

Black Lives Matter: Social Movement, Identity, and Representation in the World, Online, and in Our Classrooms

I had already been thinking about writing this paper when a student in my summer class did her final project on Black Lives Matter.

After going through a general run-down of some historical context and contemporary examples of violence and the perpetuation of racism against African Americans, this student concludes with a personal reflection which speaks to her purpose for writing this paper:

The Black Lives Matter movement is important to me because I am a part of the African American community, and it is sad to see my community mistreated and killed. This movement could potentially save my life, my family's lives, and my friends' lives. For example, my future son could have been endangered if this movement was not formed because the non-existence of this movement would have resulted in more brutality cases occurring. I am also glad to see that someone has spoken up and made a stand to protect this community of people because African Americans have tolerated multiple abuses for way too long; therefore, it was time for a change to be made. A movement like this not only opens other people's eyes to how blacks are treated, but it has also opened my eyes to how my people have been treated. I am aware of the hardships that African Americans have faced in the past, but this movement has enlightened me that racism is still present today. We think that because the nation has been desegregated and has abolished slavery that the blacks would finally be treated fairly and equally, but that is not the case. There are still racial tensions present in today's society, which is 150 years following the abolition of slavery. However, the Black Lives Matter movement can be our step to alleviate some of these racial tensions. Hopefully this movement will convince others that we need to start treating each other better and uniting with one another if we want to have a peaceful world, nation, and country. The first step to get there is to listen to what the Black Lives Matter movement has in store for a better country. Are you willing to listen?

Black Lives Matter is not only a question or a reminder, but a demand: to humanize race relations in our contemporary world. When victims of violence are not actually seen as people (as real lives), it is easier to perpetuate excuses for the violence inflicted upon them. But when victims are friends and relatives, when we humanize them, there are no excuses. This movement has grown in part because of the friends and family of the victims telling their stories, personalizing the violence so that as viewers/audience we are forced to relate to the victims as people. Nonetheless, this doesn't convince everyone, and resistance to the humanization of black victims of violence is sometimes overtly apparent in social and other media, through language and the reiteration of rhetoric designed to keep Black Lives at a distance from (real)(white) lives wanting to (re)claim the position of power to speak about violence, or keep it under wraps. When narratives of violence are claimed and articulated by the victims, it subverts the power structures that otherwise work to maintain a (racist institutional) status quo.

All Lives Matter

The counter-slogan “All Lives Matter” is a rhetorical signal of a threatened position that minimizes the larger social situation of this violence and the historical perpetuation of oppression that resonates in the present.

As George Yancy states, “One reason the chant ‘Black Lives Matter’ is so important is that it states the obvious but the obvious has not yet been historically realized.” (Yancy)

Alternatively, “All Lives Matter” as a reactive “slogan” actually functions as a rhetorical strategy of *maintenancing* the status quo, generally on behalf of whites, to put African Americans back into a silenced position of non-agential submission. Disallowing space for voiced black subject positions resonates a perceived threat since times of slavery. There were reasons, important to social and economic control, that slaves were not allowed to learn to read and write. Through writing, for example, one can have a voice which is less easily dismissed than silence. One need only turn to Frederick Douglass to see the continuum from basic literacy, to critical literacy and acquisition of knowledge, to social action and change. Or as MLK argued in his famous Letter from Birmingham Jail, the silent apathetic majority, made of whites and blacks, is more dangerous than extremist groups because no action toward change happens in such a climate of immobility. But when we read Douglass and King with our students, we often forget to bring them with us into the present moment, to comment on our continuing social issues in regard to race relations and how we can continue to work for change. We talk about the great things MLK and Douglass did and then spend time arguing about the language of the chant or slogan and dismissing responsibility for more thoughtful engagement.

All Lives Matter as a reactive slogan ignores/silences history and context, dismissing singular acts of violence as isolated and not connected to a historical continuum of state sanctioned inequality still active symbolically and literally in the examples of police violence which accelerated this movement. 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 is an acknowledgement Black poverty and genocide is state violence. It is an acknowledgment that 1 million Black people are 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 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 is that the lives of Black people—not ALL people—exist within these conditions is consequence of state violence.

When Black people get free, everybody gets free

#BlackLivesMatter doesn't mean your life isn't important—it means that Black lives, which are seen as without value within White supremacy, are important to your liberation. Given the disproportionate impact state violence has on Black lives, we understand that when Black people in this country get free, the benefits will be wide reaching and transformative for society as a whole. When we are able to end hyper-criminalization and sexualization of Black people and end the poverty, control, and surveillance of Black people, every single person in this world has a better shot at getting and staying free. When Black people get free, everybody gets free. This is why we call on Black people and our allies to take up the call that Black lives matter. We're not saying Black lives are more important than other lives, or that other lives are not criminalized and oppressed in various ways. We remain in active solidarity with all oppressed people who are fighting for their liberation and we know that our destinies are intertwined. (Herstory)

We can see or are reminded of so many other examples of white fear and the deployment of rhetorical means of social control-- the public reiteration of that perceived threat -- especially now as they circulate on social media. These might include the circulation of tropes of victim blaming (the victims are criminals who should be better (white) members of society, naming (referring to victims as “thugs” and criminals), visual representation (memes and images depicting victims doing drugs, mug shots, caricatures or depictions of black gangsta rappers). And if black men are “thugs,” female victims of color are often ignored altogether. An important component in the discussion of Black Lives Matter is the rhetorical focus on male victimhood, and the calls that also circulate demanding inclusion of female voices and representation. For example, it is worth examining the saint-thug dichotomy that circulates in regard to male victims, especially considering that there is no “easy” similar formulation for female victims, thus resulting in the eliding of female victims altogether. The black male “thug” figure becomes an easy target by white power but also results in the silencing of black women. Not explicitly advocating a feminist perspective, nonetheless BLM's priorities include a diversity of voices, and working the movement through more inclusive community organizing instead of following a (traditionally male) leader. The queer and feminist perspectives might then open more spaces for connection among and between social activist groups, helping to tackle some of the tropes, stereotypes, misinformation, and gendered discrepancies.

Black Lives Matter also calls attention to identity and ways that young people in general and African Americans in particular negotiate identity and means of identification from perspectives of race, class, sexual orientation, and gender in the world and online. Although we may not find resolutions to some of these issues and conflicts, bringing the conversations into the classroom

can offer students various means of negotiating these as personal and social conflicts and points of engagement on their own terms as well as within a community (classroom) context.

The crossover of links and information among and between sites and platforms -- including the Black Lives Matter hashtag and Twitter site, the use of Twitter in spreading information and announcing protests especially in relation to the shooting of Mike Brown in Ferguson, the viral spread of video like that from the infamous Pool Party in Texas showing the police officer man-handling/assaulting a teenage girl in a bikini – and real-world action – the move from inside to outside of the internet -- marks a new kind of possibility for social activism that if continuously utilized may in fact contribute to real social change. And these kinds of conversations can open our classrooms to making better connections between the texts we read and the lives we live in the world. If in fact we want to realize that all lives and not just some lives matter, that improved race relations and addressing social inequalities will result in a better society for all people and not just some people, and if these are issues that some of our students are concerned with when they enter our classes, we might be able to do more to help all students link their own lives and experiences with our classroom activities.

One of my recent student reflection papers captures some of this when she writes:

The issue of individual and systemic racism and discrimination has always been a highly critical topic, but it seems that in recent years, beginning in 2012 with the high profile case of the death of Trayvon Martin, a young, unarmed African-American male who was shot and killed due to racial profiling, this controversy is now being debated more than ever. With the rise of highly influential activists and leaders such as Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi who coined the notorious hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, it's almost inevitable that change is upon us. "I've been praying for a moment like this one my entire life.", says Garza when speaking about how the social media trend has brought so many young activists of all color together.

The beauty of the movement is not only that it gives a voice to African American men who are highly subjected to racial profiling, but it also plays a big role in other types of discrimination such as gender, sexuality, gender identification, etc. The leader and co-founder of the movement herself is an African-American, queer woman which in itself is essentially the most discriminated classification there is. It is already typically known that a white woman makes 76 cents to every dollar her male counterpart makes, but what most are not aware of is that African-American males make 75 cents to every dollar a white male is making. And shockingly, black women make roughly 65 cents to every dollar, that's a 35 cent margin!

Consequently, if as a society we remove the social and political stigma against black, queer women and unlearn and baptize our minds of racial prejudice, it is possible that equality will be granted to all races, religions, genders, sexual orientations, etc. I, a muslim, Arab-American woman, experience discrimination on a regular basis and am an advocate of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Though I'm aware that the mission is

directed towards black people, the message of equality and ending racism affects me as well. The fact of the matter is, everyone on earth will experience some type of prejudice and by ending it for the group most affected by it, we can end it for all.

Constructivist pedagogy and student-centered learning philosophies assert that students learn by doing, making, and engaging from a sense of personal connection and agency. But often our classes talk at, lecture, or tell students what they need to learn, and this may not match up with their experiences and cultural identities that they have come to know in the world. When a student reads Frederick Douglass and MLK and then makes her own, personal connection to the BLM contemporary civil rights movement, she is using the resources of her education for critical knowledge production and active civic participation. If she had not been given the opportunity to discover and imagine her own project (the final paper topic) she may not have engaged at such a personal/intellectual level. The openness though is not entirely true, since in fact the course readings and assignments, although open to a range of choices for writing, tend toward race, economic issues in contemporary society, and social activism. This, though I think, brings into the classroom texts and topics that might not otherwise be given space and in this way opens possibilities for students to engage. Students not concerned or initially seeing themselves as connected to these issues can still write about anything from their experiences or interests, in some kind of relation to course topics. But students who have experience or interest in thinking about race, gender, social and economic issues can find ways of articulating that in ways that may not have had an opportunity to otherwise.