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COCAINE AND COLLEGE:

How Black Lives Matter in U.S. Public Higher Education

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Huey Newton met Bobby Seale in college. Together, they founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, a radical organization formed around Black working class empowerment and resistance to police violence and grounded in the thought of Marx, Fanon, and Mao. From their founding in 1966 to their high-water mark in 1968, the Panthers grew from Newton and Seale and a few others to hundreds of chapters across the country with thousands of members. By 1972, after the concerted and murderous criminal activity of COINTELPRO, most Panther leaders were dead or in jail, and the rank and file had begun to reorganize (with the help of CIA government subsidies) around the drug industry entrepreneurialism of the Bloods and Crips. In 1973, Bobby Seale ran for mayor of Oakland; in 1980, Huey Newton received his PhD from the University of California at Santa Cruz. In less than ten years, the coordinated work of Repressive State Apparatuses, such as the FBI and local police departments, and Ideological State Apparatuses, such as The Chicago Tribune and CBS News, funneled the radical Panther energy into the safe spaces of narco-capitalism, electoral politics, and state-sanctioned educational institutions.

Before he was disciplined back into the University of California, Newton's and the Panthers' understanding of the value of education was very different from

what we might hear at a legislative hearing, a think tank policy meeting, or a Rotary Club lunch. The fifth point of the Black Panther Party Ten Point Program calls for “education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present day society.” This is certainly not what pundits and policy makers have in mind when they talk about education as the “magic bullet.” That formulation usually refers to the transactional value that comes with the social capital conferred by formal, usually state-sponsored, education. School scrapes the rough edges off of those from the abandoned regions of capital and gives them the skills to enter the economy that has structurally excluded them. The Panther program, on the other hand, sees real education as that which exposes the race and class constructions that divide the United States.

So it comes as no surprise that when the Panthers went looking for the education that would teach their children “true history,” they turned away from U.S. public schools and instead created their own “liberation schools.” It comes as no surprise that when the Panthers went looking for the education that would teach their children “true history,” they turned away from U.S. public schools and instead created their own “liberation schools.” These schools, along with the other Panther survival programs and much more than the berets and guns that usually capture the mainstream imagination, were representative of the radical Black Marxism that drew some of the most brutal and illegal state responses in U.S. history. And it is Newton’s return to state-sanctioned education that is one of the clear signals that the Panther threat to U.S. capitalism has ended.

The rhizomatic collection of organizations, projects, and websites that make up the Black Lives Matter movement has often claimed roots in the Black Panther Party. Both BLM and the Panthers are born in organizing against racist police violence. The Panthers are avowedly Marxist and BLM has some anti-capitalist rhetoric and tendencies. And, while both groups put Blackness at their center, they both also recognize the interconnected nature of all oppressions. But for many, especially Panther veterans, the connections between the Panthers and BLM are tenuous and superficial. Elaine Brown, the former chair of the Black Panther Party, looked at the “hands up, don’t shoot” project and declared that Black Lives Matter had a “plantation mentality.” When BLM leaders met with Hillary Clinton, Brown said that she was “ashamed of them for asking that racist warmonger what she thought of black people” (Slater). Brown’s critique highlights the gap between the revolutionary program of the Black Panther Party and the mostly reformist impulses of Black Lives Matter, which also points to the distance between the audiences the two groups are appealing to. Black Lives Matter raises its hands toward power, asking directly not to be shot. Newton, Seale, and the Black Panthers spoke directly to working class black people, organizing them to fight back against those who would shoot them. It is the difference between telling your child to beg a policeman not to shoot them and telling that child to shoot back at anyone who shoots at them.

The two attitudes are fully revealed in the two groups’ education programs. In 2016, at about the time of the Democratic National Convention, a group called the Movement for Black Lives released a detailed education platform, demanding a

moratorium on charter schools, full state funding of public education, the end to out-of-school suspensions, the removal of police from school campuses, the end of Teach for America, and community control of schools, among many other things (Movement for Black Lives). This agenda includes almost everything that any progressive anti-privatization individual or group could want. What it doesn't include is any recognition of school as an institution of an historically and structurally racist state or any examination of the way that educational curriculum helps to reinforce the divisions within that state. The platform imagines education as an unambiguous good to which Black people must be given equal access.

This stands in pretty stark contrast to the Black Panther demand for an education "that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society." The Panthers didn't just want access to the education and credentials that would allow their children to move up the U.S. socioeconomic ladder; they wanted education that would help their children transform the society. They very quickly decided that education could only be found in schools they created and controlled. That the state found this approach threatening is evident in the differing state responses to the Panthers and BLM. While the Panthers were jailed and murdered, Black Lives Matter has received the support of billionaires and mainstream presidential candidates.

Thomas Jefferson was so proud of founding a university in Charlottesville that he insisted that his epitaph list him as the "Father of the University of Virginia," rather than the third President of the United States. His plan to create a state-sponsored "Academical Village" available to more than just ruling elites was

grounded in the democratic idea that “it is safer to have to whole people respectably enlightened than a few in a high state of science and the many in ignorance.” In August 2017, almost two hundred years after the founding of Mr. Jefferson’s University, ignorance prevailed as white supremacist groups marched through the campus and the town, inciting violence that killed Heather Heyer and injured 19 other people. The catalyst for the clash was an oxidized 1924 statue of confederate general Robert E. Lee, which the Charlottesville city council had voted to remove from Emancipation Park. In one of a series of controversial reactions to the Charlottesville violence, President Donald Trump wondered about the slippery slope that could follow the removal of the statue of Lee:

George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, the president noted, were also slave owners. “I wonder, is it George Washington next week?” Mr.

Trump said. “And is it Thomas Jefferson the week after?” (Schuessler) Equating Lee with “founding fathers” Washington and Jefferson drew swift ridicule from historians and other highbrow types, typified by this response from a Harvard historian in the New York Times:

Annette Gordon-Reed, a professor of history and law at Harvard who is [credited](#) with breaking down the wall of resistance among historians to the idea that Jefferson had a sexual relationship with Sally Hemings, said that the answer to Mr. Trump’s hypothetical question about whether getting rid of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson also meant junking Washington and Jefferson was a simple “no.”

There is a crucial difference between leaders like Washington and Jefferson, imperfect men who helped create the United States, Ms. Gordon-Reed said, and Confederate generals like Jackson and Lee, whose main historical significance is that they took up arms against it. The comparison, she added, also “misapprehends the moral problem with the Confederacy.”

“This is not about the personality of an individual and his or her flaws,” she said. “This is about men who organized a system of government to maintain a system of slavery and to destroy the American union.” (Schuessler)

For Gordon-Reed and most of the other academics who responded to Trump’s comments, there is a qualitative difference between the slave owners who founded the country and the confederate general who fought to maintain their original idea of a slave-holding republic. They see a moral distance between the two-thirds compromise and the secession designed to preserve the states’ rights embedded in that compromise. But when we focus clearly on white supremacy, and the historical role it has played in the creation and maintenance of U.S. inequality, we might find that President Trump, like the proverbial blind squirrel, has found a nut.

In the larger history of U.S. white supremacy, Robert E. Lee was an errand boy, whereas Thomas Jefferson was an architect. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson deploys a range of Enlightenment pseudo-science to argue that Blacks are naturally inferior to whites and that this difference is “fixed in nature.” Bolstering his argument with biological lingo like “scarf-skin,” “blood,” and “bile,”

Jefferson dispassionately observes that Blacks are uglier than whites, smellier than whites, “more ardent after their female” than whites, too dumb to go to bed early before a hard day’s work in the tobacco fields, and fully incapable of writing eighteenth-century neo-classical poetry, despite the fact that they sure can sing and dance. Faced with this barrage of ignorance, Jefferson’s defenders usually insist that he be understood in historical context and point to the other places where he recognizes slavery as a moral evil. In later correspondence with the Black mathematician Benjamin Banneker, he even contradicts himself on the idea of black inferiority. As an individual, it is easy enough to understand Jefferson as a man of his time, full of flaws and contradictions—the same way that defenders of Robert E. Lee understand him as a deeply flawed man of honor. But as symbols and enforcers of the machinery of white supremacy, the many statues of Thomas Jefferson that litter the University of Virginia campus and greater Charlottesville are as much or more complicit as the statue of Lee that started all the trouble.

If we think of Thomas Jefferson not as a thinker wrestling with scientific and moral questions, but rather as a politician trying to knit the gap between emerging political arrangements grounded in democracy and freedom and an economic system that demands a free or cheap source of labor (the gap between “all men are created equal” and the slave quarters at Monticello), then it is easy enough to understand his commitment to white supremacy. Writing as mercantile capitalism is coming to fully dominate the Western world, Jefferson found himself right in step with such Enlightenment thinkers as Immanuel Kant, Carl Linnaeus, and David Hume, all of whom created racial taxonomies that implicitly justify racialized

divisions of labor and rights. In the context of the United States, Jefferson can be seen as simply codifying and justifying the system of labor control that was created in the 17th century.

Race has become such a naturalized part of U.S. culture and politics that the labor origins of racial division have been all but forgotten. References to slavery as some version of the United States's "original sin" in our curricula and our popular media leave most Americans believing that racial hierarchies arrived in the Americas fully codified instead of inchoate and evolving. The early capitalist exploitation of the fertile land of the New World was carried out by laborers imported from both Europe and Africa, and those laborers were subject to varying degrees of indentured servitude and bondage. But those degrees were not initially determined by race. Both Africans and Europeans were sometimes freed after serving their terms of servitude and working conditions were equally brutal for both. Those brutal conditions and the lack of distinction between Black and White workers led to labor solidarity across racial lines in the numerous workers rebellions from 1660 to 1680 (the most significant of which was Bacon's Rebellion in 1676).

Recognizing that hyper-exploitation of a large working class that perceived itself as a class with common conditions and interests created the conditions for perpetual resistance and rebellion, the owning class began making moves to divide workers by trying to convince European workers that they were White. From 1680 to 1710, the notion of whiteness began to appear in colonial law and custom as a property right for the propertyless. At the same time, hereditary chattel slavery for

Black Africans became firmly institutionalized. White workers were afforded privileges that no slave had and told that even free Blacks had no rights that even the lowliest white worker is bound to respect. Whiteness and White privilege became the tools deployed to convince European workers that because of their skin color they had more in common with the owners on the veranda sipping mint juleps than they did with the Africans with whom they shared laboring and living conditions.¹

The alchemy of turning genuine class differences into false racial ones (what the historian Theodore Allen calls the “invention of the white race”) has proven to be an extraordinarily effective social control device across U.S. history. It is certainly one of the main reasons why U.S. working class struggle and upheaval have never metamorphosed into long-term working class political organization. White working class capitulation to slavery, the failure of Northern White labor to make common cause with Southern newly-freed Black labor during Reconstruction, organized labor’s collaboration with Jim Crow and New Deal racism in the early twentieth century, and the distance between White labor and the Black Freedom movement in the late twentieth century are all testament to the power of White supremacy to keep working people pitted against each other.² Ruling class production of racial narratives has continuously recreated and reinforced this division across U.S. history. The myth of the Black rapist led to the White working class Ku Klux Klan and lynching. The racist suspicion of Black workers that was created in the 17th century virulently infected the U.S. Labor Movement in the early twentieth century and derailed any genuine labor solidarity. Despite the fact that

affirmative action disproportionately benefited White people³, the narratives surrounding those programs always colored them Black and routinely presented working class Black people, not ruling class people, as the biggest impediment to working class White people getting ahead. Since at least the middle of the twentieth century, race baiting (from Richard Nixon's "Southern strategy" to George Bush's Willie Horton ad to Bill Clinton's Sister Soulja attack to Trump's effervescent racial stream of consciousness) has been virtually *de rigeur* in U.S. presidential campaigns as a way to keep White working class voters looking away from the actual arrangements of capitalist power and voting against their own material interests.

The inextricable link between race and class oppression must be one of the most significant reasons for the lack of a labor party and a relatively weak labor movement in the U. S. compared to other industrialized Western countries. It also explains the shifting valence of race in different class contexts. Proclamations of racial "progress" are almost always followed by a "so much more to do" caveat. Those formulations would be so much more useful and accurate if we added that progress is usually confined to the privileged classes while the poor and working classes are always left with little more than so much more to do. Because its primary job is to divide the working classes, race plays out differently up and down the socioeconomic ladder. Racism is always at its most virulent and violent within and among the working classes. Individuals within the ruling and managerial classes certainly harbor and often manifest both latent and blatant racist thoughts and behaviors, but they tend not to perceive Black people as a class as a threat to their economic and social well-being.

Thus, Frederick Douglass could become a best-selling author, statesman, and ambassador within a Northern elite that tacitly sanctioned and benefited from Southern racialized convict leasing and the transition from slavery to Jim Crow. Zora Neale Hurston and Duke Ellington were welcomed and celebrated in rich White parlors while lynching grew and Black workers were excluded from White labor unions. In the 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr. was embraced by the White House as the Black Panthers were murdered by the FBI. When Rush Limbaugh or Donald Trump spew their race-baiting bile, they are aiming squarely at White working class people, not at the millionaires and billionaires they work and play with all day. Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, and Barack Obama all enjoy relatively raceless daily life among their ruling class friends and colleagues, but on blogs and in barrooms are subjected to relentlessly racist anger and hatred from people that their security details would never allow near them.

An education that would, in the words of the Black Panthers, expose “the true nature of this decadent American society,” would certainly include some version of this historicized understanding of white supremacy and the deployment of race and white privilege as a tool to buttress the rampant inequality created by capitalism. Such an education, especially if it were to be distributed widely, could reasonably be expected to put pressure on the ruling arrangements that race was invented to protect. So, it is worth asking whether the education the Black Panthers called for would suffer the same fate at the hands of the education industrial complex that the Panthers themselves suffered at the hands of the corporate state.

For most of the twentieth century, public education in the United States was understood as a public good—a system, like highways or public utilities, that benefited both the individual user and the larger society and was thus worth public investment. As the century progressed, this conception came to include not only primary and secondary education, but also post-secondary education. From the 1920s to the 1970s, massive state and federal investment in public colleges and universities created a public higher education system that paid tremendous dividends in democratization and middle-class expansion. By the mid-1970s, in the wake of the GI Bill, the White middle-class women’s movement, and the Civil Rights movement, access to college was expanded to people previously excluded. Democratization began to outpace the deep structure of U.S. capitalist inequality (in somewhat the same way that the eighteenth-century Black revolution in Haiti leapt beyond what Thomas Jefferson had in mind with “all men are created equal”). College became more than just a vehicle for the White middle-class and thus engaged the machinery of retrenchment. As Christopher Newfield puts it:

The youth population both grew and became increasingly multiracial, and in many school systems, minority majority. Not coincidentally, the public good understanding of higher education came under systematic theoretical and political attack. Theory came from think-tank and academic economists and practice came from

politicians, who began to ask public colleges to charge tuition and allowed them to raise it in step with their private counterparts. Of course they did not justify this change on openly racial grounds, by saying, for example, that free college was good for white people but that black and brown youth must pay. They narrowed the value of college to the individual's private investment in their future earnings while stigmatizing public benefits, particularly racially equality via race conscious admissions, as attacks on private interests.

The relentless austerity programs that have marched higher education down the road to privatization since at least the late 1970s are at least in part motivated by the need to keep race as a central tool for the enforcement of U.S. inequality.

The fate of the race conscious admissions that Newfield points to provides fertile ground for the examination of the way that Black radicalism in U.S. universities buckles under a similar, if less violent, discipline to that which befell the Black Panthers. The 1954 *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* supreme court decision is still understood as a landmark in U.S. history because it was supposed to desegregate schools, with the magic bullet of education leading to greater racial equality in the society in general. Sixty years later, that decision remains a mostly empty promise, as K-12 schools are still some of the most segregated institutions in the U.S. Martin Luther King, Jr. would surely have not missed the grim irony of so many schools with his name that have only Black and Brown students. An economic order buttressed by pitting White against Black can never fully lose separate but equal.

In higher education, where mobility beyond the neighborhood is more possible, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements actually helped to create more space for Black people in college. The Affirmative Action policies created by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations quickly spread to colleges and universities and helped to create the darker student bodies that began to demand things like Black Studies. But, beginning in the 1970s, a series of legal challenges were brought against race-based admissions programs, forcing colleges to redefine Affirmative Action as “diversity” or “multiculturalism.” As a way to get around rulings against Affirmative Action, admissions offices moved from a policy that provided access and opportunity to people who had been historically and structurally excluded to programs that argued that the admission of “underrepresented” people provided a broader and richer campus experience.

This move from equity of opportunity to decorating a white tree with colorful ornaments not only reduced the number of Black students admitted to universities, it also changed the subject from politics to culture in a way that removed any threat to the neo-liberal university. Shifting from the demands for fundamental change articulated by the Black Panthers and the first wave of Black Studies to a mere call for Census Bureau representation keeps race at the center of the discussion but removes its historical and structural reality. Race becomes an abstraction rather than an invention designed as a tool of inequality. When the discussion shifts from education “that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society” to making sure that an appropriate percentage of people of color are represented

among privileged elites, any critique of the racialized structure of inequality tends to get lost.

This is no doubt why university trustees and administrations have rushed to embrace regimes of diversity and representation. At the same time that they turn a blind eye to structural problems like state disinvestment, the assault on tenure, student debt, and the funneling of public funds into private coffers, they rush to hire vice provosts for diversity and consultants from the growing multiculturalism industry to help them create task forces and trainings that reduce structural inequality to individual symptoms. As Robin D. G. Kelley points out, “trauma, PTSD, micro-aggression, and triggers . . . have virtually replaced oppression, repression, and subjugation” in administrative lexicons, and race has been shifted from “the public sphere into the psyche.” At the same time that they erode faculty rights and stability, and send genuinely organized students to the dean of discipline, university bosses easily embrace cultural competency initiatives, safe spaces, and prohibitions on racist Halloween costumes.

The Black students who came to college in somewhat significant numbers in the 1960s and 70s brought with them demands for new kinds of education. In November 1968, student activists (including some Black Panthers) at San Francisco State University began the Third World Strike and demanded the creation of the country’s first Black Studies program. The program at SFSU was followed by others at universities like Yale, Stanford, the University of California at Santa Barbara, and Syracuse. Unlike most academic disciplines, Black Studies was created in response to the organizing and demand of Black students. The energy that created Black

Studies grew from the social struggle of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, not from disinterested academic inquiry. It thus created the same kind of disruptive threat to educational institutions that the Black Panthers created for the larger system of U.S. capitalist inequality. And, while the professors and deans who disciplined Black Studies were not as illegal and deadly as the FBI and police departments who destroyed the Panthers, they were just as effective. Almost as soon as Black Studies programs were created, budget-cutting administrators and curriculum committees descended upon them to remove whatever fangs they may have been born with. As St. Clare Drake, the founding director of African American Studies at Stanford, wrote in 1979:

What black studies were turning out to be was neither what their most youthful, dedicated supporters had envisioned nor what white faculties and administrators had wanted them to accept. The black studies movement was becoming institutionalized in the sense that it had moved from the conflict phase into adjustment to the existing educational system, with some of its values being accepted by that system. One of these was the idea that an ideal university community would be multi-ethnic, with ethnicity permitted some institutional expression, and with black studies being one of its sanctioned forms. A trade-off was involved. Black Studies became depoliticized and de-radicalized.

In the same way that the Panthers bequeathed style, a congressman, and the structure of some social programs to the post-Panther U.S., Black Studies helped bring ethnicity to college.

The co-optation of Black Studies became seamlessly complete in the 1980s and 90s, just as the retreading of Black Panther energy with Superfly culture and gang cocaine economics took place in the 1970s. Black Studies became fully depoliticized as it became entrenched in elite U.S. universities and dominated by formalist/essentialist literary studies. The celebrity professors who brought color and ethnicity to the Ivy League turned Black Studies into a fully academic (in every sense of the word) enterprise whose most notable political event was the “beer summit” arranged by Barack Obama after Henry Louis Gates was hassled by the cops outside his posh Cambridge home. Politically radical and engaged faculty continue to exist, but usually within the most elite institutions, where any connection to mass misery is either purely theoretical or trying to assimilate with a scholarship. As a bonus, this neutered arrangement is also available as another incarnation of divisive and diverting race-baiting. In the same way that the “war on drugs” channels popular attention toward the grand U.S. tradition of scary blackness, the “culture wars” of the 1990s sanction the defunding of the Humanities by convincing us that it is the beginning of the end of Western Civilization when *Their Eyes Were Watching God* replaces *Hamlet* on the syllabus.

There are, of course, pockets of curricula and courses in U.S. universities that provide the sort of radical education that the Black Panthers had in mind. But that education is less and less accessible to the great majority of Black Americans and

certainly is not foundational to mainstream understanding of U.S. history. It persists the way that the ghost of the Panthers persists in Black Lives Matter. An understanding of the broad political, economic, and educational devolution that has taken place since Huey Newton retreated to cocaine and college insists that we fully face the question of whether Black lives can ever matter in U.S. public education.

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NOTES

¹ See Allen, Morgan, and Goldfield

² See Allen, Goldfield, and DuBois.

³ See Wise