



## Black Lives Matter: Fashion, Liberation, and the Fight for Freedom – Finding Space in the Curriculum for Black Voices Through Counter-Storytelling

Kelly L. Reddy-Best & Brandon Spencer, Iowa State University

In the summer of 2018, one of the few Black male students in our department, came to me (a white faculty member) to discuss his experiences in our apparel program and expressed an interest in learning more about the intersections of Black identity and fashion. I initially came to know this student quite well in my lower-level, 300-student course on diversity and dress. In that course, because like many Black males in higher education (Allen, 1992; Harper, 2012), he experienced discrimination, in his case his teammates were possibly erasing his name from the team's in-class activities. He mentioned he would switch from pencil to pen to avoid future issues, where I interjected and said, "you do not need to change your behavior, they do." This cemented our relationship and moving forward we sometimes met to discuss his experiences as a student in our program. The purpose of this paper is to outline the narrative of one Black male student in an apparel program in the form of a counter-story, to give voice to his experience, and how his leadership ignited a highly-successfully, activist-related course in our apparel curriculum titled Black Lives Matter: Fashion, Liberation, and the Fight for Freedom (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Additionally, we provide an overview of the course and the student learning outcomes, which are centered around the tenets of Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

The development for the course began due to some of the Black male student and I's impromptu conversations after he was a student in my 300-person course. In all of our conversations, this student expressed interest in any possibilities as he has great leadership characteristics and often took initiative, additionally he needed an internship to graduate from our program. His experiences with some of the individuals who assist with obtaining internships was not fruitful and he expressed hesitation about their interest in helping him or the other students of color based upon his and their past student experiences with these individuals. Together, I helped him apply to a prestigious paid internship offered in our college, yet the one set-back was his GPA, which was lower than the requirement. I told him he should apply anyways and I would explain in my recommendation that he was the best candidate and that I knew first hand why his GPA was lower, which was due to his experience with a faculty member who treated him and other students of color with disrespect resulting in him having a significantly low grade. He was awarded the internship! It was through this internship where he explored possibilities and ideas and he came up with the concept for a new class titled Black Lives Matter: Fashion, Liberation, and the Fight for Freedom. He explained that he wanted to write about this topic for the school newspaper, but they said it was "not appropriate." Throughout the research internship, he assisted with all aspects of the course development including conducting a literature review for the reading list, developing the assignments, and assisting with some of the pre-planning for a public exhibition to be held off campus. The experience provided him the opportunity to fulfill his internship requirement in addition to taking a leadership role in creating a space where Black students could learn about their past and present in relation to fashion, politics, and identity.

### Course Overview

In this upper-level, seminar-style course there were nine student learning outcomes:

1. Describe the Black Lives Matter movement in addition to other Black activist movements throughout history

2. Analyze the relationship of Black activist movements to fashion and appearance of Black people in the US
3. Summarize and analyze literature on Black activism, Black identity and dress, and Black resistance movements
4. Examine historical and cultural research methodologies
5. Conduct original research using cultural and historic methods
6. Develop research exhibition and opening event

Selected readings from the course are in the Appendix. The students each completed a scholarship critique of each reading in addition to other smaller assignments used for assessment of the student learning outcomes. For the final project, students were required to conduct original research using a cultural or historical methodological approach that would contribute to a public exhibition (the exhibition had the same title as course). Each student developed a research question, identified materials to analyze, and then wrote a short essay. The public exhibition was on display for two weeks in the public library (See Figure 1). At the opening event, each student completed a 5-minute presentation of their research where over 70 people attended including both university and community members as the public library was able to put the opening event on their public calendar. The public event was full of engaged and interested community members where there were numerous questions during the question and answer session.

Figure 1. Image of public exhibition



### Outcomes

In this course, we created space for students to learn about Black identity, dress, politics, and activism in a predominantly white institution. CRT is a lens to think through race, racism, social power, and inequality. It is a way to center Black voices and Black experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In this course, all of the readings, assignments, and discussions about appearance, identity, and the body focused on Black identities giving much needed space in the apparel curriculum to these topics. There is significant interest by universities to consider diversity and inclusion; this course can be a model for how to consider these topics in apparel curriculum, with a focus on expanding teaching beyond the classroom, and in this case the public library. It also exemplifies the way student-led initiatives can bring richness to a program.

### References

- Allen, W. R. (1992). The color of success: African-American college student outcomes at predominantly White and historically Black public colleges and universities. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62, 26-44.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Harper, S. R. (2012). *Black male student success in higher education: A report from the national Black male college achievement study*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education.

### Appendix

- Ford, T. C. (2015) *Liberated threads: Black women, style, and the global politics of soul*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Hall, A. V., Hall, E. V., & Perry, J. L. (2016). Black and blue: Exploring racial bias and law enforcement in the killings of unarmed black male civilians. *American Psychology*, 71(3), 175-186.
- Jennings, J. (2000) *The politics of Black empowerment: The transformation of Black activism in urban America*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press.
- Khan-Cullors, P., & bandele, A. (2018) *When they call you a terrorist: A Black Lives Matter memoir*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Lowery, W. (2014). Black Lives Matter: birth of a movement. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/17/black-lives-matter-birth-of-a-movement>
- Nguyen, M. T. (2015). The hoodie as sign, screen, expectation, and force. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 40(4), 791-816.
- Seabrook, R., & Wyatt-Nichol, H. (2016). The ugly side of America: Institutional oppression and race. *Journal of Public Management & Social Policy*, 23(1), Article 3.
- Taylor, K-Y. (2016) *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black liberation*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.
- Yi, D. (2015). Black armor: Some Black American men are dressing up to deflect negative attention, as a conscious means of survival. *Mashable*. Retrieved from <https://mashable.com/2015/08/08/black-men-dressing-up-police/#SEFkm7w14Gqm>