

The Black Lives Matter Twitter Feed and “Presentism”

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My students are suspicious of presentism. They seek a rule about when events can be said to be history- twenty years ago? More than that? They are nervous that I am secretly teaching them sociology or political science. They seem not to want to sully the past with the present, and generally think it’s more profound and imaginative to study ancient history than contemporary. A few students told me that we should not try and make history be about “us” or be self-absorbed. Some said they wished I had called the Black Lives Matter class, a History of Black Civil Rights from the Anti-Lynching Movement to Today, so that it seems less contemporary, less politically charged. They have problematized the idea of objectivity in historical methods classes, and yet they still prize some sense of objectivity, and are circumspect about political passions invading the classroom.

I try to marshal all of their concerns as analytical strengths in the class, asking them to think consciously about the limitations and illuminations of contemporary history. I mention literary critic Rita Felski’s idea that self-recognition can be a shock and unsettling rather than an easy self-affirmation or self-absorption.⁹⁷ We discuss ruptures and continuities, and the “idols of origins,” including the tendency to view all black social movements as offshoots—and often inadequate ones—of the moral suasion of black civil rights in the 1950s and 60s. We discuss the slogan and sentiment of “black lives matter” over time, and the seeming dramatic contrast to arguably more empowering movements for Black Power in the 1970s. And we discuss the nature of transhistorical comparisons, especially when it comes to racial violence, racialized bodies, the politicization of crime and incarceration, and the relatively contemporary concept of intersectionality.

They are old enough to feel their lives becoming historical, and I ask them to think about Henry Rousso’s idea that “except in the case of violent transitions – a war or a revolution – we move from one era to another without immediately taking stock of it, without having realized that one generation has gradually passed away and another has replaced it.”⁹⁸ Contemporary history might allow them to be more conscious of how historical actors see time because of the emphasis on subtle ideological and emotional changes as they are lived.

The source was Black Lives Matter’s Twitter feed. I wanted to do something with social media since the question of virtual vs. face to face activism loomed in the background of a lot of our discussions. Students were asked to select a tweet and responses to it that they found compelling and analyze them in a short presentation. I asked them to think of the Twitter feed as a kind of anticipatory primary source and to assess what this body of cultural and political expression could reveal to archivists of the present moment, or historians of the very recent past.

The students mostly took up the tweets as springboards to discuss broader course themes. One student found pictures from Black Lives Matter’s protest of police marching in uniform and carrying guns at the Toronto Gay Pride parade in 2017. This student discussed the idea of intersectionality, and opened up a discussion about the perception of apolitical entertainment and consumerist spaces vs. spaces of political activism, and how the political imperatives of pride marches have evolved over time. Another found an advertisement for a Black Lives Matter block party as a means of exploring the movement in relation to joy, rather than grief, reprising a larger class

⁹⁷ Rita Felski, *The Uses of Literature* (New York: Blackwell, 2008), 39.

⁹⁸ Henry Rousso, *The Latest Catastrophe: History, the Present, the Contemporary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 97.

discussion about the emotions that animate social movements. She also pondered whether such parties could be a means of reclaiming neighbourhood space tainted by police shootings. Another student showed a tweet announcing the unveiling of the statue of African American intellectual and activist Octavio Catto outside of Philadelphia. The tweet included a meditation about what it would mean to have a black historical figure memorialized in public space, connecting this to our conversations about the sense of history igniting Black Lives Matter and the imperative of destroying Confederate monuments.

They did a great job linking the tweets to course themes, and they made some interesting transhistorical comparisons. I would have loved to see them reckon more with the idea of tweets as primary source documents, how they might pose a challenge to more “traditional” documents, whether or not these are simply transient sources, and what dilemmas they propose for historical preservation. I also would have liked to see them interrogate the tweets as one might any historical source: What do they know about the producers of these documents? Who is the audience and what is the mode of address? Is it a credible, copied, or altered version and what might that mean in this context, when some students suspected that some of the white supremacist responses on the feed were Russian bots? It would also be great to analyze their language more, and the nature of the genre, from announcements, to photographs, to poetry.

It was probably too many layers of analysis to ask students to make thematic linkages, transhistorical comparisons, and then also ask them to contemplate the nature of the primary source, and this was my own shortcoming in conceiving the assignment. Still, it strikes me as intriguing that English as a discipline has been preoccupied, during the past ten years, with the ways that ordinary readers and literary critics read literature and there has not been this same sustained discussion amongst historians about reading primary sources.⁹⁹ It seems that a seminar on contemporary history could be a place to instill this kind of reflection, because the sources are not self-evident ones, and they have yet to be engaged with or digested by general readers or professional historians alike.

Final Thoughts

I wrote this in 2018, reflecting on teaching during 2017. I speculate that the reception and tenor of this assignment would be quite different now, particularly in light of the wake of George Floyd’s murder in 2020 (among other murders of Black people). These highlight with painful clarity--and add a renewed urgency to studying--the ways in which the history of the racist present merges with the history of the racist past.

⁹⁹ See the special issue of *Representations* called “The Way We Read Now,” Vol. 108, no. 1 (Fall 2009); Michael Warner, “Uncritical Reading,” 13-38 in Jane Gallop, ed., *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, eds. *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).