

Afterword: How I Use #BlackLivesMatter as an Entry Point and a Disruption Tool

White Supremacy as a Pedagogical Tool

I am a southern black woman from Albany, Georgia. My grandparents are also from Georgia and came of age in the Jim Crow South. My grandmother and grandfather were educators in elementary and middle school, respectively. They stressed the significance of academic achievement and progress as a tool of black progress. Raised as a member of the “southern grandparent generation,” I was never unaware of white supremacy and racial prejudice. I knew of archetypal white supremacy like the Ku Klux Klan, but rarely imagined white supremacy as a burly man in a white sheet and pointy cap. My run-ins with whiteness were more subtle: a white person’s random glare on the street or being stopped by a smiling white woman to touch my hair and asking my grandmother how I was “so clean and neat.” However, the majority of my learning about how to maneuver around white people was experienced in the classroom. One particularly striking memory was in eighth grade. The director of the gifted and talented program refused to test me for admittance because “it was too late in the year and would not be beneficial.” My grandmother protested and I was

given a slack test of pronouncing difficult words. After four or five words, the test was over. I passed immediately and was placed in the program for the following year.

White supremacy in my house was a pedagogical tool used to help me develop a consciousness of who I was as a young black southerner. My grandfather frequently reminded me “what whites don’t want blacks to know is put into books.” Black folks’ historical and social-economic investment in literacy notwithstanding, I simply loved to read and be nosy about other black folks’ lives. Reading about black folks was important for me because they were often left out of daily learning in my classroom unless it was Black History Month. “Black history is every day,” my grandmother said. My initial investment in #BlackLivesMatter was locating and falling in love with stories about black folks who refused to be pushed to the side. Mildred Taylor, Eleanora Tate, Virginia Hamilton, and short stories illustrated by Jerry Pinkney lined my bookshelves. Documentaries like *Eyes on the Prize* were staples in our home. Reading about black folks, especially little black girls with pigtails like me, helped establish footing that black girls were special and possessed magic outside of the understanding of white folks.

Toward a #BlackLivesMatter Pedagogy

As a college professor at a predominantly white institution, I rely heavily on the “teaching moments” of my youth to curate my pedagogical approaches. My classroom is constructed as a reclamation space for my students to engage with black literature and culture. Students are challenged to acknowledge marginalized experiences that are often outside of their own comfort zone. I recognize that I am often a source of discomfort for students because I am a woman of color at the front of the classroom—a feat many of my students have not seen previous to my class—who encourages them to confront their own prejudices and privileges. In my syllabus, I typically offer students the following disclaimer:

...the tone and language used in this course will not be sugarcoated. I will intentionally provoke you in order to stimulate conversation and challenge your comfort zones. This is by no means an attack on your

personal beliefs or character. Rather, my intentions are to challenge you think about issues and concerns from various viewpoints outside of your own perspectives.

This disclaimer warns them of my stance to push them outside of their comfort zones and crack, if not break, their rose-colored glasses that we have overcome all racial and social injustices. Students learn the first week that relying on the stance of being colorblind will not help them complete the course or avoid interrogation. This is especially critical when introducing the concept of #BlackLivesMatter during a time when Americans would prefer to look the other way and push conversations of race to the margins. #BlackLivesMatter is a movement for social change, but also a teaching moment for educators to identify and map out new touchstones of pedagogical and cultural inquiry that reflect the current social landscape.

My incorporation of #BlackLivesMatter into the classroom stemmed from a weeklong discussion of the murder of Trayvon Martin in February 2012. The majority of my students had not paid much attention to Martin's death and those that knew of his death heard about it through the hashtag #JusticeforTrayvon. Because the course centralized hip-hop culture, we situated Martin as a "hip-hop martyr" and discussed how his death (and the murkiness around what happened) sparked a demand for revisions to legal and political practices. However, it was not until watching George Zimmerman's trial with an Issues in African American Studies course that I thought about the developing significance of #BlackLivesMatter as a pedagogical tool. The defining moment in our discussions surrounding the case came from an otherwise quiet black male student who blurted out "I guess I don't fucking matter!"

Situating Social Justice and Protest

Since Fall 2013, I have intentionally included a unit on #BlackLivesMatter in all my courses. For fall semester classes I teach the unit at the end of the semester. In spring courses, I usually organize readings so the unit can take place in February to commemorate the death of Trayvon Martin, which initiated the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Teaching the

#BlackLivesMatter unit in February calls upon the importance of Martin's death as well as creates a branch for students to connect how contemporary acts of racial violence and protest extend past the traditional celebration of Black History Month. Students are able to follow how Martin's death updates the trajectory of black protest in a cultural and historically relevant moment. Students examine readings across multiple mediums including blogs, op-eds, and Twitter hash tags. Using social media as a critical tool is important on two levels: it meets students where they are in terms of producing and digesting information and current events, and helps students take an active role in curating and transcribing current events that are relevant to the present.

Additionally, students earn participation points as "tweet lecturers." Tweet lecturing is a two-part critical listening and critical writing exercise where students live tweet our class discussions from a designated Twitter account and write a critical response about the readings and class discussion from that day. The account students use is an account I have set up specifically for the course. Students are required to sign up for a lecture at the beginning of the semester. On their assigned day, students then tweet a minimum of 15–20 tweets that reflect what is being discussed in the class as well as their own thoughts about the information and texts being presented. After completing their tweets, students write a 750–1000 word critical response about the activity. Tweeting serves a twofold purpose: it is a contemporary departure point to get students interested and aware that critical conversations take place outside of a traditional classroom, and it helps raise awareness of the social-historical and cultural narratives of black protest they may otherwise overlook or discount. All tweet lectures are then archived online via *Chirpstory*. Students can access a link to review how their tweets created a changing narrative and living archive that contributed to larger conversations taking place about black protest and black agency throughout social media. From their initial feedback, students enjoyed contributing to the conversation and being digital archivists. They learned firsthand that in this digital age, tweeting is a form of archival work and protest in digital spaces. It simultaneously creates a sense of community and critical dissonance. It is important to introduce students to alternative methods of critical engagement in order to update and create new language to contextualize the current events taking place. Tweets serve as "receipts"

(or evidence) that #BlackLivesMatter is a complicated and non-monolithic form of 21st century black protest. The lack of uniformity within the movement should parallel and be reflected within its documentation and critical discourse.

Mapping Out Black Lives Matter via the Tragi-Erotic

The most substantial exercise in the #BlackLivesMatter unit is the creation of a map of high profile murders of black folks by police officers. My use of folks here is strategic: it is a challenge against the hegemonic understanding of violence as solely damaging to black men and boys. I prefer to draw out the map longhand. The physical act of writing out the names and dates of death is a physical reminder of the lives that were lost. In addition to the map providing a visual demonstration of the senseless murders of black and brown folk, it is also an exercise in teasing out social, cultural, and economic similarities and differences in the ways in which the lens of death and guilt is turned onto the victim rather than to the perpetrator (especially when the perpetrator is white or is a police officer). The mapping exercise raises questions of how empathy is constructed in public and private spaces while questioning how mourning is an act of (dis)respectability. The green light to mourn police brutality victims is often grounded in middle class respectability politics—a belief that the deceased was educated, from a satisfactory background, and visually appealing (respectable).

Although police brutality can be traced back decades—I often challenge students to consider slave patrolling as one of the earliest predecessors of police brutality—we start our map with the year 1999. This year marks the death of Amadou Diallo, a New York man shot 41 times by police as he reached for his wallet to identify himself. The map then proceeds to other high profile (and controversial) deaths like Sean Bell, Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, Rekia Boyd, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, etc. At the end of the map are three question marks that represent the deaths of those we do not know, simply because their deaths (and lives) were not covered by the media. I have found that mapping the deaths of black men, women, boys, and girls is a humbling experience.