

THE RACIALIZING CONTEXT OF UPRISINGS, RIOTS, & REBELLIONS



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CNN



PGH City Paper

Naming the moment...

This information is specifically for School of Education faculty as a follow-up to **Dean Kinloch's poignant, truth-telling message** that we received the morning of June 1, 2020. We are experiencing the all-too-familiar confluence of Black people being killed without cause or reason, slow reactions to hold law enforcement accountable, and uprisings, quite literally, across our fractured nation and globally. In fact, the American Studies Association's position statement dated June 8 referred to these recent days of protests as a rebellion, one in which collective uprising may give sway to alterations in our knowledge, how we are with each other, and how to do so from being better informed and with equity at the center.

It is up to each of us to make sense of the ongoing anti-Black violence that happens through encounters with legal and extra-legal people, such as George Zimmerman's killing of Trayvon Martin on 2014. In the past weeks, we've been reminded, all too boldly, of the sound of a largely white police force literally extinguishing the breath and life from George Floyd. Vigilantes murdered Ahmaud Arbery while he was jogging and Breonna Taylor was killed in her own home. In the days since these murders, uprisings and position statements from organizations, education leaders, and politicians have been filling up our minds, hearts, and souls. The Marine Corps has **banned** the Confederate Flag from its buildings and events, and several former generals have publicly taken the current U.S. President to task for fanning the flames of division and racializing Black protestors as "thugs." Five years after Colin Kaepernick took a knee to protest the sanctioned killing of Black peoples, the National Football League **recently** stated that the killing of Black peoples is wrong. These voices are speaking, finally, when many voices have been making obvious the anti-Black racism that has been foundational to this nation's formation. My suggestion for us is to make meaning of these events, with others, and with recognition of the long history of this anti-Black violence and those who have long named it and fought against it.

Our own Dean Valerie Kinloch, an internationally known scholar of literacy and justice, participated in a **Pitt-sponsored town hall** along with four other individuals to offer their reactions, their analysis, and their heart-mind-soul truths about the ongoing reality of anti-Blackness. Various students, staff, and faculty have come together to read, study, and engage in both unlearning mythologies of the nation and learning its stark realities.

Study groups, which can be easily incorporated into our courses, engage people in reading, discussing, and making meaning of a nation whose rise to prominence was not through the myth of rugged individualism but rather was through an economic system of chattel slavery of Black peoples. These study groups are also powerful ways to allow for student input and offerings into shared readings. For those in our School who are not steeped in studies of struggle, know that it is never too late to start. In part, that is what this essay, among the many others from the Office for Equity and Justice, is meant to do. Below I address some questions that may arise in your discussions with students and with each other as faculty and I provide examples of actions to undertake to combat anti-Blackness in our work as educators.

What does chattel slavery have to do with today? That was hundreds of years ago...

As our own Center for Urban Education (CUE) director and Helen S. Faison Endowed Professor Dr. Elon Dancy addresses through his leadership and scholarship, Black peoples in the United States, specifically those descended from enslaved ancestors, are still in the Middle Passage. For those unfamiliar with the Middle Passage, this is the period of time and space in which captured African peoples were rapidly regarded as property and treated thusly during their long journey from their homes to the shores of many ports, including the United States.

Property, however, is not human; it less than human. In 1992, following the acquittal of four white police officers who brutally beat Rodney King, uprisings soared in Los Angeles and lasted for days. Scholar and public intellectual Dr. Sylvia Wynter addressed the barrier to humanity felt by people engaged in the uprising, before and after, through an [open letter to her colleagues](#), demonstrating how the Los Angeles Police Department used the phrase “No Humans Involved” to describe police disturbances involving Black people.

So what is the difference between a riot and an uprising, and do we need them?

The 1992 uprising in Los Angeles is generally referred to as a riot, and is often accompanied by the language of looting. After Hurricane Katrina left thousands of people in New Orleans without means to food, Black peoples' attempts to get basic needs of food from closed stores was [labeled](#) as looting. However, white people engaging in similar acts were deemed to be “finding food.” This is an example of how uprisings are racialized. It is lockstep with the pervasive, systemic enclosure of Black peoples from full humanhood, which occurs through much of society. In one case, Black people are cast as engaging in criminal acts, while the other case frames white people as finding food in a time of chaos and scarcity.

Pointedly, two Black journalists at the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* have been barred from covering uprisings in Pittsburgh, as they were deemed to be biased. What was their offense? Was it their knowledge of Black neighborhoods or was it one journalist's tweet that noted how the array of pollution and damage to the city's North Shore neighborhood after a country music concern was not “looting.” To date, both of these journalists, in a city that is 25% Black, remain contained from doing their jobs as journalists.

How are we to make meaning of uprisings, rebellions, and riots?

The first step, as always, is to know the history. We must understand that neither the Emancipation Proclamation nor the Brown vs. Board of Education and other legal actions allowed for or made imperative the humanity of Black peoples de facto. In other words, what is legal should not be confused with what is real and what is moral.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who has been effectively white-washed in school curricula, is held up as a beacon for color evasion and peaceful protests. In truth, the sit-ins and marches that took place in the 1960s involved a great deal of violence, directed from police, from citizen's white rage, and on many fronts. We've seen these scenes **repeated** in recent days, with one example of dozens of protestors being tear-gassed, physically assaulted, and pepper-sprayed to make a path for our current president to stand in front of a church with a bible in his hand.

It was Dr. King, having learned a great deal about the intersection of poverty, racism, and patriarchy from Coretta Scott King, who said, "A riot is the language of the unheard." Given that our nation has not reckoned with its racist and colonial origins and ongoing systems of power, the police and the criminal justice system are generally not places of respite and protection for people of color, to put it mildly. Without being able to have trust in those resources, their voices are heard, instead, in the streets.

I encourage you to consider what Black adult caregivers feel when every day presents a risk that they or their child may not return home because they have "fit the description" through racial profiling, or even the fact that they are unsafe in their own homes, as demonstrated by tragic killing of Breonna Taylor in Kentucky. This is the context through which the unheard have been making themselves heard loudly over the past days in many ways. This is an uprising. Has property been damaged? Sadly, yes, but as one of the Black Lives Matter Platform states, property should not be valued more than lives, specifically Black lives. As a contrast to what is termed a riot, consider that this summer also marked the 99th anniversary of the burning down of what was known as Black Wall Street, the Black neighborhood of Greenwood, Tulsa, in which businesses were overwhelmingly owned and patronized by Black residents. On June 1, 1921, mobs of white people burned down homes and business, and law enforcement contained more than 6,000 Black people suddenly displaced from their homes and places of business. While "mobs" is the word most commonly used to describe this large-scale anti-Black destruction of a community, is it not also a riot? Is it an uprising of white rage in the face of a free-ish Black neighborhood? These are the questions to consider internally and externally.

At times, social movements and strategies, such as sit-ins, have been preceded by self-made study groups that were often convened outside of formal education spaces. Pitt's own Black Action Society is one such example. Its history began with groups of students reading small pamphlets procured from bookstores in Homewood and in the Hill District. In other instances, as long-time scholar activist Dr. Barbara Ransby notes in her **latest book**, uprisings' lessons come after the social disruption caused by the uprisings. Ransby also makes the important point that with the rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, **Black feminism** is a foundational concept. This marks this as a social movement that, from the start, not only disinvited the harm of patriarchy but has consistently foregrounded the necessity of an intersectional lens, one in which multiple vectors of oppression intersect to create a particular reality in society. Put another way, BLM extends this insight from many Black women, such as Sojourner Truth, who asked, "Ain't I a woman too"?

What can I do as an educator?

Quite a lot. In fact, the failure of education to fully tell the history of how this nation was founded and how it ascended into its power is part of the reason why, for example, many do not know that the monuments to soldiers in the Confederate army were built long after the Civil War, closer to the Jim Crow era as a racist tactic to preserve white supremacy.

As an educator, your first action is to say something to your students, from an informed position. Do not pretend that your students are not in emotional and spiritual turmoil, particularly if they are Black. Every time we do not acknowledge large-scale suffering, we implicitly condone it and, arguably even worse, we leave our students, who may be isolated and traumatized with feelings of destabilization, fear, and anger on their own. That is neither the ethos, nor the practice, of so many in the School. Connection is vital. You do not need to have all the answers (who does?), but it is important for you to be an instructional leader who is also a learner.

We can also examine our practices in our teaching. How do we respond to someone who speaks with an accent, or to some who speaks Black English? Dr. April Baker-Bell's recent book, **Linguistic Justice**, names the ways that Black people are all too familiar with both having their language policed as well as having well-placed pride in the specific cadence, code, and meanings of their home language. However, all too often, fluency in standardized American English is conflated with intelligence. It is simply a code that, through geopolitical happenstance, is the one associated with intelligence and power. However, any learner of whitemain American English will tell you tale after tale about the idiosyncrasies of this language and its spelling patterns. It is neither correct nor proper; it simply has power. As educators, we should widen the linguistic role models in our curricula. Include readings, audio, and videos that are both pertinent to the course and deviate from a singular code of communication.

As a School, we can form study groups and weave information about racist violence, as well as **resistance** and community organizing, as modes of public pedagogy, into our curriculum. For some of us, this may require some unlearning and some new learning. I urge you to learn not only about anti-Blackness but also about the centuries-long resistance for sovereignty by Indigenous peoples that has existed and exists now. As we continue to learn and teach about Black history, including its powerful traditions of prioritizing learning, we must do so from the simple and powerful stance that Black lives matter. As American Defense Fund leader Sherrilyn Ifyll put it eloquently in a recent news segment, the struggle of Black Americans has never ended with the sentence, "and then they gave up." Let's consider how we can teach about the freedom struggles by Black Americans as a deep form of patriotism.

In the school's 2019-2020 school-wide read, Dr. Bettina Love implored us to think about the matter, the bodily matter, in the United States and what it takes to make Black lives matter: specifically, an informed love for Black humanity and a refusal of, as she expertly puts it, the survival industrial complex that education has become for far too many Black children and youth.

In the coming days and weeks, the school will be sending out resources that address anti-Black violence, the militarization of law enforcement, and many anti-racist resources to read and put into practice.

As always, please be in touch with questions, comments and concerns,
Dr. Leigh Patel

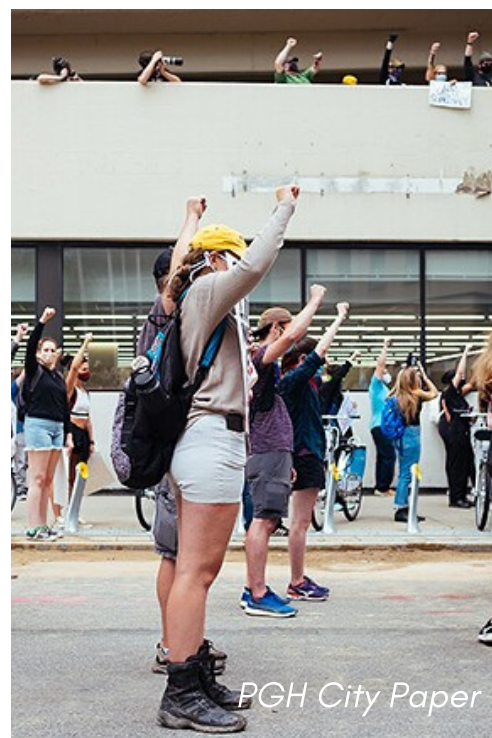
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