

IDSEM-UG1849

# Black Lives Matter: Race, Resistance, and Populist Protest

New York University

Fall 2015

Thursdays 6:20-9pm

527 1 Washington Place

Professor Frank Leon Roberts

Fall 2015 Office Hours: (By Appointment Only)

429 1 Wash Place

Thursdays 1:00-3:00pm, 9:00pm-10:00pm

Contact: [Frank.Roberts@Yale.Edu](mailto:Frank.Roberts@Yale.Edu)

#BlackLivesMatterSyllabus

From the killings of teenagers Michael Brown and Vonderrick Myers 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 interdisciplinary 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 two 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.

Among the texts that we are likely to engage this semester include Cornel West’s *Democracy Matters*; Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*; Angela Davis’s *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Osagyefo Sekou’s *Gods, Gays, and Guns*; and Assata Shakur’s autobiography *Assata*, among others. Our reading material will also be supplemented by a variety of guest speakers and media activists who have played important roles in the blacklivesmatter movement and in the movement for black lives. Guest speakers will include Dr. Cornel West, Darnell Moore of the Black Lives Matter New York City chapter, DeRay Mckesson, Umi Selah and more.

## A Note on the Syllabus:

You should approach this syllabus as a jazz composition—meaning there must be a willingness and expectation of improvisation. Like a jazz musician, we will occasionally rift, edit, and “trouble” the composition as needed. Any changes to the syllabus will be announced in a timely fashion.

## Required Texts:

1. Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the War Against Imperialism*
2. Cornel West, *Black Prophetic Fire*
3. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the age of Colorblindness*
4. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*
5. Osagyefo Sekou, *Gods, Gays, and Guns*
6. Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*
7. Assata Shakur, *Assata*
8. Assorted Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Jayne Cortez, James Cone, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Op-Eds by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometti, Black Lives Matter, and more.

## Required Viewing: (All available at [blacklivesmattersyllabus.com](http://blacklivesmattersyllabus.com))

1. Alicia Garza. RadTalk. #LawForBlackLives Conference. August 1, 2015. Web.
2. Umi Selah. RadTalk. #LawForBlackLives Conference. August 1, 2015. Web.
3. Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, Rev. Sekou, et. al. "The State of Our Movements." #LawForBlackLives Conference. August 1, 2015. Web.
4. Traci Blackmon, Rosa A. Clemente, Nyle Fort, Michael L. Pflieger, et.al. "Seven Last Words: Strange Fruit Speaks," Riverside Church. February 20, 2015. Web.
5. Kiese Laymon, Hua-Yu Sebastian Cherng, Brittney Cooper, Nyle Fort, Imani Henry and Frank Leon Roberts. "The Fire This Time: Ferguson and the Future of Race in America." New York University Center For Multicultural Education and Programming, December 10, 2015. Web
6. Ashley Yates, Dante Barry, Philip Agnew, Cherrell Brown and Mychael Smith. "American Policing: Lessons on Resistance." Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. February 18, 2015. Web.
7. Alicia Garza, "What Are Black Lives Matters Demands." MSNBC Interview. August 2015. Web.
8. MSNBC Originals. "Queerness on the Frontlines of Black Lives Matter." MSNBC Network. 2/19/15. Web.
9. Democracy Now. "Assata Shakur Speaks." DemocracyNow. May 2, 2013. Web.
10. Women's ENews, "#SayHerName Calls for Gender Inclusive Movement to End State Violence." May 20, 2015. Web.

## Grading Criteria

- 50% Attendance and Critical Participation
- 25% One Class Presentation
- 25% Weekly Response Papers with Final Portfolio

## Learning Objectives

1. To provide student with an interdisciplinary exploration of the key issues informing the emergence of the populist blacklivesmatter social movement.
2. To help students historicize current events and contemporary political movements taking shape in the United States. This course helps students link these movements to longer legacies of social justice organizing (such as the civil rights movement and black power movements).
3. To deepen students scholarly understanding of the role that the media industry plays in influencing national conversations about race and justice.
4. To link---through interdisciplinary engagement--the recent killings of unarmed Americans at the hands of law enforcement entities to the militarization of American public life that has taken place in tandem with the rise of the prison industrial complex in the U.S.

## Weekly Topics

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|-------|--|
| 9/10  | Black Lives Matter and the Remaking of American Democracy (Special Guest: Dr. Cornel West)             |
| 9/17  | We The Protestors: The Demands (Special Guest: DeRay McKesson)   |
| 9/24  | Freedom After Ferguson: The State of the Movement (Special Guest: Darnell Moore/Black Lives Matter NY) |
| 10/1  | Shut It Down: On The Ethics of Black Rage (Special Guest: Operation Help of Hush)                      |
| 10/8  | Writing Contemporary Black Lives   |
| 10/15 | The Prison Industrial Complex and the Movement for Black Lives   |

10/22	The Prison Industrial Complex and the Movement for Black Lives
10/29	Black Lives Matter's Theology of Liberation
11/5	But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Lives Matter's Queer Critiques
11/12	#SayHerName: Black Women, Intersectionality and Black Feminist Critique
11/19	#SayHerName: Black Women, Intersectionality and Black Feminist Critique
12/3	Towards an Ethics of Black Freedom, Joy, and Survival
12/10	It Is Our Duty To Fight for Freedom: Black Political Prisoners and the Legacies of Assata Shakur

## Weekly Schedule:

### 9/3 Overview

Watch:

- #LawForBlackLives Conference Footage Clips:
- Umi Selah, 2015 RadTalk, #LawForBlackLives Conference at Riverside Church
- Alicia Garza, 2015 RadTalk, #LawforBlackLives Conference at Riverside Church

### 9/10 Black Lives Matter and the Remaking of American Democracy

Read:

- Cornel West, *Black Prophetic Fire* (particularly Chs 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and Conclusion)
- Cornel West, "The Fire of a New Generation" (New York Times)
- Cornel West, "Democracy Matters Are Frightening In Our Time" (Chapter 1) and "The Deep Democratic Tradition" (Chapter 2) in *Democracy Matters*
- Frank Roberts, "Freedom After Ferguson: A Blues Vision for Black America." Uptown Magazine, Dec 2014.

Special Guest: Dr. Cornel West

### 9/17 We The Protestors: The Demands

- - Read:
    - Ferguson Action, "Our Vision for a New America." <http://fergusonaction.com/demands/>
    - We The Protestors, "The Demands" <http://www.wetheprotesters.org/demands/>
    - Deray McKesson, Brittney Packnett, Johnetta Elzie and Samuel Sinyangwe, "The Problem" and "Policy Solutions," <http://www.joincampaignzero.org/>
    - George Yancy and Judith Butler, "What's Wrong With 'All Lives Matter'" (The New York Times)
  - Watch:
    - Alicia Garza, "What Are Black Lives Matters Demands?" (MSNBC Interview)

Special Guest: Deray McKesson

### 9/24 Freedom After Ferguson: The State of the Movement(s)

- Read:
  - Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of Black Lives Matter" (The Feminist Wire)
  - Patrisse Cullors, "#BlackLivesMatter Will Continue to Disrupt the Political Process." (Washington Post)
  - Danielle C. Belton. "The 5 Biggest Challenges Facing #BlackLivesMatter." (The Root)
  - Frank Roberts, "Freedom After Ferguson: A Blues Vision for Black America." Uptown Magazine, Dec 2014.
- Watch:
  - "State of Our Movements" (with Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, Rev. Sekou, et. al). Law for Black Lives Conference Panel, Friday, July 31, 2015. Riverside Church.

## 10/1 Shut It Down: Baltimore, Ferguson and The Ethics of Black Rage

### Read:

- Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger" in *Sister Outsider*
- Brittny Cooper, "In Defense of Black Rage: Michael Brown, Police and the American Dream" (Salon.Com)
- Carol Anderson, "Ferguson isn't about black rage against cops. It's white rage against progress." (Washington Post)
- Michael A. Gould-Wartofsky, "When Rioting is Rational," Jacobin Mag, 1/2/2015.
- Mychal Denzel Smith, "The Rebirth of Black Rage: From Kanye to Obama, and back again." *The Nation*, August 13, 2015.

### Watch:

- Lauryn Hill, "Black Rage,"

## 10/8 Writing Contemporary Black Lives

### Read:

- Cornel West, *Democracy Matters* (finish text)
- Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

## 10/15 The Prison Industrial Complex and the Movement for Black Lives

### Read:

- Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*

## 10/22 The Prison Industrial Complex and the Movement for Black Lives: Prison Reform or Prison Abolition?

### Read:

- Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*
- "The Abolitionist Toolkit," (CriticalResistance.com)

### ○ Watch:

American Policing: Lessons on Resistance, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Panel (Ashley Yates, Dante Barry, Philip Agnew and Cherrell Brown). February 18, 2015.

## 10/29 The Liberation Theologies of Black Lives Matter

### Read:

- Osagyefo Sekou, *Gods, Gays, and Guns: Essays on Religion and the Future of Democracy*
- -----, [The Gospel Is Not A Neutral Term: An Interview With Rev. Sekou](#), Theology of Ferguson, 24 Oct, 2014.

### Strongly Recommended:

- James Cone, Chapter 1, "The Cross and the Lynching Tree in Black Experience" in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.
- Recommended Viewing:  
"Seven Last Words: Strange Fruit Speaks," Riverside Church, February 20, 2015.

## 11/05 But Some of Us Are Brave: The Movement for Black Lives's LGBTQ Politics

### Read:

- Emma Margolin, "Which #BlackLivesMatter? The killings no one's talking about." MSNBC.com. 07/21/15
- Darnell Moore, "Black Freedom Fighters in Ferguson: Some of us are queer." The Feminist Wire. October 17, 2014.

### Watch:

"Queerness on the Frontlines of Ferguson." MSNBC Original.

**11/12 #SayHerName: Black Women, Intersectionality and Black Feminist Critique**

Read: Short Readings (Less than 150 pages total)

- Audre Lorde, “A Litany for Survival,”(Poem) “Who Said It Was Simple” (Poem)
- Audre Lorde, “The Masters Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House,” “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” and “The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action” in *Sister Outsider*
- Jayne Cortex, “There It Is” (Poem)
- Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics”

**11/19 #SayHerName: Black Women, Intersectionality and Black Feminist Critique**

Read:

- African American Policy Forum, “[Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women.](#)”

Watch:

- Darnell L. Moore, “I don’t want to die.”(Shantel Davis). “Seven Last Words: Strange Fruit Speaks,” Riverside Church, February 20, 2015.
- Aja Monet, “Word Warriors”

**12/3 Towards an Ethics of Black Freedom, Joy, and Survival**

Read:

- Robin Kelley, “Keeping It Surreal: Dreams of the Marvelous” in *Freedom Dreams*
- Robin Kelley, “Foreword,” to *The Meaning of Freedom*
- Angela Davis, “The Meaning of Freedom”
- Javon Johnson, “Black Joy in the Time of Ferguson,” QED, Volume 2, Number 2, Summer 2015, pp. 177-183
- Gina Dent, “Introduction: Black Pleasure, Black Joy” in Black Popular Culture
- Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Short Excerpt: Baby Suggs’s sermon in the clearing)

**12/10 It Is Our Duty To Fight for Freedom: Black Political Prisoners and the Legacies of Assata Shakur**

Read:

Assata Shakur, *Assata*

Watch:

Democracy Now. “Assata Shakur Speaks.” DemocracyNow. May 2, 2013. Web.

## Part II

# Requirements and How You Will Be Graded:

50% Attendance  
25% Response Papers  
25% Presentation

There are three graded requirements for this course, distributed as follows:

**A. 50% Critical verbal in-class participation and the weekly submission of two “discussion questions/critical issues” (drawn directly from the issues raised in the readings) that you’d like to discuss in class.**

Your guidelines for the discussion questions/critical issues component are as follows:

- You are required to come to class every week with two short pre-prepared questions/points (i.e.—they must be typed, not handwritten, and submitted via hardcopy). It is never guaranteed that your questions will actually make it into our discussions, nonetheless you are required to come to class with them. Moreover, though you are required to submit written copies of your two questions/issues—your verbal participation in class is not limited to these two aforementioned questions/issues. In addition, it is completely acceptable to regurgitate questions/or points that you raised in your weekly 1 page response paper. In short, your two weekly discussion questions/points should give me a clear idea of what you plan on talking about in class that day.

Your verbal participation grade will be assessed in the following way:

“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.)

- B. **25% one in-class presentation.** All students will present a 20 minute “lecture” on one of the assigned readings. The purpose of this exercise is for you to master the art of lecturing/presenting/ “teaching” on a topic. On the day that you present, you are required to submit a copy (emailed electronically: to NYUGALLATINRACE@gmail.com) of your powerpoint presentation and/or an “overview” of your presentation. You are not required to do a response paper on that way.

In order to receive an A, the guidelines are as follows (adhering to these guidelines does not guarantee that you will actually receive an A; however **NOT** adhering to these guidelines **does guarantee** that you will NOT receive an A):

- If you are going to be using media material (i.e. youtube clips, videos, music, etc.) your media material cannot take up more than 5 minutes worth of time. You may show multiple clips, but no one clip can be longer than 5 minutes.
- Your entire presentation must not exceed 20 minutes under any circumstances. The instructor will be obligated to stop you at the 20 minute mark, regardless of whether you have finished.
- Your entire presentation must not be shorter than 15 minutes.
- Do not include a “Question & Answer” period.
- Your presentation format can take a variety of forms. You are given complete free reign in coming up with your format. You can use your twenty minutes to “break down” the author’s argument; expound upon one of the theories or concepts that the author engages in order to present your own original essay/lecture (this is called the “applying theory” approach); bring in clips/media material that you think illustrate or contradict the point the author is trying to make; ask the class to get into small groups to discuss a particular issue than have them “report back” on their findings (if you do this, your small group activity segment must NOT exceed 6 minutes). Any of these formats is fine—you may also experiment on a format not listed.
- Ultimately, you are being graded on 1)how well you engage the author’s ideas 2) originality, 3) the quality of how well you “teach” the author’s argument (this includes vehemently disagreeing with what she has to say).

- C. **25% 10, 1 to 1.5 response papers.** You are required to produce ten, very brief 600 to 800 word “response papers” over the course of the semester. Your response papers will always be due at pm on the Wednesday before class (i.e. the day before class). Your response papers are similar to the presentations in so far as you can use the papers as an opportunity to “break down” the author’s argument; or simply hone in and/or expound upon one of the theories or concepts that the author engages. Your papers will NOT be handed back to you, nor will they be graded individually. At the end of the semester you will compile all of your response papers into one packet—alongside a 1,500 essay where you provide me with an overview of the key themes, ideas, and theories that have been of interest to you this semester. Your grade for this portion of the course requirements will be determined by the following criteria:

**A quality:**

- Your response papers were successfully submitted by 6am on the due date to the instructor’s email address (which will be NYUGALLATINRACE@gmail.com).
- Your response papers consisted of 600 to 800 words of your OWN voice. In other words, a 600 word response paper should not include a quotation that was 300 words.
- Your response papers were not riddled with grammatical errors.
- Your response papers were well written and highly engaging.
- Your response papers directly engaged the author’s argument. This means that before you endorse or disagree with the author—you made it clear that you actually understand the author’s argument.
- Your end-of-the-semester 1,500 word essay that provided an “overview/introduction” to your 10 papers was well written.
- Your response papers often brought in original examples (i.e. something going on in current affairs; a historical phenomenon, or a personal antidote) that clarifies the accuracy OR limitations of the author’s argument that is under review. (You are not required to do this every time.)

**B quality:**

- You deviated from the above criteria.
- You did not successfully submit 10 papers.
- Curve grade caveat: you met the requirements, but the quality of your response papers were inferior to that of the overall quality of your peers.

**C quality:**

- You deviated from the above criteria in a truly egregious way.

