ford Hall 2015" in honor of the 1969 occupation of that building by black students, which led to the creation of the Department of African and Afro-American Studies. Taking the idea of praxis in the model of Gramsci, Arendt and Freire seriously, the students developed a "Ford Hall 2015 Syllabus" designed to "communicate the urgency of cultivating an informed community to stand in solidarity" with the occupying students and function as a "pedagogical tool to teach while simultaneously circumventing the uncompensated labor that people of color perform in the perpetual defense of their humanity." They compiled a list of readings that addressed issues such as white privilege, allyship, intersectionality, and the nature of institutionalized racism. As college campuses continue to function as key sites of social movement building in the age of Black Lives Matters, we hope students understand and articulate the connections between their intellectual work and activist work.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.aaihs.org/resources/charlestonsyllabus/>

<sup>2</sup> This introduction is adapted from The University of Georgia Press' online description of the *Charleston Syllabus: Readings on Race, Racism, and Racial Violence*, Edited by Chad Williams, Kidada E. Williams, and Keisha N. Blain. Retrieved from [http://www.ugapress.org/index.php/books/index/charleston\\_syllabus](http://www.ugapress.org/index.php/books/index/charleston_syllabus).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/08/how-to-teach-kids-about-whats-happening-in-ferguson/379049/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://nyupress.org/books/9780814725245/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.aapf.org>

<sup>6</sup> <http://ajccenter.wfu.edu/welfare-reform-syllabus/>



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