

# RADICAL READINGS

## AN ANTI-RACISM DIGEST

“Radical simply means ‘grasping things at the root.’” - Angela Davis

June 22, 2020

Dear English & Communications Alumni and Students:

Individualistic responses to systemic issues are not adequate responses.

I’m an Associate Professor of Multi-Ethnic Studies and the Digital Humanities, and founding director of the Minor in Ethnic Studies. My doctoral degree is in American Cultural Studies, and my forthcoming book discusses the mechanisms of everyday racism in social and traditional media. I also went to high school in North Adams! In this digest, I will address some central conversations I’ve been hearing around the issues of racial miscommunication and end with a discussion question about “Defund the Police” and what our future holds.

The protesters in the streets around Black Lives Matter are protesting systemic injustices that are the basis of US systems and institutions; of racial capitalism.

*For more on Racial Capitalism:*

- [Geographies of Racial Capitalism](#) with Ruth Wilson Gilmore

Much of my research is in critical whiteness studies; a form of privilege studies that considers how race shapes the racial imaginings of whites. Dr. Jane H. Hill explains that many people have a folk understanding of race and racism; a part of this understanding is that racism is the individual failing of an ignorant individual. BLM protesters critique the systemic and institutionalized nature of racism; for example, how [Black and Latinx homeowners were twice as likely to receive the subprime mortgages that helped to lead to the Great Recession](#).

When a person with power, for example someone at the head of an institution, addresses a systemic issue through personal feelings (i.e. I feel bad when I hear stories of racism...), rather than stressing systemic changes—for example, disarming police on campuses (which many campuses are doing), founding a Black Studies Department, etc.—these responses are

colorblind, ineffectual, and weak. When they deliberately focus on individualism, they render racism as an individual issue rather than a systemic one. Coming together to make a statement demanding systemic change, and being dismissed, due to delivery or another matter, as “All Lives Matter” is not listening; it is not sharing a communicative burden and rings of “English only education” and authoritarianism (i.e. I’m right, can’t hear you!). Change happens through coalitions. Mutual respect is a part of these.

To be academic about it, the situation posed above, about a person at the head of an institution who focuses on individual feelings rather than systemic change, is a demonstration of what Dr. Eduardo Bonilla Silva terms the “abstract liberalism” frame of colorblindness. Abstract liberalism uses liberal philosophy, a focus on the individual, and colorblind logics to explain racial matters. Sidestepping systemic change through a logic of being racially informed, people embodying the abstract liberalism frame of colorblindness are most often white liberals who seek to educate others about their racism, while not acknowledging the reality of systemic issues. In my opinion, when you have relative power, and have the power to make some systemic change, focusing on personal responsibility is a weak response. It is meant to skirt the issues. Rather than to point fingers at individual extremists like the KKK, whites need to sit with discomfort in racial situations, work through unconscious bias, and discuss systemic inequality with their white kids. All of us will make mistakes. Whites need to grapple with the legacy of racism—which includes disproportionate access to inherited wealth.

Personally, in these times I find comfort in theory, for example bell [hooks](#) and others explain that theory is for everyone. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga term the theory of the lived experience of women of color as “theory of the flesh”. I find reading women of color feminism very cathartic and eye-opening as those on the periphery of society often have the most apt critiques of the center. For those of you looking for a piece on self-care, I would suggest [“How black Americans can practice self-care during these trying times. And how everyone else can help them.”](#)

As an ethnic studies scholar, I think social movements are the key to making a more equitable society. Thinking and writing about theory, though the space of the academic classroom, is not where change happens. I also believe we must know our history. So, now, for my digest entry I wanted to end with a call for an open discussion behind the history of a phrase we are hearing often—Defund the Police. I want to offer some sources that help inform us about what the history behind this statement is and what it actually means. I have a few really short articles below, and one video. If you have time, I would like you to check out these sources and respond to the question posed below.

Defund the Police—this has become a talking point today one that many people cannot imagine. Labor Historian Dr. Austin McCoy gives us a short [History of Defund the Police](#). I really suggest checking this out. He offers wonderful sources that puts this discussion in historical context with other relevant slogans like Black Power and Make America Great Again. He ends with a powerful call to action and redefinition:

*The protests of the killings of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Tony McDade, and other Black Americans have introduced a legitimacy crisis in policing among a broader swath of Americans. This crisis of legitimacy has opened a new phase of political struggle and sent pundits, politicians, scholars, and observers across the political spectrum scrambling to define, and redefine, “Defund the Police.” We need to understand the tensions in rhetoric and political debates, but especially the long histories of the politics that inspire these slogans.*

Asian American Studies Scholar Dr. A. Naomi Paik also gives more context to the argument in their piece: [Why the calls for defunding police?](#) In this piece, Dr. Paik writes:

*Abolitionists seek to reverse the trend of the last 50 years by divesting from police, which now gobble up ever greater shares of our cities’ budgets. They wish to reinvest those resources into community well-being, which would improve public safety by meeting everyday needs for housing, health care, food, education and the like – well before a crisis that seemingly requires police intervention. This presence of resources and relationships, not just the absence of harmful institutions like police, is central.*

Finally, Activist and Academic Dr. Angela Davis also offers her opinions on : [Uprising & Abolition: Angela Davis on Movement Building, “Defund the Police” & Where We Go from Here.](#)

Davis asks us to remember that the protests of today cannot be sustained, and we need to transition into different types of systemic change, going on to offer suggestions, she says:

*But I’ve often said one never knows when conditions may give rise to a conjuncture such as the current one that rapidly shifts popular consciousness and suddenly allows us to move in the direction of radical change. If one does not engage in the ongoing work when such a moment arises, we cannot take advantage of the opportunities to change. And, of course, this moment will pass. The intensity of the current demonstrations cannot be sustained over time, but we will have to be ready to shift gears and address these issues in different arenas, including, of course, the electoral arena.*

I would really like to hear your comments on these pieces! I hope you have time to read them all. After, I would like to know: What is your view of Defund the Police? What is next?

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