

**“Teaching Trayvon” at Irvine:
On Feminist Praxis, Afro-pessimism, and “Woke Work”**

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This essay politicizes how one might teach “non-Black” students of color, specifically, Asian or Asian American students with relative social and political or “passing white” privilege, at a large research institution about non-analogous experiences of racial Blackness as coursework in gender and sexuality studies.¹ Anti-racist pedagogy, even in such heady times as these, in which “recent discussions on intersectionality in political science have sparked increased attention in research to race, gender, and other identity categories,” presents consistent challenges, specifically regarding comparative racisms (Alexander-Floyd 2014, 3).² The curricula I recount makes non-Black racial differences in analogous to racial Blackness because it historicizes Black social and political and thus material life as a “becoming toward death” characterized by “accumulation and fungibility” (Wilderson 2010, 85, 26). It reads for this structure or political ontology in local sites and as embodied knowledges to animate what Christina Sharpe describes as “wake work” (2014).

I describe the practice of teaching Trayvon Martin’s murder and the response his life and death elicited from legal and media institutions, including new media sites that invite citizen journalists to participate in “hashtagivism” (i.e., hashtag activism), as a special topic in summer sessions of “Gender and Popular Culture” (2013, 2014) and “Gender and Power” (2015)³—core courses in Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of California, Irvine. These courses regularly attract non-majors because they fulfill two general education credits each: Arts and Humanities, and Multicultural Studies. They especially attract non-majors during the two summer sessions Irvine hosts annually: Summer Session 1 (June-July) and Summer Session 2 (August-September). Summer courses meet for six hours each week or a total of 36 hours; mine met twice a week for two hours and 50 minutes each or a total of 34 hours, because each class meeting I allocated ten minutes to a break that students used to breathe new curiosities and translations into discussions.

My pedagogical approach was twofold: I anchored course topics and themes in popular cultures and trends to bait students otherwise disinterested in anti-Black violence to interrogate the ideological work of racial Blackness. As well, I operationalized a distinction between a liberal humanist model of inclusion and the more radical education in structural antagonism that is possible yet, by capitalizing on and upsetting student expectations. Students received me as a woman of color rather than a pedagogue, and hoped to find in my person and politics a multiculturalist co-conspirator, in other words, a “feel good” class about Trayvon Martin and what his life and the movements surrounding his murder make meaningful for *them*. With a few exceptions, my mostly white and Asian American students looked for themselves in reading and viewing assignments; which is to say, as Anna Sampaio does, they expected the course “to serve merely as a form of ‘therapy’; that is, as a learning environment centered largely, if not entirely, on sharing personal experiences and one not suited for rigorous academic analysis” (2006, 918).

I instead wielded what social and cultural capital I could in the classroom (as the pedagogue, after all) not towards liberal, colorblind, or multiculturalist ends, which can only ever entrench racial hierarchies, but towards an ethical rejection of liberal pluralism. By counter-intuitively encouraging students to lean into hierarchal race knowledge, I curated a more radical lesson in anti-Black discursive-material relations. This approach reflects my training in Culture and Theory, a Ph.D. program at Irvine in critical race, gender, and sexuality studies which at present attracts

graduate students partial to Afro-pessimism: a turn in Black studies *towards* the shame in which Black persons are thought of as less and Other than human (Nyong'o, 2002). I privilege Afro-pessimism in the classroom as well and especially in/as gender and sexuality studies because it

teaches us all how we might better inhabit multiplicity under general conditions at the global scale for which such inhabitation has become (and perhaps always has been or must be) a necessary virtue. And it does so less through pedagogical instruction than through an exemplary transmission: emulation of a process of learning through the posing of a question, rather than imitation of a form of being (Sexton 2011, 8-9).⁴

I propose teaching Trayvon Martin's murder as a feminist project not (just) because the movements or "networks" (Cullors-Brignac) for Black life it animated are "rooted in the labor and love of queer Black women," or because they elaborate the murder of Black youth as a reproductive rights issue; but also and notably because his murder underscores how "Black people are deprived of...basic human rights and [dignities]" as a matter of *fact* (Garza, Tometi, and Cullors-Brignac).⁵ That Black lives don't and, Jared Sexton argues, *can't* (epistemologically) matter suggests that racially Black persons "inhabit multiplicity" as a series of questions, for example, about what it means to be sentient but not sovereign (Marriott 2000), or to occupy flesh as a "hieroglyphics" without signification as body (Spillers 1987).

If Black persons are structurally proscribed from the species of Man, in other words, if Black persons are sub- and/or supra-human, by which I mean vulnerable like dogs but dangerous like "demons"⁶—actor Michael B. Jordan reflects in an interview with Oprah Winfrey about his performance as Oscar Grant in the biographical film *Fruitvale Station* (dir. Ryan Coogler, 2013), "Black males...are America's pit bull. We're labeled vicious, inhumane and left to die on the street"—then Black lives can only matter insofar as they cannot matter as human and pave the way for an/Other relationality or sociality. It is to this effect that Sexton reminds us, "Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space" (2011, 28). Black life as "a type of living on that survives after a type of death" (23) thus anticipates the hermeneutics post-humanist feminism proclaims to seek, for instance, in studies of the cyborg.

Afro-pessimism enumerates social and political constructions of the body *essential* to the study and historicity of sex and gender, preempting other topics and themes like undifferentiated sex, matter out of place, biological determinism, sexual perversity, gender fluidity, reproductive rights, and alternative kinships, to list just a few examples (Spillers 1987; Hartman 1997; Sexton 2015). Its theoretical framework resonates in ethnic, specifically, Asian American Studies as well, because Black persons are the *stuff* of pathology. They unconditionally experience the vitriol and disgust with which nonblack persons of color, like sexual minorities and gender non-conforming persons, are occasionally received, indeed, infrequently if one is an upwardly mobile "model" minority.

Comparative Racisms

When Asian American students of Irvine's Lambda Theta Delta fraternity posted a blackface video to YouTube on April 16, 2013, the world took notice, if only to wag a nagging finger at students of color who, per multiculturalist dictum, should know better. Members of the fraternity, however, did not "intend" racial terror and further discounted allegations of racism precisely because as first- and second- generation Americans, they claimed not to inherit the New World's

racial-*cum*-spectacular ways of seeing and knowing Black bodies, including the uniquely but not exclusively American “structures of feeling” that induce Blackface *as* minstrelsy (Williams 1954).⁷

But Tiffany Willoughby-Herard suggests that first- and second- generation Americans like Asian Americans are certainly familiar with this history because “ideas about the non-white immigrant” in the U.S. are “inextricably linked to the institution of [racial chattel slavery] and ideas about the [chattel slave]” (2014, 511). Which is to say, as Claire Kim does, “Asian Americans have not been racialized in a vacuum;” they are “racially triangulated vis-à-vis Blacks and Whites, or located in the field of racial positions with reference to these two other points” (1999, 106, 107).⁸ Activist Kim Tran recounts in *Everyday Feminism* that this triangulation prods Asian Americans to invoke the black imago as a tried-and-true strategy for activating their own “honorary whiteness”:

The model minority myth and the criminalization of Black and brown folks in our communities have given many Asian Americans a false sense of honorary whiteness and severed us from building coalition with other communities of color. Maybe more importantly, the Black community frequently serves as our negative definition—the people we don’t want to be. We’re told we’re not like “them”. We are the products of hard work and our merit will help us rise high and far from the images of poverty and crime that define Black America (2016).

To evacuate the question of racial Blackness from the study of Asian and Asian American subjectivities thus shuts down substantive conversations about how racial differences are compounded, to say nothing about how it absolves Asian and Asian American communities from accountability for their anti-Black racism, at the University of California and elsewhere—for example, in Brooklyn, where 10,000 mostly-Chinese Americans gathered on February 20, 2016 to protest former police officer Peter Lang’s conviction. Lang, who testified to shooting and killing Akai Gurley on November 20, 2014 because his firearm “accidentally” discharged, is the first New York state police officer found guilty of on-duty manslaughter in more than ten years. His supporters in Brooklyn bemoaned, “Chinese Americans count as well” (Walker and Balsamo 2016); their slogan “No scapegoat!” and allegations of “selective justice” exemplify the anti-Black racism with which Asian American communities intuit and respond to their racial triangulations.

Of concern are not admissions policies and statistics, though I list them anyway, but the tyranny Black students experience at public institutions of higher education because the state assumes, to paraphrase late Justice Antonin Scalia, that Black persons lack the capacity (even if they can sometimes muster the will) to compete with white and Asian or Asian American students at “advanced” research institutions like the University of California. I am not suggesting that public institutions of higher education should oust Asian and/or Asian American students to make room for Black ones; nor am I invoking the “Oppression Olympics” typically associated with anti-Asian bias in Black communities (Shulman and Smith 2005; Butz and Yogeewaran 2011; Oliver and Wong 2003; Cummings and Lambert 1997; Ha 2010). Rather, I want to think critically about how the state actively re-segregates K-12 public education and especially high schools that might otherwise serve and prepare Black students for admission to state universities.

Since at least 1989, Irvine has been home to more Asian and Asian American students than any other University of California campus; by 2008, ethnically Asian students accounted for more than half of Irvine’s student body (Davidson 1989; NBC News 2009). Statistics for Black enrollment are grim by contrast. According to data culled by Irvine’s Office of Institutional Research, nearly 2,000 ethnically Asian students matriculated in Fall 2015 compared to less than 200 Black students. Further, while the state of California publically avows a commitment to

accessible public higher education for Black students, enrollment numbers for ethnically Asian students are too frequently cited as the ringer to dispute grievances made by Black students.

Precisely because Irvine is a jewel of diversity in the University of California's neoliberal crown, its students reproduce "nostalgically grotesque" ways of looking at Black persons and cultures that bear scrutiny (Scheper 2007).⁹ These "blueprints of expectation and response" (Lorde 1984, 123) are not unique but paradigmatic of relations bolstered, in the neoliberal parlance, by "inclusive excellence," which can only ever entrench racial Blackness as a structural antagonism (Sexton 2008).¹⁰ Black students' conspicuous absence on campus whitens Irvine, making it possible for other students of color to access its historical and social currency, regardless of how "unreliable" it has been, for example, in Asian American history (Reft 2013; Tsang 1983, 1998, 2000, 2001). As a non-Black instructor of color, I teach racial differences and their power-knowledge regimes comparatively to underscore how social and political privilege is leveraged.

Getting Woke

The non-Black student body's hostile response to direct action organized by Irvine's Black Student Union in the weeks following Lambda Theta Delta's video, including the note "Go Back [to] Africa Slave," slipped into Black student Charity Lyons' backpack during science lab on May 7, 2013, provokes further speculation about the efficacy of the additive model on which diversity programs at Irvine and elsewhere pivot. A program of "inclusive excellence" organizes racial differences in a lateral or horizontal and not a vertical or hierarchal array—a gesture that does nothing to dismantle relations of power. A model like Culture and Theory's, partial to Afro-pessimism, instead concedes to race relations *as they are*, contextualizing racial differences in their assigned hierarchies to think locally, globally, and comparatively. A model attendant to racial hierarchies outs racial Blackness as the "zero degree of social conceptualization" and "lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings [and] punctures" exacted from Black flesh as the raw material of all race knowledge (Spillers 1987, 67).

Galvanized by events on campus and the administration's response, which was to cite these as "isolated" incidents (Cole 2015), I taught "Gender and Popular Culture" about screen cultures and anti-Black political economies in August and September 2013, as the special topic "Teaching Trayvon". 31 students enrolled in my Summer 2013 course: ten Asian or Asian American students and two Black or mixed-race students. I updated "Teaching Trayvon" to query Michael Brown's spectacular lynching and its outcry, including emergent "hashtagivism" in which Black persons are counted in social media "without counting" (Ricks 2015), when I taught the course for a second term, attracting upwards of 45 students—16 Asian or Asian American students and two Black students—in August and September 2014. I taught the final iteration of the course, by then renamed "Black Lives (Don't) Matter," in August and September 2015 to no more than 16 students: approximately eight Asian or Asian American students and one Black student.

"Teaching Trayvon" prompted politically vigilant and necessarily uncomfortable conversations about how new media like Facebook and Twitter and old media like broadcast and print journalism cultivate anti-Black viscera, gut, and instinct in viewer-consumers to authorize anti-Black violence. Its reading and viewing assignments queried the *politics* of blackface, or "the ways in which over a period of decades and centuries Black people have been dehumanized, that is to say represented as less than human" in "the representational politics that one sees through the

media” (Davis 2016, 34). The emphasis on media production and consumption was incited by events at Irvine but is neither irrelevant nor incidental. Born at the hour of another Black Lives Matter movement: to abolish chattel slavery, and tasked with cohering the imagined community of a broken nation, American media in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made blackface the first mass-produced popular entertainment in the United States (Robinson 2007). The minstrel show caricatures racial slavery as a social good to justify anti-Black violence at the precise moment in which Black persons might qualify as human, or at the very least, at a critical moment in which the terms that (still) make Black lives structurally fungible were being debated.

Students learned how to navigate popular racialized humanist discourses of masculinity using feminist theories and methods enumerated in canonical texts like Audre Lorde’s “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” and “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (1984), bell hooks’ *Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1981), Kimberle Crenshaw’s “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” (1991), Angela Davis’ “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves” (1972), and Toni Cade Bambara’s “On the Issue of Roles” (1970). I paired their texts with essays written by contemporary scholar-activists like Ta-Nehisi Coates, Mia McKenzie, Dani McClain, Monica J. Casper, Omar Ricks, Darnell L. Moore, Shahn King, and Britney Cooper, for publication in newspapers and magazines like *The New York Times*, *Salon*, and *The Atlantic*, and on blogs like *Mic*, *The Feminist Wire*, and *Black Girl Dangerous*. These popular essays introduced students to urgent experiences of anti/Blackness as events unfold in real time, furnishing the case studies students used independently (at home) and collaboratively (in class) to test theoretical frameworks. One student notes in their 2015 evaluation, “This is one of the only courses I’ve ever completed every single reading assignment for, and actually enjoyed doing it.”

I committed 11.5 hours of a 34-hour course to the study of Trayvon Martin’s murder, specifically, to the infotainment erected to sensationalize his death and buoy George Zimmerman’s legal exoneration. Students considered how Trayvon was tried for Zimmerman’s crimes and further unpacked how a jury of six women, five of them white and one of them Hispanic, tried Trayvon not “as a child buying candy” but “as a thug” (Casper 2013). We discussed how and why Trayvon was tried for what juror B-37 suspects are the crimes he would have committed had he lived past age 17, and meditated on a question that many racialized young people in this society inherit: What could Trayvon have done, if anything, to ward off certain death (Davidson 2013)? Or, as Charles Blow poses the question, “At what precise pace should a black man walk to avoid suspicion?” (2013).¹¹ I allocated an additional 5.5 hours to the study of how Zimmerman curated and deployed his passing white privilege, which prompted the university’s upwardly-mobile Asian and Asian American students who had enrolled in the class to indirectly but robustly interrogate their own access, however conditional, to social and cultural capital. In its third iteration—“Black Lives (Don’t) Matter”—I added reading and viewing assignments to this unit about Rachel Dolezal’s “trans”-raciality, which further encouraged non-Black students of color to interrogate how the colorblind ideologies that scaffold diversity discourse authorize and enable Black erasure.

I allocated one class meeting or two hours and 50 minutes each to the units “Representing Differences” and “Co-opting Differences,” for which I yoked reading and viewing assignments from the inaugural year’s headlines. In “Representing Differences,” for example, students deliberated why a Cheerios ad in 2013 featuring a black father, white mother, and interracial child provoked racist comments so vitriolic that Cheerios disabled its YouTube comments section (Goyette 2013). They further contemplated if interracial couplings in which no black persons are

counted incite similar vitriol, on and off screens. Also in this unit, students considered how Paula Deen's "plantation nostalgia" resonates with and reinforces her brand (Rosenberg 2013). In the unit "Co-opting Differences," students interrogated visual cultures, for example, that caricature the Harlem Shake, and in which celebrities like Miley Cyrus and later, Ellen DeGeneres "twerk" to curate and/or parody "ratchet" personalities that objectify actual Black persons and cultures.

Reading and viewing assignments in the unit "Disembodied Identities" further prompted students to interrogate new technologies of lynching and minstrelsy, for example, in video or Google Play games and as Facebook memes. In 2014, I added "Beauty and Consumer Culture: The whiter, the better," about how hair- and skin-care industries exploit racialized ideologies of sex and gender; and "Gender and the Sports-Media Complex," about racism in professional sports. In 2015, I added three more units to consolidate reading and viewing assignments that elaborate "the performative enactment of our ensemble of always already role-allocated individual and collective behaviors" (Wynter 2015, 32-33). They included: "Scenes of Subjection," about the convergence of Black material death and sexual terror, for example, in staged lynchings (Hartman 1997); "Humanism and Its Black Others," about the exclusion of Black persons from Enlightenment genealogies of the Human; and "Racial Economies of Sex and Desire," about how racial differences are intuited, especially by persons of color, to distribute and arrange desire and identification and thus prefigure the conditions and relations of attraction and attachment. I allocated one class meeting or two hours and 50 minutes each to reading and viewing assignments in these units, but they provoked discussions and interlocutions in other units as well.

Coursework in gender and sexuality studies that foregrounds anti-Black political economies must outfit students with a toolbox which they can use to interrogate their own hermeneutic or sensory knowledge of the world for the ways in which this knowledge is overdetermined or saturated by the experience of living *in* an always already anti-Black world. Students must, in other words, think critically about the politics of their identifications. The task at hand is what Christina Sharpe describes as "wake work," but also and notably, *woke* work, because the Black feminist revolution hailed by the rejoinder Black Lives Matter "begins with the self and in the self" (Bambara 1970, 109). Indeed, in a world that has erected infra- and super-structures committed to making Black lives fungible, our students, like ourselves, must look inward to make Black lives matter.

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Notes

1. I differentiate between Black and "non-Black" persons of color to underscore how the latter activate passing white privilege in a multiculturalist society. A multiculturalist color line invites racially distinct persons into its folds by entrenching racial blackness as a structural antagonism (Sexton 2008).

2. See also: Jordan-Zachery, Julia. 2007. "Am I a Black Woman or a Woman Who Is Black?: A Few Thoughts on the Meaning of Intersectionality." *Politics & Gender* 3(2): 254-263; Brunsma, David L., Peggy

Placier, and Eric Brown. 2012. "Teaching Race at Historically White Colleges and Universities: Identifying and Dismantling the Walls of Whiteness." *Critical Sociology*: 1-22; Simien, Evelyn. 2004. "Black Feminist Theory: Charting a Course for Black Women's Studies in Political Science." *Women & Politics* 26(2): 81-93; Monforti, Jessica Lavariega, and Melissa R. Michelson. "Diagnosing the Leaky Pipeline: Continuing Barriers to the Retention of Latinas and Latinos in Political Science." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 41(1): 161-166.

3. Summer courses occasion an opportunity for the concentrated study and defense of "the dead, the dying, and those living lives consigned, in aftermath of legal chattel slavery, to death that is always-imminent and immanent" (Sharpe 2014, 60). Summer session students can immerse themselves in the "position of the unthought" and to "try to bring that position into view without making it a locus of positive value" free from the obligations of the academic year (Hartman and Wilderson 2003, 185).

4. Angela Davis makes a similar argument in her 2014 interview with Frank Barat, wherein she notes that "Black struggle in the US serves as an emblem of the struggle for freedom. It's emblematic of larger struggles for freedom. So within the sphere of Black politics, I would also have to include struggles against repressive immigration politics. I think it's important to point to what is often called the Black radical tradition. And the Black radical tradition is related not simply to Black people but to all people who are struggling for freedom. ... [For example,] We have to look at the way in which anti-Muslim racism has really thrived on the foundation of anti-Black racism" (Davis 2016, 39).

5. Afro-pessimism revisits Fanon's distinction in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) between "the fact" of racial Blackness—its "social death" (Patterson 1982) or ontological crisis (Wilderson 2010)—and the "lived experience" of racial Blackness, which endures, indeed, "survives after a type of death" (Sexton 2011, 23).

6. Recall that Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson testified to fearing for his life because he perceived Michael Brown, who was unarmed and approached Wilson with his hands up, as a "demon".

7. The video was posted with the disclaimer "No racism intended." Anti-blackness, however, transcends intention; it engenders "energies, concerns, points of attention, anxieties, pleasures, appetites, revulsions, and phobias capable of both great mobility and tenacious fixation" (Sexton in Wilderson 2010, 7).

8. Claire Kim explains, "Racial triangulation occurs by means of two types of simultaneous, linked processes: (1) processes of 'relative valorization,' whereby dominant group A (White) valorizes subordinate group B (Asian Americans) relative to subordinate group C (Blacks) on cultural and/or racial grounds in order to dominant both groups, but especially the latter, and (2) processes of 'civic ostracism,' whereby dominant group A (Whites) constructs subordinate group B (Asian Americans) as immutably foreign and unassimilable with Whites on cultural and/or racial grounds in order to ostracize them from the body politic and civic membership" (1999, 107).

9. "Nostalgic Grotesque" is Jeanne Scheper's description of anti-Black scopical regimes that induce pleasure and terror (2007).

10. Irvine's Office of Inclusive Excellence, which Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor Enrique Lavernia promises "will elevate UCI's commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion among faculty, graduate students and undergraduates and advance our campus as a national leader and global model for inclusion," is paradigmatic of the diversity-making that can only ever reproduce anti-Black political and libidinal relations. This office has been created, he explains, to "oversee institutional accountability, mount education and training programs, conduct responsive research, and build partnerships with universities and colleges dedicated to inclusive excellence." It will further "foster and fortify a campus culture in which faculty and students alike expect equity, support [and] diversity and practice inclusion" (Lavernia 2016).

11. Amy Davidson elaborates, “The idea that Martin, when he saw a light-skinned man looking at him strangely, should have realized his mistake and cleared out is a way of saying that he ought to have been exquisitely conscious of his blackness, of how he looked. Zimmerman’s lawyers argued that Zimmerman was properly scared; more subtly, they made the case that it was perverse of Martin not to recognize and manage his own scariness. And yet there are complications in instructing a black teen-ager to start running: Martin seems to have alarmed Zimmerman and the police dispatcher both when he moved too quickly and when he was slow” (2013).

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