

Intersectionality in the Classroom: Black Lives Matter as a Consummate Example

By

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Abstract

This essay considers the implications of teaching about Black Lives Matter (BLM), a movement that joins a long tradition of Black American protest. We reflect on how BLM helps us illustrate intersectionality in the classroom. To make our argument, we take as a case study the controversy surrounding the Cincinnati Women's March in January 2018: BLM Cincinnati declined to participate in the march after Women's March organizers refused to listen to BLM's critiques of the theme "Hear Our Vote." We analyze the events, mainstream discourse, and activist statements around the controversy and reflect on how to use the conflict pedagogically.

In our years of classroom instruction, we have found that teaching about past social movements tends to be easy; lessons proceed without controversy. Students seem inspired to learn about the suffrage movement and the Civil Rights Movement, and public memory of those movements regards them as largely favorable (if Whitewashed). Teaching about current events, though, presents us with more of a challenge. How can we teach about ongoing social movements, unfolding in real time as our semesters progress? Black Lives Matter (BLM) in particular presents university faculty with rich potential and myriad political landmines, especially in conservative areas and in a climate of increased scrutiny and distrust of higher education from elected officials, conservative media outlets, and large swaths of the population (including many of the families who reluctantly send their adult offspring to our campuses to learn--or, as it often seems--to get a degree so they can get a job). We come to communication, literature, and gender studies classrooms as colleagues in a department of interdisciplinary and communication studies. Leland holds a PhD in communication and teaches courses in communication and women's, gender, and sexuality studies (WGS), while Helene holds a PhD in English and teaches courses in literature, writing, Black World Studies, Latin American Studies, and WGS.

In this essay, we think through the practical and theoretical opportunities and implications of teaching BLM, a movement that joins a long tradition of Black American protest, resistance, and work for liberation. Specifically, we reflect on the ways in which BLM helps us illustrate intersectionality--a concept we have long taught in our classes, but one that students sometimes have trouble grasping without tangible, contemporary applications. Founded by three Black women, two of whom identify as queer, BLM has from its outset intentionally defined itself intersectionally, rejecting the pop-bead metaphysics of the Civil Rights Movement, Black nationalism, the White feminisms of the first and second wave, and the virulently Whitewashed lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender movements for liberal inclusion.

To make our argument, we take as a case study the controversy surrounding the Cincinnati Women's March in January 2018: BLM Cincinnati declined to participate in the march after organizers of the Women's March refused to listen to BLM's critiques of the march's theme "Hear Our Vote." BLM wanted the march organizers to use the term "Voice" instead of "Vote," arguing that the ballot is not available to many people of color, including those convicted of felonies, those who are immigrants, and those without identification, transportation, or the economic privilege of time off on voting day to go to the polls (among other critiques). Our essay analyzes the events, mainstream discourse, and activist position statements around the controversy. Ultimately, we use the march and BLM's boycott of it to illustrate how BLM builds on a rich history of activism against statist violence that traces its roots through abolitionism, the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Arts Movement, contemporary Black literature, and intersectional feminisms such as the position articulated by the Combahee River Collective. Moreover, we consider the theoretical and practical implications for teaching BLM in university classrooms, including a discussion of the utility of this particular case study as a pedagogical exemplar.

BLM and the History of Black American Activism

In one sense, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag and associated movement began in 2013 when Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi took to the Internet to decry the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the self-appointed Neighborhood Watch vigilante who gunned down unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin in Florida for the so-called offense of wearing a hoodie, being Black, and walking down the street. Zimmerman's claim to feeling threatened rendered Zimmerman innocent under the state's Stand Your Ground law that allows shootings in self-defense (evidently capaciously defined)--a reality that serves as the warrant for Cullors, Garza, and Tometi's argument that the state (Florida, and more broadly, the United States) values White feelings more than Black lives. Innocent Black deaths at the hands of police in Ferguson, Missouri, New York City, and elsewhere over the following year fomented activist energy both online and in the streets.¹

In another sense, though, the message that Black lives matter (notice the lowercase) has persisted for centuries on the North American continent--as long as legal structures, statist violence, economic exploitation, abuses of human dignity, and other social systems of oppression have treated Black lives as excessive, dangerous, and ultimately disposable (Hill Collins; Giroux). We necessarily pause to point out that indeed Black lives have mattered since the introduction of Africans into the Americas. Here, we situate Black lives in relationship to what "matters" to suggest that broader contextualization is a worthwhile exercise and opportunity found in interdisciplinary classrooms. We want to suggest that there is a tension between Black bodies as signifiers for the sacred, invoked within the question of whether Black lives matter, and that such tension provides useful direction in the conversations that can occur in classrooms. This tension has been enacted and addressed in ways that place historic Black activism in closer relationship to the contemporary moment than our students realize and, as a result, allows us to consider this historical trajectory through a more continuous narrative.

To begin, we recall the systemic structures that have bound and unwound Black bodies in direct correlation to economic pressures on American Whites. We acknowledge how those lives have been constructed and reconstructed in value--as lives that "matter" or not within a comparatively short history. Teaching about this contemporary moment necessarily points us historically backward yet draws us nearer to understanding the significance of and relationship to the idea of what it means to "matter." The layers of mattering indicate unavoidable politics that intersect race, gender, and class and also help us to understand how we have conceptualized how bodies matter in terms of the institutions and systems Americans consider sacred.

During slavery, Black lives mattered. This seems an odd usage to be sure, but the question of what it means for lives to "matter" is inseparable from systems of economy and justice in the United States. Insofar as profit could be made from slave labor, Black men's bodies could be ruthlessly damaged, but owners would resist, when they considered it possible, the loss of life--because as chattel those bodies mattered to the survival and upward mobility of White lives and the retention of the socio-economic structures that aligned Whiteness with privilege. The loss of slave labor was a devastation that implied that Black lives mattered more than White

¹ For detailed accounts of the history of BLM, see Garza; Langford and Speight; and Taylor.

privilege; it was, in effect, the first of a familiar argument: abolition flew in the face of the assumptions that “all lives matter”—when “all” is defined as a majority, thereby diluting the focus on the humanity of those bodies in question, such that “all” equates to “southern and White.” But this is also an obvious question of economy and justice insofar as those systems had always been sacred in the protection of White privilege and supremacy. We have the evidence for this in the rituals that resulted—well-oiled jail cell doors that flung open in the face of mobs and militias invoking martial law to perform the most violent rites of White supremacy. Lynchings have been part of the narrative of Black bodies since antebellum times when there was a clear transition in the significance of Black bodies. In these moments journalist Ida B. Wells engaged in public activism of words, reconstructing the public narrative about the relationship between Black bodies and justice as a sacred system in this country. Her book *The Red Record* was a public outcry against the deceit of justice that implicated and signified on Black bodies as criminal without evidence or due process. Wells also decried the intersection of gender bias in such rites by attacking the assumption that White femininity (also sacred) presumed the kind of fragility and unequivocal compassion that led to the sort of temporary insanity it must require for a White woman to involve herself with a Black man willingly. When revealed, such involvement would, in a society protective of the sacred tenets of White supremacy and femininity, lead to ritualized lynchings. Wells wrote what should not be written—that White privilege would be enacted on a White body if that body was a woman’s and stepped against the sacred tenets of White male supremacy by making a Black man matter to her romantically. In this too we see how Black bodies mattered in upholding the rituals of White supremacy and reinforcing the value of race over gender. Regardless of the obvious rape and subsequent miscegenation occurring during slavery, what mattered most after slavery was the continuity of performances that privileged race and created a very specific tension between Black men’s bodies and the sacred. Even so, the Black man’s body as a signifier in relationship to sacred systems was not new (Logan).

In the antebellum period, pervasive stereotypes once again made Black bodies matter. Juxtaposed against the acquired privilege of a suddenly floundering and unstable southern economy, Black bodies could take on new significance as a beacon for declaring the necessity to protect what was sacred—that uniquely White southern way of life. Given the clarity of a post-slavery economy, Black lives mattered, again according to White social mores and economic needs of the time, providing a well-documented recasting of the usefulness of the enslaved into a post-slavery caricature of immorality and violence. Such representations emboldened and enabled violence against Black bodies, presumably because of their inherent savagery and insolence. Once again the sacred systems that protect White privilege and reinforce White supremacy were called upon to correct abolition and patch a cracking narrative. The judicial system proceeded to invoke the loophole in the 13th Amendment such that the representations of Black men once again had purpose: the benefits of slavery were still possible through criminal convictions, which meant Black bodies could indeed still matter, so long as the representations of those bodies were as close to an affront to a newly sacred White privilege aligned with a progressively more industrialized nation. The prison industrial complex became and remains a burgeoning privatized business, unreformed in the face of both DNA evidence and sociological research that proves its implicit bias (Alexander). Black lives still matter contemporarily, then, in the parlance of White supremacy, but their value inheres not in innate sacredness of human

dignity; rather, their value exists purely economically. Black bodies matter as they fill private prisons and consequently White wallets.

Once Reconstruction and the potential of freedom and education presented Black men as upwardly mobile, and therefore a more significant threat economically and socially, thus began the calculated representations of Black bodies once again. These new representations made those bodies matter differently again--as targets of fear of the dangers of intellectual ineptitude, savagery, and rape. This pattern was and is constitutional and systematized in the actual, ideological and theoretical criminalization of Black (and Brown) bodies. This system has ensured that the so-called Urban Negro (a definition understood less as a factor of demographically defined districts and more about the racial and ethnic location of Black bodies, whether they occupy an urban or suburban environment) has been an increasingly symbolic body stereotyped as a pariah of the American justice system with unrivaled consistency. This particular representation is perhaps the most enduring perception of Black men's bodies, as evidenced in its contrived reinvention within the most popularized hip hop consumed by young suburban White men. And while this would seem to make a too-rapid jump to the current moment from this systemic representation and its tensions between the Black body, how it matters, and the most contemporary versions of social justice activism surrounding the BLM movement, we need only consider the parallel evolution of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Arts Movement to see how these issues are ensnared. Moreover, the development of Black women's intellectual activism as a potent focal point for the emergence of intersectionality in the consideration of the Black body and its political ramifications becomes more evident as we examine the implications of gender within those movements.

While the most consistent patterns of our criminal justice system feed on institutionalized racism, we stand now in an important moment historically within the trajectory of Black activism. The Civil Rights Movement and the Black Arts Movement are characterized by collective social and political efforts to attack oppression of Black bodies through oratory, music, and the language arts. Building upon prior moments that cast Black bodies as savage, immoral, and dangerous, these contemporary moments of the mid-20th century are characterized by another necessary perception of Black men's bodies as invisible; however, in the face of such a perception, the relevance of Black bodies that reject invisibility by creating images and voices that attempt to pull the veil of White supremacy remains. These images ignite and justify the attack on Black bodies in ways that begin literally and, more currently, continue under the pressure of public opinion, again narrativized as assaults against the sacred principles of justice always already intertwined with notions of constitutionality and patriotism. As television became a centerpiece in American households, families could, for the first time, actually see children and adults, Blacks and White allies, participating in peaceful protests--and how they were being violently attacked outside schools and inside restaurants and in the streets by both average White citizens and the police.² This is a significant aspect of the backdrop for the anger or revolutionary spirit that occurs within the speeches, poetry, and theater of the period that were the foundation for contemporary social (media) and intellectual activism. This period is characterized by an increased visibility and elevated reality of surveillance of Black organizations and leaders and the development of the White liberal "left." Even so, violent responses to peaceful

² Several scholars have offered profound analyses of the visual rhetoric of the Civil Rights

Movement. See, for example, Gallagher and Zagacki; Harold and DeLuca; Johnson.

demonstrations against segregation and Jim Crow policies aimed at curtailing the freedom of movement and justice provided to Black people reinforced the radical notion that America would never peacefully accept the presence of free Black or Brown people as equal to its White citizens--no matter their education, religious affiliation, political connections, or artistic production. Assassinations and race riots were further evidence of this point. The Black Arts Movement included a change in tone that in some ways clearly pointed to an anti-colonial context of increasing African independence. The anger, frustration, and attack in much of the writing blasted to bits the sensibilities of the previous period's supposed pandering to White philanthropic audiences. The public and participatory artistic work of this period was antecedent to the viral social media-based social activism embodied by the originators of the BLM movement.

Thus far, we have suggested the import of Black men's bodies, but that is not to suggest that Black women's bodies have any less significance in the conversation of what "matters." To the contrary, the use of Black women's bodies for breeding, rape, and labor is well-documented and grounded in evidence as vast as presidential DNA and slave mistress diaries. But of particular significance for the purposes of this argument is the role of Black women as intellectual and political voices on behalf of the Black body signified upon in the idea of "Black lives." Black activist women's roles as sisters, mothers, aunts, and wives placed them squarely in the conversation in ways that subjected their voices and activism to particularly exploitative and vile attacks from public and private criticisms, including similar critiques as those leveled at their men counterparts, but with the addition of attacks on their sexuality and moral grounding. Consistently asked to step back and support the larger socio-political cause of Black manhood, Black women--and their bodies--were selectively visible as a part of the public, symbolic discourse surrounding Black lives during the Civil Rights Movement and before. Ironically, however, these women were always within and alongside of the conversations about the protection of Black lives. Women like Shirley Chisholm and many other less visible (to the mainstream public) Black women held key background roles, often because of internal Black patriarchal bias, but still wrote, sat, and sang the movement into American households. The significance of these women in the conversation about the oppression of Black bodies is making its way into more mainstream scholarship; however, the contemporary activism of the women who spawned the BLM movement renews attention to the intersecting struggles that a more gender-inclusive and class-conscious representation of Black bodies suggests.

Black feminists in the second wave, sometimes referring to themselves as womanists, resisted the middle class and White bias of White second wave feminists, calling attention to the needs and concerns of women of color in the United States and around the world. Contributors to *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga and Anzaldúa), for instance, represented various groups of women in the United States as well as so-called Third World Women globally. The Combahee River Collective, a group of Black lesbians, issued a position statement that defined Black women's experiences as a legitimate source of politics. The Combahee River Collective critiqued the systems of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and economic exploitation as interlocking oppressions that cohere to make life unlivable for poor women of color, especially those who identify as lesbian. Their message, like so many during the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements, predicted that of BLM: in a White supremacist culture, boldly declaring the inherent worth of Black life remains a radical and prophetic act.

BLM Cincinnati vs. The Cincinnati Women's March: A Royal Clash in the Queen City

On the day after Donald Trump's inauguration in 2017, thousands of activists gathered in Washington, DC, for a Women's March, a response not only to Trump's victory over the first woman in American history to secure a major party's nomination for presidency (and who received more votes for the presidency than any White man in U.S. history), but also to Trump's professed misogyny throughout the campaign. A year later, activists in cities around the United States planned anniversary marches to continue calling for liberal reforms based on gender and to persist in resisting Trump's ongoing commitment to sexism.

The national march in 2017 had a number of limitations and faced criticism for centering the needs and concerns of monied, White, cisgender women--to the exclusion of others. The ubiquitous pink "pussy" hats, for instance, suggested that the womanhood the march represented included only genitals that look a particular way and have a certain color. The follow-up marches in the spirit of the 2017 national march did little better in organizing events with intersectional awareness. For instance, in our hometown of Cincinnati, the 2018 Women's March selected the theme "Hear our Vote." BLM Cincinnati suggested as an alternative theme "Hear our Voice," a broader theme that would not stake a movement ostensibly for liberation entirely in the power of the ballot. Moreover, argued BLM Cincinnati, access to the right and ability to vote does not apply evenly and neutrally across populations. People of color disproportionately find themselves excluded from the franchise for several reasons: laws requiring a state-issued form of identification (exclusionary to people experiencing poverty, especially those with no jobs or who use public transportation to get to work and otherwise have no need of a driver's license); over-policing and laws that subsequently ban people convicted of felonies from voting; and the inability to get to the polls in the middle of a workday (a problem particularly salient for people who work multiple jobs). Furthermore, only adult U.S. citizens can vote, so "Hear our Vote" excludes non-citizen immigrants (whether documented or not) and people under the age of 18. BLM Cincinnati decried the Women's March organizers for ignoring their voices and for putting too much faith and trust in electoral politics generally and the Democratic party in particular. In a blog post explaining their decision not to participate in the Women's March, BLM Cincinnati activists wrote that resisting Trump strikes them as too narrow a goal in the overall struggle against oppression:

The fight for women's liberation has never been led by the Democratic party or any other party that props up and supports this social system – at best these parties have tailed public sentiments and given lip service. If women's liberation was crucial to any of these parties it would be unthinkable that women are still being denied access to safe, affordable abortions or lacking essential preventative and curative healthcare all together. If women's liberation was a priority to Democrats or any political party of the rich, it would be unthinkable that non-binary and transgender people are still struggling for accommodations in all public arenas – since ability to determine your gender identity and expressions is another facet of women's liberation from oppression. With these realities in mind, we reject the idea that the Democratic Party is somehow serving up women's liberation.

The suggested alternative theme, to emphasize voice instead of vote, would include people who wish to work for legislative change, but its broadness also encompasses other perspectives and priorities.

Firing back, in an interview with the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Billie Mays of the Women's March accused BLM Cincinnati of running a smear campaign against the march. Mays defended the march and its organizers as indeed feminist and working class and interested in working with BLM Cincinnati. Notably, Mays's response does not seem to acknowledge any of BLM Cincinnati's substantive claims about the march's theme, priorities, or non-responsiveness to BLM Cincinnati's objections early in the planning process.

Putting the Pieces Together with and for Our Students: Teaching BLM

One challenge in teaching WGS courses centers on helping students understand what feminism means and how the definition of feminism differs from what they often hear in media and popular culture.³ Besides deflecting stereotypes of feminism as man-hating or oversensitivity, we must complicate the tendency to understand feminism monolithically. Introducing students to feminisms, in the plural, requires offering examples of issues and events that illustrate the differences between radical and liberal feminism or that concretize womanist critiques of White liberal feminists, and the list could go on indefinitely. As helpful as we find position statements and manifestos for their clarity in articulating different groups' goals, histories, and politics, students sometimes find such documents too vague or seemingly out of date. Having a current and local example helps make the material reality of theoretical differences come alive for students.

When we first introduce the example of the 2018 conflict between the Women's March and BLM Cincinnati, students' initial reaction typically mirrors the journalistic framing of the *Cincinnati Enquirer* article on the issue, which seems to wonder why activist groups similarly situated ideologically cannot simply find a way to get along (Curnutte). Our first strategy, then, focuses on posing a simple question about the presenting issue in the conflict: the theme of "Hear our Vote." We ask students to brainstorm some reasons why BLM might object to the word "vote" with probing questions like: "What's wrong with the word 'vote'?" or "What are the limitations of a focus on voting?" Usually, some students in the class will recognize that not everyone can vote or that the history of enfranchisement in the United States carries tremendous racist baggage (especially women's suffrage). If no one comes up with one of these responses, a more direct question like "Does the theme 'Hear our Vote' include everyone? Who might be left out?" will typically invite the same sorts of answers if students did not generate them without such prompting. The discussion about access to voting can then lead to a conversation about the effectiveness and limits of the ballot box as a tool for change. We sometimes have to clarify that BLM does not suggest that people should not vote; rather, they resist the impulse to organize a movement for liberation from oppression solely or primarily around the ballot. BLM does not advocate against voting, but sees voting as a limited way to meet only a narrow set of goals.

³ Though beyond the scope of this essay, a robust body of scholarship explores some of the challenges of teaching feminist classes with students who resist confronting their own privilege.

For a sample, see England; Johnson and Bhatt; Johnson et al.; Spencer.

The tensions around voting--both access to it and the effects of it--animate the larger patterns of conflict between radical and liberal perspectives on social change as well as the differences between womanism and (liberal, White) feminism. Once students understand the basic agonism, the more complex questions about political parties, the relationship between social movements and the police, essentialism, and intersectionality become easier to broach. BLM Cincinnati, for instance, objected to the idea that electing more Democrats will result in better lives for people of color. State violence in the form of deportations, mass incarceration, and police violence against Black lives have proliferated under Republican and Democratic presidential administrations and majorities in Congress.

The BLM critique in general and blog post explaining it in particular offer the clearest explanation of BLM's arguments in this case. Instructors looking to spend a whole class period or unit on the topic could supplement the BLM blog with Alicia Garza's "Herstory" of BLM, which offers more of the theoretical grounding that underpins BLM Cincinnati's actions in January 2018. Garza's "Herstory" articulates BLM's intentional commitment to intersectionality: while BLM makes race the focus of their analysis, they recognize that race always already intersects with gender, sexuality, socio-economic class, religion, physical and mental (dis)ability, and other axes of power. As such, BLM works to confront systemic and institutionalized sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, *et. al* because those forms of oppression have a multiplicative effect with racism in the lives of people of color--and ultimately because oppressions interlink, and no one experiences true freedom until everyone does.

BLM's critique comes into even sharper focus when juxtaposed with the (non)response from the Women's March organizers. Rather than dealing with the substance of BLM's argument, the Women's March flattens complexity and difference in suggesting that progressive groups ought to get along peaceably. As Spencer and Patterson have shown, so-called allies often brandish ally identity in an effort to avoid the real work of coalition building across axes of difference. The assumption of shared interest draws on presumptive ally status between the groups, despite the Women's March organizers' indifference to BLM's suggested alternative theme and BLM's nuanced rationale for broadening the march's focus accordingly. As such, class discussions that consider this conflict can focus on the Women's March in two critical ways: first, for their willingness to concede to systems of power in the status quo; and second, for their stubborn persistence even after learning of BLM's critique. Non-intersectional liberal perspectives, then, fail on the face (because they have a milquetoast vision of liberation that only benefits monied, cisgender, heterosexual White women) and against a standard of reflexivity (because, frankly, they chose not to engage with their privilege *even when confronted with it directly*).

We find tremendous value in subsequently linking this example to myriad historical examples to which we already allude herein: the racism of first and second wave feminisms, the sexism of the Civil Rights Movement, and the homophobia of both--to name a few. But beginning with a contemporary example and framing class discussions of power and privilege and the ways they reproduce even within minoritized spaces challenges students' perceptions that we live in a post-feminist, post-racial period of enlightenment in which gay and lesbian people can get married and Caitlyn Jenner graces the cover of *Vanity Fair*. Students insist that even an article from 2009 suffers from datedness, and we hear them wax

about how much progress “we” have made since then. While we concede that some of these signifiers of progress indeed represent semblances of improvement, we find the tendency to rush toward proclamations of good news uncritically naive. An example of the unreflective reproduction of power from within an allegedly progressive movement works to dash such unfounded optimism, in productive ways.

To move our analysis into the realm of the concrete, we now turn to brief explications of using the example of the Cincinnati Women’s March in two different classes. Leland, a communication scholar who also teaches WGS classes, uses this case study in his Introduction to LGBT Studies Course. Helane, a literature professor, approaches this case within the trajectory of African American intellectual activism in her African American literature courses.

I (Leland) find that the example comes in handy throughout my Introduction to LGBT Studies class, but I typically introduce the example early in the semester when I explain core concepts and terms for the first time. Defining terms like “essentialism” and “intersectionality” for students in an introductory-level general education course requires specific, tangible examples. The pink “pussy” hats that have come to represent the Women’s March, for instance, illustrate bifurcate essentialism: genital and racial. How do we understand what *woman* means? Does having a vagina make one a woman, or lacking one exclude one from the category of woman? Furthermore, what are the politics of adopting an iconic signifier for a whole movement that suggests such a narrow understanding of womanhood? I then pose similar questions about the color of the hats and the corresponding presumed Whiteness of womanhood in the parlance of the Women’s March. At least since Sojourner Truth asked in 1851, “Ain’t I a Woman?,” Black women in the United States have interrogated the racial boundaries of womanhood and found themselves on the outside when White women draw those boundaries. The example comes in handy again later in the term when I assign the Combahee River Collective’s “A Black Feminist Statement.” Students groan when I tell them the reading is 40 years old--the oldest piece we read during the semester. But they always find it more relevant and timely than they expect, and pulling the thread of the Cincinnati Women’s March example through from the beginning of the term to the discussion of Combahee that comes a few weeks later helps students realize the historical and ongoing necessity of intersectional analysis and critique as well as the oppressive persistence of patterns of power and privilege that reproduce themselves even in ostensibly progressive and activist spaces that imagine themselves oriented toward liberation.

The subject of Black activism arises almost immediately in the context of my (Helane’s) African American Writing courses. Students are confronted with the circumstances of slavery (regardless of the time period of study) and the development of the African American Vernacular English (AAVE)--both in spoken language (when we discuss and linguistically legitimize AAVE) and in genres with which they are familiar--at the very beginning of the course. In doing so, we address the stereotypes and stigmas associated with each moment in American history that has specifically politicized the Black body. As we approach the texts within the course, we inevitably begin to draw connections between histories. Most often, students are astonished at the use of the Black body as a signifier and stereotype.

As we read speeches and essays, contextualizing the events referenced within them, students see quite clearly how this trajectory can be drawn out. In my contemporary African

American literature course, students learn about the Civil Rights Era and the Black Arts Era, and they are drawn to the current implications of the texts that are themselves acts of activism against the racism, classism, and sexism applied so judiciously to Black bodies in America. For the most part, they find their way into these texts through their benign connections to African American foods, friends, and music (jazz and what they believe is hip hop). I consider this an opportunity to help students see how an interdisciplinary format and an intersectional lens will help them to understand both these texts and their times in ways they could not predict.

From an interdisciplinary lens, we discuss the intersectionality of Blackness in America as a starting place from which to understand Black intellectual activism. I have yet to teach a student who has not heard, read, and studied Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech, "I Have a Dream." So in order to begin to situate this conversation, we must take the time to read the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." We confront the idea of space and difference in the positionality and perception of intellectual activism and how such activism is a performance of the sacred in the Black community. To assist students in understanding this, and so as not to confuse the sacred with the specificity of a particular religion, but to help students understand spirituality as another important intersection of black identity, we use as evidence the required reading of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. With distinct differences in their backgrounds in virtually every possible way, King and X both engaged the sacred as a foundation and platform for their activism. What students entered understanding as a distinct difference in experience and philosophy, they begin to consider alternatively within a larger historical trajectory; both King and X encountered jail for different reasons, but what they produced during their stays, who they emerged as, and, ultimately, the difference in their subsequent value in relationship to White supremacy, mattered because they were Black bodies enacting rites/rights to which they were not, under American applications of justice, entitled. No matter their differences in approach or philosophy, they were both assassinated. When students are confronted with the experiences of Black bodies that become visible, and how the state reacts to that visibility, they are reminded of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

So many of the texts in these periods are written in response to the assaults on the Black body that students quickly realize that there is no separation between the discussion of politics, history, and literature when it comes to African American writing. It is made plain in their exposure to Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, and Lorraine Hansberry. But when we turn to June Jordan's "Poem about Police Violence" and they read: "what you think would happen if/everytime they kill a black boy/then we kill a cop/everytime they kill a black man/then we kill a cop...18 cops in order to subdue one man..." and find that the only way they can distinguish between the circumstances of the poem written in 1978 and the news in the last several years is that in 1978 the narrative defined these as "justifiable accidents" (Jordan 764-5).

When students begin to discuss the perception of the activist impulse as it occurs in a Black body made visible, they are inclined to understand current events differently: What was it that marked Colin Kaepernick as distinctly different from Tim Tebow again? The public display of the Black body is an act of defiance as a rite that is not supported within a system designed to uphold White supremacy as sacred. We need only return to the public display of Emmett Till's murdered and mutilated body by his mother to understand the repercussions of infractions against White supremacy. The difference between the public displays of Emmett Till and Mike

Brown is in what “matters” in these performances. The state and its precepts arguably undergird a system that supports *de jure* and *de facto* White supremacy. The state in this case proclaims to the public what is sacred and makes its argument plain in the display of Mike Brown’s body on the street in Ferguson. In contrast, Till’s mother places her son on display in an effort to make him visible for the purpose of undermining a system that justified his murder. There is a parallel tension between these rites that suggests a conflict of sacred interest that, arguably, is further exemplified in the discussions between the BLM and Women’s March movements in Cincinnati. Students can probe these juxtapositions as they engage African American writing alongside the events made visible by the BLM movement. Similarly, students can use the case of the conflict between the Cincinnati Women’s March and BLM Cincinnati to approach the discussion of how these movements can diverge. In fact, students realize rather quickly that they must consider the intersectionality of oppressions that occur in Black bodies. It is an approach that can capture both the perceived narratives surrounding Black bodies and the reality of a Black body that is also gendered and classed.

I introduce students to Black women’s narratives that invoke such intersections. Ntozake Shange’s “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf: A Choreopoem” offers a way for students to understand the intersectionality of Black women’s experience and the internal struggles that ensue when gender and sexuality are explored differently within communities already dogged by class and ethnic prejudices. Such texts assist in the conversation about intersectionality as we discuss the Cincinnati Women’s March and BLM controversy. This is the relevance of the case study we discuss above. As students engage the texts in the course, they often make these connections themselves. Even as students are haunted by Audre Lorde’s declaration that “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” they also recognize that Nikki Giovanni and June Jordan take Amiri Baraka’s poetic revelation that, “Poems are bullshit unless they are/ teeth” and infuse it with a nuanced and protective self-love of the particularly Black body and its actual local and global community. As we move further into even more contemporary texts now categorized as Afro-futurism—from Octavia Butler’s fiction to the African-inspired text(ile)s of *Black Panther* to the psychedelic soul of Janelle Monáe, students discover the current implications and importance of centering the agency and authority of Black bodies and cultures in global futures through science fiction and fantasy. During these moments, students see such authors recast narratives about the relevance of Black bodies and communities as sacred in their own rites/rights, as simultaneously occupying real spaces of state-sanctioned brutality and symbolic spaces within a uniquely American pan-African Black mythology.

It is important to note that students do not typically enter my courses recognizing the relationship between these texts and these public performances as part of the conversation about the BLM movement. It has become increasingly evident that what they see is isolated incidents within history that can suggest to them the banality of a statement like “All Lives Matter.” It is only within a framework that requires that they engage in an interdisciplinary journey through these texts in tandem with current events that students recognize the rabid consistency of the assault on Black bodies, the activist impulses in response that voice and visualize those bodies, the intersections that create tensions and nuances within and among activists, and how the subjective question about Black lives quickly turned into a hashtag that signifies both a call to arms for some and an expletive for others. In our discussions, it is the emergence of these

juxtapositions, ironies, and paradoxes that exemplifies the nuances of Black experience in the United States.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have traced an intellectual and activist genealogy for BLM, illustrating the connections among various movements for Black life and dignity in the United States. We have shown how linking a contemporary example of BLM activism allows us to illustrate truths to our students in interdisciplinary gender studies and literature classrooms.

The claim “Black lives matter” ought to register as banal, whether someone issues the claim in the streets, at a public meeting, on the floor of Congress, on Twitter, during the national anthem at a sporting event, or in a university classroom. But we know that a claim seemingly so simple, so agreeable--that Black people’s bodies and lives have intrinsic value--inspires polemics, accusations of hate-mongering and divisiveness, and defensiveness from those who assure us that they have Black friends. The persistence of White supremacy in U.S. American culture renders the claim “Black lives matter” and the BLM movement radical--jarring, upsetting, and threatening to the status quo (read: the normalization of Whiteness and White statist violence at every turn).

As educators, we embrace the opportunity inherent in such a richly threatening claim. To teach (and to learn) ought always upset the status quo as knowledge and understanding slowly chip away at ignorance, confusion, and unawareness. More than that, education introduces new and better questions, troubles what we think we know, and sometimes calls us to reevaluate what we hold as given, natural, or even sacred--particularly when the ideologies previously valorized make life unlivable. We invite our readers to (continue to) join us in embracing the profound opportunity and responsibility to educate students prophetically, proclaiming the truth that Black lives matter and disrupting any cultural force that suggests otherwise.

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