Theoretical Foundations of the Movement for Black Lives  
(POLS 3930-02/PHIL 4360-02)  
Tues (asynchronous); Thurs (via Zoom): 11:00-12:15

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Office Hours  
Thurs, 12:30-1:30 and by appointment  
St. Louis University  
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Course Description

This course examines the theoretical underpinnings of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Through close engagement with primary documents such as the Movement for Black Lives’s (M4BL) policy platform, we will trace how BLM builds on, reconfigures, and merges various traditions of radical critique to diagnose and dismantle contemporary structures of anti-Black violence. Since its emergence, BLM and the larger M4BL coalition have articulated an intersectional critique of anti-Black violence, pointing to the specific ways white supremacy, patriarchy, and racial capitalism (among other structures) affect Black populations in the United States and globally. By situating BLM’s analyses in the context of Black radical theory and politics, ranging from Black queer and feminist thought to abolition to Black Marxism(s) and anti-capitalism, we will surface the rich historical terrain that BLM draws on and contributes to.

Our semester will begin with a historical, philosophical, and socio-political inquiry into the concepts of “race” and white supremacy. Subsequently, we will ask: How does BLM understand anti-Blackness and white supremacy? In what ways are the histories of Black enslavement and settler colonialism relevant to the present struggle for Black lives? Why are Black bodies disproportionately represented in the U.S. prison population? On what grounds does the M4BL policy platform suggest that “patriarchy, exploitative (global) capitalism, militarism, and white supremacy” are interlinked? What transnational solidarities and linkages has BLM forged? What universal vision of liberation does BLM seek to enact? By asking such questions, we will become familiar with the dynamic ways BLM and the M4BL coalition have theorized historical and ongoing forms of structural violence. We will also become conversant in the modes of resistance, including the formation of solidarities across national borders, that have emerged from BLM’s on-the-ground struggles.

Course Objectives and Learning Goals

• Understanding core concepts developed by Black thinkers to analyze the specific relations of domination affecting Black populations in the United States.
• Identifying the historical, political, and intellectual context within which these interventions were (and are) made.
• Connecting theoretical and philosophical concepts and BLM’s contemporary political struggles against systems of inequality and oppression.
• Improving critical reading and comprehension skills by engaging with complex theoretical texts.
• Writing clear, well-formulated arguments and analyses that can explore continuities and discontinuities between theoretical ideas and concepts and political practices of resistance.
• Engaging in thoughtful dialogue and debate through class discussions.
• Developing self-reflexivity and critical thinking about your own pre-conceived assumptions and political beliefs.

Required Texts

There are no required books to be purchased for this course. I will provide PDFs for all the readings.

Grading

This course is entirely online. Each week will consist of one asynchronous lecture, posted on Blackboard by 11 a.m. on Tuesday, and a synchronous class meeting via Zoom on Thursday from 11 a.m.-12:15 p.m. The following components will determine your grade in this course:

• Attendance and Participation (20%)

Your attendance and participation grade will be based on your engagement with the course content and your peers during our weekly class meeting. If, for any reason, you’re unable to attend class, please contact me at the soonest. Since this is a discussion-based seminar, I expect you to come to class prepared.

• Weekly Reading Responses (20%):

Each week you will be expected to post a written response (250-300 words) to the asynchronous lecture and readings on Blackboard. Your response should be analytical. In other words, instead of offering a summary, engage with the core arguments of the readings, probe the underlying assumptions and tensions in the texts, and explore the ways the reading connects with or differs from earlier readings. Also, be sure to end your response with a minimum of two discussion questions that the readings and/or lecture raise for you. Please submit these responses no later than 10 pm on Wednesday.

• Midterm Take-Home Essay (20%):

The midterm will consist of a short take-home essay. I will provide the prompt a week before this assignment is due.

• Discussion Leader (10%):

Each seminar member will be responsible for facilitating a portion of our synchronous class meeting at least once during the semester. During the first two weeks of class, I will ask you to sign up for a class meeting that you’re interested in leading.
• Final Paper Project (30%):

Your final assignment will consist of a 10-12 page essay. Your final essay is due on Dec. 2 no later than 5 pm. I will not be handing out essay prompts for the final. Instead, you can pursue and develop a question that interests you so long as it pertains in some way to BLM and BLM’s relationship to the theoretical texts we have studied. Soon after the mid-term essay is due, I will ask you to submit a short paragraph, including a brief bibliography, outlining the questions you wish to explore in your final paper.

Course Expectations, Policies, and Requirements

Covid-19

This semester is unlike any other semester in recent memory. Given the circumstances we find ourselves in, this class, as mentioned earlier, will be run entirely online. As the semester progresses, I will be responsive to the moment we’re in, altering course policies such as attendance and assignments if and when required.

Class Discussions

All of us come to this class as learners, teachers, and thinkers. None of us, myself included, have the singular correct answer for all of the complex, important topics and ideas we will be discussing. Instead, we will seek to work collaboratively through these questions and issues in a critical, supportive, and dialogical manner. Students should come to our synchronous class meetings ready to interact with each other, and with a spirit of curiosity. I will do my level best to create a conducive learning environment. To that end, our classroom will be an open, creative, and supportive space for all. I expect, enjoy, and encourage lively discussion.

Office Hours

I encourage everyone to meet with me during office hours, whether it is to discuss the readings, get assistance and/or brainstorm writing assignments, and/or to talk about any issues or difficulties you might be facing in the course. Since office hours will be conducted via Zoom, please email me to set up an appointment.

Academic Integrity

*Academic integrity is honest, truthful and responsible conduct in all academic endeavors.* The mission of Saint Louis University is "the pursuit of truth for the greater glory of God and for the service of humanity." Accordingly, all acts of falsehood demean and compromise the corporate endeavors of teaching, research, health care, and community service via which SLU embodies its mission. The University strives to prepare students for lives of personal and professional integrity, and therefore regards all breaches of academic integrity as matters of serious concern.

The governing University-level Academic Integrity Policy was adopted in Spring 2015, and can
be accessed on the Provost's Office website at:
https://www.slu.edu/academics/graduate/university-wide_academic_integrity_policy_final_6-26-15.pdf

Additionally, each SLU College, School, and Center has adopted its own academic integrity policies, available on their respective websites. All SLU students are expected to know and abide by these policies, which detail definitions of violations, processes for reporting violations, sanctions, and appeals. Please direct questions about any facet of academic integrity to your faculty, the chair of the department of your academic program, or the Dean/Director of the College, School or Center in which your program is housed.

Disability Accommodations

Students with a documented disability who wish to request academic accommodations must contact Disability Services to discuss accommodation requests and eligibility requirements. Once successfully registered, the student also must notify the course instructor that they wish to access accommodations in the course.

Please contact Disability Services, located within the Student Success Center, at Disability_services@slu.edu or 314/977-3484 to schedule an appointment. Confidentiality will be observed in all inquiries. Once approved, information about the student’s eligibility for academic accommodations will be shared with course instructors via email from Disability Services and viewed within Banner via the instructor’s course roster.

Title IX

Saint Louis University and its faculty are committed to supporting our students and seeking an environment that is free of bias, discrimination, and harassment. If you have encountered any form of sexual misconduct (e.g. sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, domestic or dating violence), we encourage you to report this to the University. If you speak with a faculty member about an incident of misconduct, that faculty member must notify SLU’s Title IX coordinator, Anna R. Kratky (DuBourg Hall, room 36; akratky@slu.edu; 314-977-3886) and share the basic facts of your experience with her. The Title IX coordinator will then be available to assist you in understanding all of your options and in connecting you with all possible resources on and off campus.

Anna Kratky is the Title IX Coordinator at Saint Louis University (DuBourg Hall, room 36; anna.kratky@slu.edu; 314-977-3886). If you wish to speak with a confidential source, you may contact the counselors at the University Counseling Center at 314-977-TALK or make an anonymous report through SLU’s Integrity Hotline by calling 1-877-525-5669 or online at https://www.lighthouse-services.com/_StandardCustomURL/LHI.LandingPage.asp. To view SLU’s policies, and for resources, please visit the following web addresses: https://www.slu.edu/here4you and https://www.slu.edu/general-counsel.

SLU’s Title IX Policy (formerly called the Sexual Misconduct Policy) has been significantly revised to adhere to a new federal law governing Title IX that was released on May 6, 2020. Please
take a moment to review the new policy and information on the following web address:  
https://www.slu.edu/here4you. Please contact the Anna Kratky, the Title IX Coordinator, with any questions or concerns.

**Writing Center**

I encourage you to take advantage of the writing services in the Student Success Center. Getting feedback benefits writers at all skill levels. Trained writing consultants can help with any writing, multimedia project, or oral presentation. During the one-on-one consultations, you can work on everything from brainstorming and developing ideas to crafting strong sentences and documenting sources. These services do fill up, so make an appointment early! For more information, or to make, change, or cancel an appointment, call 977-3484 or visit  
http://www.slu.edu/writingservices.xml

**Distance Education Etiquette**

Your actions in distance education contexts are just as important as in on-ground, face-to-face educational contexts – and sometimes require additional attention and commitment, as some distance education technologies might be less familiar to us. Accordingly, all students are expected to follow the guidelines below:

*Synchronous Video Contexts (Zoom, etc.)*

- Mute your microphone when you are not speaking. Remember to “un-mute” yourself just prior to speaking. Identify yourself when you begin speaking.
- Expect a few seconds of delay in getting a response from the instructor or another class member to a question; wait before repeating your question or assuming it was not heard.
- If possible, position your camera such that your video feed does not capture too much of your surroundings or other activity/sound from your home/location. Be conscious of posters, art, or other surroundings that others might find offensive or inappropriate for an educational context.
- Use the “Raise Hand” and “Chat” (or similar) features of your video-conferencing tool. This limits verbal interruptions and the confusion generated when multiple people try to speak at once.
- Just as in an on-ground, face-to-face class, limit side conversations, multi-tasking (on your computer or otherwise), and use of your cellphone.
- Temporarily turn off your video feed and mute your microphone when engaged in any non-class conversation or activity.
- Respect and be attentive to the diversity of your classmates and instructor. Before communicating, consider your message in the context of the class’ diversity in race, ethnicity, religion, disabilities, gender, sexual orientation, age, social class, marital status, geography, etc. Consider the diversity you can see or know – as well as that you cannot.
- Remember that video-based class sessions (including chat transcripts) may be recorded and retrieved for later viewing.
Non-Video & Asynchronous Contexts (Blackboard, Canvas, Online Chats, Discussion Boards, etc.)

- When using the “Chat” or “Discussion Board” (or similar) features of your course management system, remember that your course-related communications to the instructor or other students should be considered “professional” (they are not like texts to your friends). Remember that course context and all related written work – including chat and discussion board transcripts – can be recorded and retrieved.
- Be cautious when using humor or sarcasm; without the context of facial expressions or other body language, your tone or intent could be missed or misunderstood by others.
- Respect and be attentive to the diversity of your classmates and instructor. Before communicating, consider your message in the context of the class’ diversity in race, ethnicity, religion, disabilities, gender, sexual orientation, age, social class, marital status, geography, etc. Consider the diversity you can see or know – as well as that you cannot.
- Respect others’ time and life circumstances, which often don’t allow for an immediate response to a question or comment.

Other Policies/Notes

- If a student has a desired name that is not listed on the course roster, please let me know. Students are encouraged to notify me of their gender pronouns. I use he/him pronouns.
- If a religious holiday that you observe conflicts with an assignment, please let me know in advance so that we may discuss alternative options.
- All papers turned in late (whether response papers or your final paper/project) will be marked down by 1/3 grade per day, unless we made an alternative arrangement in advance.

Tentative Reading Schedule

I. White Supremacy and “Race”

Week 1: 8/18 & 8/20

- Introduction to the course, and an exploration of BLM’s statement, “[w]hen Black people get free, everybody gets free.”

Week 2: 8/25 & 8/27


Recommended:
II. Historically & Politically Situating Black Lives Matter

Week 3: 9/1 & 9/3

- Explore the Movement for Black Lives’s website, especially “About Us” (https://m4bl.org/about-us/) and “Vision for Black Lives” (https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/)

Recommended:

Week 4: 9/8 & 9/10

Recommended:


**III. Black Global Protests, Black Feminist Thought, Intersectionality**

**Week 5: 9/15 & 9/17**


Recommended:


**Week 6: 9/22 & 9/24**


Recommended:

Week 7: 9/29 and 10/1


Recommended:

IV. Slavery, Mass Incarceration, Prison Abolition

Week 8: 10/6 and 10/8

- Closely read the Movement for Black Lives’s Demand to “End the War on Black People”: (https://m4bl.org/end-the-war-on-black-people/) and “Invest-Divest”: (https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/invest-divest/)

Recommended:

Week 9: 10/13 & 10/15 (Midterm week)

- 13th (Documentary)

Recommended:

**Week 10: 10/22**


**Recommended:**

**V. Slavery, Settler Colonialism, Racial Capitalism**

**Week 11: 10/27 & 10/29**

• Closely read the Movement for Black Lives’s demands for “Reparations” ([https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/reparations/](https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/reparations/)) and “Economic Justice” ([https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/economic-justice/](https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/economic-justice/)). Pay particular attention to the use of the term “racial capitalism” in the demand for reparations.

**Recommended:**


**Week 12: 11/3 & 11/5**


• #BlackLivesMatter Solidarity Statement: https://www.indigenousjustice.org/solidarity

**Recommended:**


**VI. Transnational Solidarity, Resistance, Political Power, Abolition-Democracy**

**Week 13: 11/10 & 11/12**

• Closely read the Movement for Black Lives’s demands for “Community Control” (https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/community-control/) and “Political Power” (https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/political-power/).


**Week 14: 11/17 & 11/19**


Recommended:

