

Black Lives Matter: Race, Resistance, and Populist Protest

New York University

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Office Hours: By Appointment Only

Thursdays 6:20-9pm

Room 401, 1 Washington Place

From the killings of teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; to the suspicious death of activist Sandra Bland in Waller Texas; to the choke-hold death of Eric Garner in New York, to the killing of 17 year old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida and 7 year old Aiyana Stanley-Jones in Detroit, Michigan—#blacklivesmatter has emerged in recent years as a movement committed to resisting, unveiling, and undoing histories of state sanctioned violence against black and brown bodies.

This seminar links the #blacklivesmatter movement to four broader phenomena: 1) the rise of the U.S. prison industrial complex and its relationship to the increasing militarization of inner city communities 2) the role of the media industry in influencing national conversations about race and racism and 3) the state of racial justice activism in the context of a neoliberal Obama Presidency and 4) the increasingly populist nature of decentralized protest movements in the contemporary United States.

In this course we will be mindful of an important distinction between #blacklivesmatter (as an emergent movement that has come into existence within roughly the past three years) vs. a much older and broader U.S. movement for black lives that has been in existence for several centuries (which can be traced back to at least the first slave uprisings in the antebellum south). Part of our goal then, we be to think about how the former has been influenced by the latter and to what ends.

Among the many topics of discussion that we will debate and engage this semester will include: the moral ethics of black rage and riotous forms of protest; violent vs. nonviolent civil disobedience; the hyperbolic media myth of “black on black” crime; coalitional politics and the black feminist and LGBTQ underpinnings of the #blacklivesmatter movement; the similarities and differences between the blacklivesmatter movement and the U.S. civil rights movement; and the dynamics of political protest among the millennial and post-millennial generations.

Our reading material will often be supplemented with live, in-person dialogues with contemporary grassroots activists who are currently involved in the movement.

Required Texts

1. Marc Lamont Hill, *Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond* (Simon & Schuster, 2016)
2. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New Press, 2012)
3. Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (7 Stories Press, 2003)
4. African American Policy Forum, *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women* (African American Policy Forum Report, 2015)
5. Movement for Black Lives, *A Vision for Black Lives: Policy Demands for Black Power, Freedom, and Justice* (Movement for Black Lives Policy Platform, 2016)
6. Assorted essays by Cornel West, Alicia Garza, Audre Lorde, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, Shaun King, and more available at BlackLivesMatterSyllabus.com

Required Films:

- Stay Woke*, (Director, Lauren Grant; Producer, Jesse Williams, 2016)
2 Fists Up: We Gon' Be Alright (Director, Spike Lee, 2016)
The 13th, (Director, Ava DuVernay, 2016) *Optional/Strongly Recommended, Week 11/17
Birth of A Nation (Director, Nate Parker, 2016) *Optional, Week 10/27
NO! (Director, Aishah Shahidah Simmons, 2006) *Optional/Strongly Recommended, Week 10/27

I. Weekly Topics

- 9/8 Introduction: 5 Ways of Understanding Black Lives Matter as a Movement
9/15 Who They Are: Black Lives Matter and the Remaking of American Democracy
9/22 What Do "They" Want? The Policy Demands of BLM
9/29 Shut It Down: Black Civil Disobedience and the Art of Disruptive Protest (Or, What We Can Learn from Mizzou and Colin Kaepernick)
10/6 Black Lives Matter and America's Voices from the Bottom of the Well: Lessons from Ferguson, Baltimore, Flint, and Beyond
10/13 #SayHerName: Black Women, Intersectionality, and the Poetics of Black Feminist Organizing
10/20 The "Race" for the White House: Black Lives Matter and Election 2016
10/27 Black Lives Rising: Legacies of Black Rebellion
11/3 Black Lives Matter and The New Jim Crow: Rethinking Prisons and Police Violence in America (Part 1)
11/10 Black Lives Matter and The New Jim Crow: Rethinking Prisons and Police Violence in America (Part 2)
11/17 Black Lives Matter and The New Jim Crow: Rethinking Prisons and Police Violence in America (Part 3)
12/1 "Ok Ladies, Now Let's Get in Formation:" BLM's Protest Populism
12/8 #SayTheirName: BLM's LGBTQ Underpinnings
12/15 The Futures of Black Lives Matter

II. Meeting Schedule

Note: An * indicates that the reading material is available online at BlackLivesMatterSyllabus.com

9/15 Who They Are: Black Lives Matter and the Remaking of American Democracy

In this session we cover some essential questions: What is the history of the Black Lives Matter movement? What are the guiding principles of the movement? What are some of the major public misconceptions of the movement? How do we distinguish between BLM the organization and BLM the movement? Who have some of the movements key organizational players been? What conceptual differences are there between "the black lives matter movement" vs. "the movement for black lives." What does any and all of this have to do with the remaking of American democracy?

Read:

- *Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the Movement"
- *BlackLivesMatter Statement, "11 Major Misconceptions About Black Lives Matter"
- *BlackLivesMatter Statement, "Guiding Principles"
- *BlackLivesMatter Statement, "About Us" Section
- *BlackLivesMatter Statement, "Find Chapters"
- *Cornel West, Chapter 1, "Democracy Matters: Winning the War Against Imperialism"

Listen to:

- *NPR Interview with Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometti, "Black Lives Matter Founders Describe 'Paradigm Shift' In The Movement" July 2016.

*Reflection Paper Due 9/14

Writing Prompt: In our opening session we covered the documentary “Stay Woke,” and the TedTalk “5 Ways of Understanding Black Lives Matter.” We also discussed the social construction of race. Write an 800 word reflection on any of the material covered in our first session and/or in this week’s reading material. Has your understanding of BLM shifted in any way? Has the material covered in these first two weeks being clarifying, or has it led to a greater lack of clarity? Be sure to include two specific discussion questions/talking points that you would like to raise in your small groups.

9/22 Shut It Down: Black Lives Matter and the Ethics of Disruptive Protest (Or, What We Can Learn from Mizzou and Colin Kaepernick)

This week’s session focuses on what has become a hallmark strategy for the black lives matter movement: disruptive protest. Whether it be in the form of protestors shutting down highways; activists staging “Die Ins” on the steps of capital buildings; or community organizers interrupting the stump-speeches of presidential candidates---*disruption* continues to be a viable political strategy for BLM. As such, this week we will study some of the fundamentals of nonviolent civil disobedience and explore the central role that disruptive protest plays in contemporary black social justice movements. Our conversation will be anchored to two case studies: The University of Missouri-Missou’s Concerned Student 1950 movement (which resulted in the resignation of the University of Missouri’s President) and the recent protest of the national anthem by NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick. Particular attention will be paid to the vital role that two constituencies have historically played in the black freedom struggle: college students and athletes. This session will also serve as a practical introduction to the art of direct action civil disobedience. We will screen director Spike Lee’s 2016 documentary about the Mizzou movement, “2 Fists Up: We Gon’ Be Alright.”

Read:

- *Mark Engler and Paul Engler, “The Act of Disruption.” From *This Is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty First Century*, Nation Books, 2016.
- *Gene Sharp, “198 Methods of Nonviolent Action”
- *Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger”
- *Michael Eric Dyson, “The Courage of Colin Kaepernick”

Watch:

- * Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation

In-Class Screening,

We Gon Be Alright: 2 Fists Up (Director, Spike Lee) 2016 Documentary

9/29 What Do “They” Want? Approaching The Policy Demands of BLM

Contrary to what mainstream media would have us believe, black lives matter has always been a movement organized around specific sets of demands. Though it is true that these demands have been varied and shifting, the fact remains that BLM has always had concrete demands (whether it be the early demand that Police Officer Darren Wilson be indicted for the killing of teenager Michael Brown or the more recent demand that police departments across the nation be defunded and demilitarized). This week, we will focus on the history of the movement’s shifting demands. In an attempt to respond to the often-asked question “What do they want?” --- we will closely examine the 2016 platform statement of the Movement for Black Lives. Finally, we will also seek to put pressure on the assumption that policy/legislative reform is the most valuable way to measure the “success” of a social justice movement.

Read:

- *The Movement for Black Lives, “A Vision for Black Lives: Policy Demands for Black Power, Freedom, and Justice” Platform.

*Reflection Paper Due 9/28

10/6 Black Lives Matter and America’s Voices from the Bottom of the Well: Lessons from Ferguson, Flint, and Beyond

In this week’s session we will be joined by VH1 Host and Distinguished Professor of African American Studies at Morehouse College, Marc Lamont Hill, to discuss his manuscript Nobody: Casualties of America’s War on the

Vulnerable from Ferguson and Flint and Beyond. Students are strongly encouraged to review the 2016 U.S. Department of Justice Report on the Ferguson Police Department.

Read:

Marc Lamont Hill, *Nobody: Causalities of America's War on the Vulnerable from Ferguson to Flint*

Special Guest: Marc Lamont Hill, VH1 Host and Distinguished Professor, Morehouse College

*Reflection Paper Due 10/6

10/13 #SayHerName: Black Women, Intersectionality, and the Poetics of Black Feminist Organizing

Black Lives Matter is a movement grounded in the creative labor and organizing genius of black women. In this session we explore the feminist underpinnings of BLM, and connect to a broader history of black feminist thought and practice. Special attention will be paid to #SayHerName, a national organizing campaign created by the African American Policy Forum under the leadership of black feminist legal theorist Kimberle Williams Crenshaw.

Read:

*African American Policy Forum, *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women.*

*Audre Lorde, *Poetry Is Not a Luxury*

*Audre Lorde, *A Litany for Survival*

*Kimberle Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins:*

*Reflection Paper Due 10/12

10/22 Black Lives Matter and Election 2016

In this session we discuss how race has shaped presidential politics, from the election of America's first black president to the current contest for the Oval Office. Particular attention will be paid to the role that the black lives matter movement has played in shaping Election 2016. We will also examine the (often coded) role that race played in the candidacies of Senator Bernie Sanders; Democratic Nominee Hilary Clinton, and Republican Nominee Donald Trump.

Read:

To Be Announced

Watch:

*Eddie Glaude and Michael Eric Dyson Debate, Democracy Now

*PBS Roundtable, "The Race for the Whitehouse"

*Reflection Paper Due 10/21

Reflection paper: Compare and contrast Eddie Glaude and Michael Eric Dyson's positions on the presidential choices for 2016. Which perspective resonates most with you, and why? Also: reflect on the PBS roundtable. Which of the panelist's perspective did you agree with most? Why? Was there anything you felt was missing from the conversation? Your "paper" can also take the form of a video vlog cast, if you like.

10/27 Black Lives Rising: Legacies of Black Rebellion

Field Trip Screening: Nate Parker, *Birth of a Nation*

In this session we will screen Nate Parker's 2016 film *Birth of a Nation* and have a critical discussion about the controversy surrounding it. A licensed professional will be present as we discuss issues related to sexual violence and sexual assault---and critically interrogate how and why these issues are important to BLM. Note: all students reserve the right to refuse to view the film. For those students, alternative arrangements will be made.

Read: Roxanne Gay, "Nate Parker and the Limits of Empathy," New York Times

Gabrielle Union, Op-Ed "I cannot take Nate Parker rape allegations lightly" LA Times

Reflection Paper: On the one hand, Nate Parker's film points us in the direction of a long legacy that has paved the way for the contemporary #BlackLivesMatter movement: a legacy of black resistance to white supremacy. On the other hand, the controversy surrounding Nate Parker *the man* points us in the direction of another long legacy: a legacy of male misogyny and sexual violence. Rather than attempt to render these conversations as mutually exclusive, instead, we will seek to engage them side by side. Is it possible to separate an artist's personal life from the artistic work that he or she produces?

Reflection Paper Due 10/29 (Note Change In Normal Date)

*Note, all students have the right to not screen Birth of a Nation. Those who chose this option are required to independently view Ava DuVernay's documentary *The 13th*, and write a reflection paper on that.

11/3 Black Lives Matter and The New Jim Crow: Rethinking Prisons and Police Violence in America (Part I of 3)

In this session we discuss the history of the prison industrial complex in the United States and its deleterious effect on the lives of black and brown communities. Our guiding text will be Michelle Alexander's foundational work, *The New Jim: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Students are also encouraged to independently review director Ava DuVernay's 2013 documentary *The 13th*.

Read: Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*

Reflection Paper Due 11/2

11/10 Black Lives Matter and The New Jim Crow: Rethinking Prisons and Police Violence in America

In this session we will be joined by community organizer, activist, and senior justice writer for *The Daily News*, Shaun King. Our reading material will be King's robust and extensive 25-part series on ending police brutality in America. Our focus this week will be assessing concrete legislative and policy solutions for ending police violence and misconduct.

Read:

Shaun King, 25 Part Essay Series on Police Brutality in America
(Available on BlackLivesMatterSyllabus.com)

Reflection Paper Due 11/9

Special Guest: Shaun King, Senior Justice Writer, *The Daily News*

11/17 Black Lives Matter and The New Jim Crow: Rethinking Prisons and Police Violence in America

This session focuses on the abolitionist underpinnings of the black lives matter movement. We will wrestle with an internal debate that BLM activists across the country are currently engaging: are the institutions of the police and prisons beyond the point of "reform"? In other words, should our focus be on "reforming" broken institutions (such as the prison system or the police) or is now time for us to consider dismantling these institutions altogether? Moreover, we will define "abolitionism" as not simply the dismantling of broken institutions—but also a commitment to *creating and building new worlds*.

Read:

Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*

Reflection Paper Due 11/16

12/2 "Ok Ladies, Now Lets Get In Formation": Black Lives Matter's Protest Populism

In this session we examine BLM's populist appeal. More specifically, we pay attention to the vital role that commercial artists have historically played in amplifying the concerns of black freedom movements. Whether it be Nina Simone and Billie Holiday or Harry Belafonte and James Brown, historically black artists have played important roles in using their platforms as a means of amplifying the struggle for black communal liberation. From Kendrick Lamar's "We Gon' Be Alright" and J. Cole's "We Just Want to Be Free," to Jesse Williams's BET award speech and Ava DuVernay's *Selma*—the age of BLM has given birth to a resurgence of commercial black popular culture as a site of sociopolitical critique. Our discussion this session will focus on Beyonce Knowles's visual album *Lemonade*.

Read:

Select 5 of the following short reviews of your choosing:

- *Zandria Robinson, "[We Slay, Part I.](#)" *NewSouthNegress.com*
- *Zandria Robinson "[How Beyonce's Lemonade Exposes the Inner Lives of Black Women.](#)" *Rolling Stone*, April 28, 2016.
- *Candace Benbow, "[Beyoncé's 'Lemonade' and Black Christian Women's Spirituality.](#)" *Religion and Politics*, June 28, 2016.
- *Wendy Syfret, "[the story of messy mya, the tragic voice on beyoncé's new track](#)" *Vice.com*, 9 February, 2016.
- *Syreeta McFadden, "[Beyoncé's Lemonade is #blackgirlmagic at its most potent.](#)" *The Guardian*, April 24, 2016.
- *Omise'eke Natasha Tinsle, "[Beyoncé's Lemonade Is Black Woman Magic](#)". *Time*, April 25, 2016.
- *Cynthia Okoroafor, "[The african influences in Beyonce's Lemonade album, explained.](#)" *VenturesAfrica.com*, April 26, 2016
- *Miriam Bale, "[Beyonce's 'Lemonade' Is a Revolutionary Work of Black Feminism: Critic's Notebook.](#)" *Billboard*, April 25, 2016
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Watch in Class:

Beyonce, *Lemonade*

*Reflection Paper Due 12/1

12/9 #SayTheirName: BLM's LGBTQ Underpinnings

In this course---and in this movement---all black lives matter. To speak of "all" black lives means refusing to exclusively privilege the lives of cisgendered heterosexual black men. As a movement that has been grounded in the labor of queer black women, Black Lives Matter has remained committed to amplifying voices within that have been historically devalued within the black community: particularly the voices of black women and queer folk. This week's reading material helps us approach an internal question within BLM that activists continue to debate: why must the struggle for black liberation always also be a struggle for women's liberation (including an expansion of the very definition of womanhood) and LGBTQ liberation?

Special Guest: Michael Roberson Garcon, Founder of the forthcoming House Ballroom Freedom School

12/15 The Futures of Black Lives Matter

In our final session, we will be joined (via skype) by 2008 Green Party Vice Presidential Candidate Rosa Clemente.
Read: TBA later.

Special Guest: Rosa Clemente, 2008 Green Party Vice Presidential Candidate

III. Grading Breakdown and Requirements

20% Quiz

There will be one surprise quiz over the course of the semester. The quiz will cover material discussed in our in-class conversations and in our reading material. In order to do well on this quiz, it is in your best interest to be taking careful notes all semester. For those who have been paying attention in class, the quiz should be a breeze.

30% Weekly Reflection Papers

Nearly every week you are required to submit a paper that reflects on the material that is under consideration for **that particular week**. **Your response papers are due the night *before* class** by 11pm and should be reflection on the material that we are scheduled to cover in class the following day. Format: 800-word minimum reflection paper followed by 2 original discussion questions. The discussion questions will form the basis of the small group discussions. Be sure to provide textual citations **two times or more** in your paper.

Papers should be submitted to the email NYUGALLATINRACE@GMAIL.COM

50% High quality, voluntary, verbal participation in every class.

Each week you should come to class **prepared to speak for at least one minute by yourself**. When I ask you, “what did you think about the reading?” this is a question that you should have prepared for in advance. Shyness is not an excuse.

Given that this is a seminar course; you will need to verbally participate in every class discussion. If you want to know how well you are meeting the “voluntary participation” requirement, ask yourself the following question: “Do I **take the lead and raise my hand** to speak at every session, or do I only speak when the professor has pressed me to respond?” If you find yourself frequently falling into the second category, you should not expect to receive an A in this course.

How your verbal participation will be evaluated: “A” Range Participation:

- You came to class every week with two well thought-out, pre-prepared “questions” or “issues” (drawn directly from the readings) that you kept handy.
- Your contributions to our class discussions indicated that you were reading the assigned material closely, as opposed to simply coming to class and “improvising” on the assigned topic.
- In the moments that you were called on unexpectedly to discuss a particular topic, you articulated your ideas with clarity.
- You spoke at least once in every session.
- The depth of your insights were roughly in the top 30 percentile of the class (which means whether or not you receive an “A” in participation is partially contingent on the quality of your fellow colleagues’ contributions to class. Your participation grade will be curved in relationship to your peers insights. This means: if your peers were consistently making stronger, sharper insights than you in class—you will be receiving a lower grade than them. “Sharp insights” do not necessarily mean insights that share the same view as the professor or the author whose work is under consideration. “Sharp insights” simply refer to your ability to breathe life, depth, nuance and wisdom to our classroom conversations.

“B” Range Participation (inclusive of any one of these scenarios, or all):

- You met all of the criteria listed above; your contributions were valuable and insightful—but your contributions were not consistent enough to be considered within the top 30% of the class.
- Your written weekly questions were often or occasionally vague—thus indicating that you probably did not actually do the assigned reading material; or that you did the readings at the last minute and simply attempted to “throw together” your discussion questions in a disingenuous attempt to fulfil the course requirement.
- Your contributions were valuable—but you lacked self-awareness. “Self-awareness” is the ability to discern when it is time to strategically be silent in order to allow your colleagues to speak.
- You raised your hand often—but when called upon, your ideas were either: a) too scattered b) simply a regurgitation of comments that someone else had already made c) lacked depth or insight.
- You were occasionally unattentive. “Unattentive” includes: texting your phone during class; using your laptop in class (prohibited); having a “side conversations” during class. If you are observed engaging in any of these activities, even once, you will be incapable of receiving an “A” for participation.

“C” Range Participation (inclusive of any one of these scenarios, or all):

- You rarely participated in class *voluntarily*.
- When called upon to speak, you refused. (Responding with “I don’t know” or “I don’t have anything to say” constitutes a refusal.)

If by several weeks into the class, a critical number of students are not actively participating at every session **the instructor reserves the right to begin assigning mandatory, formal group presentations.**

A Note on Attendance: If you are absent more than 1 time you are **categorically locked out of the possibility of receiving an A** in this course no matter how well you may have performed the aforementioned requirements.

IV. How Our Sessions Will Be Structured

Generally, each of our sessions will normally consist of four “segments.”

- i. Brief opening statement/mini-lecture by the instructor.
- ii. Student-Led Facilitated Group Session
- iii. Moments from the Movement
- iv. Roundtable General Discussion

Note: The use of laptops in class is strictly prohibited. All notes should be taken manually.

