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The Matter of All Black Lives

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ABSTRACT

Evoking the spirit of Toni Morrison, we were moved to view the work of the scholars in this special issue through the lens we used to frame a class we taught last spring—*Black Lives Matter: A Multimodal Journey*. The course was centered around Morrison's notion of the Black Gaze and was designed to specifically ask the question: *What becomes possible with regard to Black liberation when we center the Black Gaze?* Our approach to the course purposely centered the beauty and brilliance of the Black experience through the work of Black artists, scholars, writers, entrepreneurs, and media producers. Furthermore, we organized our course by what one of our students, Sharina Gordon, called the "pillars" of Blackness (Gordon, 2021): *Black Gaze, Black Genius, Black Joy, Black Healing, and Black Love*. We found the *Pillars of Blackness* to be a useful construct as we read the articles in this special issue. In doing so, we highlight how the authors featured in such a timely issue center these pillars and offer them as a guide as we think about where we go next in our collective journey toward Black liberation.

KEYWORDS

#BLM; liberation; Black gaze; racial justice; Toni Morrison

...As though our lives have no meaning and no depth outside the white gaze.
And I have spent my entire writing life trying to make sure that the white gaze was not the dominant one in any of my books.
--Toni Morrison, Author

Introduction

For centuries, we as a nation have been witnessing resistance to Black people's humanity. Long before Patrisse Cullors-Brignac, a queer Black woman, wrote the now famous hashtag #Blacklivesmatter—following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watchman who killed Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old Black boy, Black people have insisted their lives matter in the face of a White society that has only shown disdain, inhumanity, violence, and disrespect for their communities and cultures. Long before *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* determined in 1954 that "separate but equal" schooling was unconstitutional, Black people found a way to educate themselves against historical odds (it was a crime punishable by death for Black people to learn to read in America) and create sustaining forces of happiness and well-being. As it rests on the continuum of the timeline of Black resistance, the Black Lives Matter movement (#BLM), incited by a rash of murders of unarmed Black women, men, and children by police, is arguably the current generation's civil rights struggle. The fact is, that as long as Black people have been in this country, their struggle has never ceased.

Perennial Nature Of Police Brutality

As we write this Afterword, here in the United States, another Black man, Daunte Wright, has been killed by a White police officer in Minnesota who claimed to confuse her gun for a taser. Ma'kyiah Bryant, a 15-year-old

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Black girl whose little sister called the police in Columbus, Ohio to rescue Ma'Kyiah from being attacked by bullies, was shot four times in the chest by a White police officer. Ma'kyiah was killed only a few hours after Black Americans sighed one collective moment of relief when the verdict of "guilty on all counts" was rightfully announced in what some may call the 'trial of the decade.' Derek Chauvin, the police officer who suffocated Mr. George P. Floyd for 9 minutes by holding his knee on his neck, received what could only be the appropriate decision for the murder. The autopsy report for Mr. Floyd stated that he desperately wanted to live—he wanted to breathe so badly that his "feet and knuckles tried to breathe for him."

The torture and killing of Black bodies by police date back to the creation of police precincts (El Muad'Dib, 2019; Hadden, 2003) in the United States. Starting as "slave patrols" in the 1790s with the Charleston City Watch and Guard, and solidified as a system by the 1890s with a police precinct in every state, police departments were created for the express purpose of capturing enslaved Africans who sought freedom and ran away from their captors. Humans are meant to be free. Everyone deserves the right to live freely. It is both tragic and pathetic that Black people must remind a society to which we were involuntarily brought—but one which they built with their bare hands and sustained with their creativity and genius—that their lives matter. Black people have always known that our lives are of significance. It is those who subscribe to the ideology white supremacy who still need to understand this.

Despite us knowing the truth that our lives matter, there is work *we* still must do as Black people. Even as the movement insists that we *#sayhername* to illuminate the tragic, senseless murders of Black girls and women; even as ancillary movements insist that #*BlackTransLivesMatter*, often the outcry from #BLM supporters about the murders of Black girls, women (cis and trans), and femmes at the hands of the State is *minimal* and somewhat recent. In our collective fight for Black liberation, Black people must interrupt a selective consciousness in which there exists a hierarchy on *which* Black lives matter *most*. Of course, Whiteness is at the root of this selective consciousness and has stoked the thinking that Black people must compete with one another for our humanity and attention to our intersectional plights. Black people must unlearn this. If we are truly genuine in our desire to liberate all Black people from structural racism, we must give up the beliefs, attitudes, and actions informed by Whiteness that insists on ranking our humanity. Black people must heed the words of Toni Morrison who said, *"If you wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down."*

The Power Of The Black Gaze

We opened this Afterword with the words of the great American novelist Toni Morrison. Her work serves as inspiration for each of us in our lives and for the way we teach. In evoking the spirit of Morrison, we were moved to view the work of the scholars in this special issue through the lens we used to frame a class we taught for the *first* time last spring—a course centered on Morrison's notion of the Black Gaze. To our knowledge, our graduate-level course, *Black Lives Matter: A Multimodal Experience,* was the first of its kind to be taught at our college. We designed the course to ask specifically the question: ***What becomes possible with regard to Black liberation when we center the Black Gaze?*** Thus, we deliberately *focused* on the Black Gaze (Bertrand & Porcher, 2020; Howell et al., 2019)—a way of knowing and being particular to Black folx. Our approach to the course purposely centered the beauty and brilliance of Black experience through the work of Black artists, scholars, writers, entrepreneurs, and media producers. In their article, "Towards Black Gaze Theory: How Black Female Teachers Make Black Students Visible," Howell et al. (2019) affirmed our approach:

> Damage-centered research (Tuck, 2009) dehumanizes Black people by focusing on disparities rather than cultural capital. Moving away from theories that frame blackness as a deficit, we turn to Black women teachers and educators and their humanizing pedagogies as experts in cultivating cultural wealth of Black children, youth, and families. Building on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014), Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2015), and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000), we look towards Black female teachers and the ways that they mentor and humanize Black students to lay the foundation for Black Gaze Theory as a framework that 1) shifts conceptions of Black children away from a white gaze laden with "amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois, 1994, p. 2) to sociopolitical consciousness and 2) describes the cultural wealth of Black children and youth. (p. 20)

We organized *Black Lives Matter: A Multimodal Journey* by what one of our students, Sharina Gordon, called the "pillars" of Blackness (Gordon, 2021): *Black Gaze, Black Genius, Black Joy, Black Healing, and Black Love*. As Black academics, we center the hopes, dreams, challenges, and lives of Black people in our work, and we did so as we co-created and co-taught this course. In the design and execution of the course, we heeded Morrison's words and multimodally explored Black scholarship and art that (re)present Black life outside the White gaze. We refused to center any of the dominant negative narratives often told to and about Black people in various

academic fields. Our mission was to decenter the actions and perspectives of White people. Throughout our time together in that learning community, we explored academic research, literature, podcasts, film, photo series, and social media created by and about Black people, centering our lived experiences and ways of knowing our world.

Just as the articles in this special issue ask their readers to, we asked our students to engage with the complicated history of Black people in the United States. We took up how Black racial identity intersects with other social markers such as gender and sexual identity, dis/ability, and immigration status, and we examined what this means for educators in the 21st century and for contemporary society. Motivated by the global #BLM movement and its mission to bring about a world in which Black people are no longer targeted for demise, the course, like these articles, intentionally resisted revisiting the traumatic experiences of Black people as teaching tools. Instead, we explored the stories told to and about Black people that focused on how Black joy manifests, the importance of centering Black healing and Black freedom dreaming, and how Black people love themselves through crises.

Marching, Tweeting, And Researching In Defense Of Black Lives

We found the *Pillars of Blackness*—the framework for our course—to be a useful construct as we read the articles in this special issue. In particular, it was both a challenge and a great delight to think about the offerings of these articles through this lens. As a society, we have watched social protest movements unfold in real time via social media. In turn, many of us have become voyeurs as well as active participants acclimated to the idea of digital activism—with social media being used to publicize and develop political movements that expose systemic racism and racial violence. We are teaching and learning in a time when digital spaces have transformed the method by which citizens protest and speak back to the social injustices they witness in society. In his article, Harris (2021) discusses the emotional and intellectual impact of police brutality on Black bodies over time as he creatively examines three historic movements in which he was personally involved. Harris signifies that the current Black Lives Matter Movement has manifested differently from the Civil Rights Movement and the Million Man March, yet its goal is identical—the elevation of the worth and importance of Black lives.

Harris (2021) highlights that a major difference among the movements is that the current #BLM Movement has been exceedingly successful in attracting participants and supporters from all racial and ethnic groups, which did not happen during the Civil Rights Movement and the Million Man March. Citing the *Black Genius* of the current #BLM Movement, Harris notes that the obvious difference in this movement from the two previous ones is how #BLM has effectively used the tool of social media to communicate with supporters all over the world: "A simple keystroke on one of the many social media platforms can result in massive protests in a matter of hours" (p. 37). Harris affirms what Hill (2018) acknowledged in his article, the genius ways Black protestors used Black Twitter during the Ferguson Missouri uprisings after Mike Brown had been brutally murdered by police:

> In the days following Brown's death, the Black Twitter community disseminated information about the shooting that went unreported by traditional media outlets, issued calls for new evidence, demanded the release of Darren Wilson's still-withheld name to the public, organized protest actions against the Ferguson police department, and engaged in broader dialogues about anti-Black state violence. These efforts, anchored by the hashtags #MichaelBrown, #Ferguson, and #HandsUpDontShoot, transformed Brown's death from a local event to an international cause. (p. 287)

Harris's historical analysis, coupled with autobiographical anecdotes, affirms the genius and power of Black social movements to bring about Black solidarity, consciousness, and change.

In their article, Fletcher and Tan (2021) offer an example of the benefits of centering the socioemotional learning of Black students, investing in socioemotional curricula and resources that help Black youth heal from the discrimination they have endured, and wraparound support services to attend to not only their social needs but their academic needs as well. We believe the authors provide powerful possibilities of centering the Black Gaze in service of helping students heal. In their article, Decker-Woodrow and Barfield (2021) highlight the lack of racial literacy in large data sets like those provided by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). Decker-Woodrow and Barfield encourage the IES to "create opportunity for multiple research approach studies and potentially enhance racial diversity (in studies, study topics, researchers, and reviewers), and the development of metrics to assess progress in addressing racial diversity goals over time" (p.74). Decker-Woodrow and Barfield's work, which advocates for combating systematic research inequality through various research approaches, resonates with the argument Ladson-Billings (2000) presented over 20 years ago as she argued that research should be informed by the identities of the researcher or the knower.

During the penultimate week of our *Black Lives Matter* course, we asked our students to engage in a writing activity that led to the creation of a manifesto. There were Black, White, Asian, and mixed-race students in our class. Students self-selected their groups based on how they identified. Each group served as "the writer" of a paragraph of the manifesto. As instructors, we contributed beginning and closing sentences and offered very few edits to the final document. As instructed, each group, speaking from their collective positionality, offered a paragraph toward the final version of the manifesto. We choose to end this Afterword with the Black students' contribution to the manifesto. We find their words to be an appropriate summary of the collective ideology the articles in this special issue attempt to bring forth:

> We, the students of the *Black Lives Matter: A Multimodal Experience* class, believe we all have a role in the movement for Black lives, but due to our racialized identity, we recognize that our involvement may look different.
> Our work as **Black People** is to love ourselves. We must create and visit existing places by and for our collective Black survival, Black healing and empowerment, and thriving. We must turn toward the youth and futurity of our people. We must turn and sit with the elders, our warriors who can teach us how to mourn, organize, stay alive, keep going, and re-assemble ourselves to know that we are greater than our traumas. As Black people committed to our own liberation, we have the power to create a future that builds on the legacy our ancestors gifted us.
> *Black. Lives. Matter.*

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