

2016

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Recommended Citation

Hristova, Elena D.. "Teaching #BlackLivesMatter: Media, Race, and Social Movements" Editor's Notes and Introduction." *Teaching Media Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (2016). <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/tmq/vol4/iss1/1>

Teaching Media Quarterly is published by the University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

Teaching Media Quarterly

Volume 4, Number 1 (2016): Teaching #BlackLivesMatter: Media, Race, and Social Movements

Teaching #BlackLivesMatter: Media, Race, and Social Movements

Editor's Notes and Introduction

Elena D. Hristova

The mediated Black Lives Matter movement is working to fragment the narrative of American exceptionalism and demand recognition of the humanity of Black and brown people. The dehumanization of Black and brown people permeates the history of the United States. In the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries, slaves transported to the Americas endured torture, rape, and daily terror. Slave labor produced the vast wealth of the American colonies and the United States, in both the South and North. With the end of the Civil War, the 13th Amendment outlawed slavery, except as punishment for a crime. The Black Codes of the Reconstruction Era instituted newly written vagrancy laws, which imprisoned unemployed Black men and women in chain gangs. Chain gangs were in turn sold to work in agriculture and mining, and to rebuild the South (Blackmon 2008). In the era of Jim Crow, Black Americans endured the "separate but equal doctrine," which provided them with substandard schools, healthcare, housing, and jobs, and required strict respect of segregation laws (Massey & Denton 1993). State-sanctioned Ku Klux Klan intimidation, violence, rape, murder, and economic terrorism met any transgression of segregation laws (Wells-Barnett 1892, 1895). The second half of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century have seen urban renewal programs and white flight to the suburbs, which depleted the tax base of largely Black urban communities, the disappearance of industrial jobs, redlining in housing, gerrymandering of voting districts, the War on Drugs, broken windows policing strategies, the militarization of law enforcement, the erosion of welfare support, mass incarceration of Black, Latino, and American Indian populations, and the loss of voting rights (Sugrue 1996; Hirsch 1998; Kruse 2005; Freund 2007; Wilson Gilmore 2007; Alexander 2010; Thompson 2010).

The media have played a crucial role in these historical developments. Among others, politicians, segregationists, and pundits have traditionally employed print, radio, and television media to justify state and extrajudicial violence against Black people, to promote the segregation and disenfranchisement of Black and Latino citizens, and justify policies for the removal and extermination of American Indian peoples. More recently, the media have helped to popularise post-racial narratives of personal responsibility that lack any historically informed understanding of the operations of structural white supremacy and settler colonialism. At the same time, media scholars have worked to expose and analyse these trends and developments. Some scholars have examined narratives about the state of race relations, studied representations of Black and white men and women, reconstructed a history of mainstream media's relationship with racial and ethnic minorities, and examined the current post-racial mystique (hooks 1992, 1994; Hill Collins 2000; Means-Coleman 2000; Smith-Shomade 2002; Stabile 2006; Squires 2014). Others have shown the ways in which Black Americans have engaged in media production, employed the media to form counterpublics to communicate internally, and opposed dominant white supremacist rhetoric (Savage 1999; Squires 2000, 2002, 2009; Smith-Shomade 2007; Heitner 2013; McGrath Morris 2015).

In the current context of state and extra-legal violence targeting Black and brown people in the United States, the on-going epidemic of police and state brutality, as well as access to new communication technologies and the surveillance practices they enable, it is of utmost import to develop teaching strategies that help undergraduate students acquire critical tools for understanding the ways in which the media operate vis-à-vis social movements and their

demands. Black Lives Matter is currently one of the most important social movements in the U.S. It links police brutality and mass incarceration of Black Americans to political and economic policies rooted in white supremacist thought and practice. Black Lives Matter organizers and participants in protests and marches have repeatedly employed social media--Twitter in particular--to coordinate their actions. They have also used media to highlight Black people's experiences of state violence otherwise ignored in mainstream media. Participants in the Ferguson and the Baltimore Uprisings called out mainstream media for misrepresenting the protests, for presenting socio-economic conditions in simplistic narratives of "thugs," rioting and looting, and for titillating audiences at home with footage of burning buildings and violence, whilst ignoring the actual grievances and daily experiences of Black people and people of color. In this issue of *Teaching Media Quarterly*, we present five lesson plans designed to help instructors teach #BlackLivesMatter as a mediated social movement, and at the same time, to teach media concepts, social movements, Critical Race Theory, and African American communication through an engagement with #BlackLivesMatter. These lesson plans are designed to assist instructors in fostering undergraduate students' critical thinking as well as enabling participation in one of the most important current social movements.

In the lesson "Making a Video and Making a Difference Using Social Media: A 'Call to Action' Approach," **Tia Tyree** uses a video production assignment to help students engage with questions about activism, race, and social change in contemporary U.S. society. In particular, the lesson asks students to produce persuasive videos that deal with the #BlackLivesMatter principles, as articulated on the movement's website. Students produce these videos with accessible technologies--smart phones, computers, and tablets--and share them via social media. The lesson situates the video production project as, at once, an activist tool for social change and a "tactic" in the sense that the field of public relations uses the term. As with other tactics, students are tasked with producing a message designed to persuade the public to act in a given manner. But this activity is designed to help students gain skills in creating persuasive texts that explicitly aim to mobilize audiences toward a social movement. It aims not only to help students build their cultural competencies related to race and diversity in the United States but also to give them tools for thinking about the possibilities of online activism through the production of shareable video content.

Allissa Richardson's "#SayHerName" lesson draws on the Daniel-Smitherman theory of African American communication to show how repetition and call and response are still key rhetorical tactics in the on-going struggle for racial justice. After reviewing coverage of the emerging #SayHerName movement and listening to Janelle Monae's "Hell You Talmbout," students are given the option to respond with either a video, song, or essay. This multi-modal engagement lets students, in Richardson's words, respond "critically to the #SayHerName movement's call-to-action."

In the lesson "Deconstructing POV in TV Coverage of Black Lives Matter Protests," **Joel Saxe** asks students to identify and critically engage with various points of view, contexts, and images presented by mainstream and independent coverage of protests surrounding the killing of Michael Brown in 2014. CNN and Democracy Now news reports serve as entry points for students to consider news media norms within a larger context of the politics of representation and racism.

Heather Woods and **James Alexander McVey's** lesson "#BlackLivesMatter as a Case Study in the Politics of Digital Media: Algorithms, Hashtag Publics, and Organizing Protest Online" helps students explore organizational, technical, and discursive dynamics of online activism

around #BlackLivesMatter including critical analysis of social media algorithms and re-imagining *publics* online. Through readings, screenings, discussion questions, and in-class assignments, students will come to understand filter bubbles, online modes of protest, and authorship of hashtags in terms of specific facets of #BlackLivesMatter. Woods and McVey's focus on how real life inequality is reproduced online makes this lesson especially applicable to millennial students whose lives are increasingly entangled with social media.

In the lesson "Riot vs. Revelry: News Bias Through Visual Media," **Joel Geske** employs the legal definition of a riot to examine and compare the visual records, particularly photographs, of two events that occurred in the Midwest of the United States during a six-month period in late 2014 to early 2015. Although these visual records appear to be identical, mainstream media such as ABC, NBC, and CBS labelled the events involving African Americans in Ferguson, Missouri as "riots," while the events involving whites in Columbus, Ohio, following the Ohio State college football playoff championship win, as "revelry." For the convenience of instructors, Geske has provided a downloadable PowerPoint file with images to be used in teaching the class. The lesson plan asks students to identify and classify these images relating to the legal definition of a riot, and to engage students in discussion as to the ways in which and the reasons for the particular framings.

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Biography

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