

Naming Resistance and Religion in the Teaching of Race and White Supremacy: A Pedagogy of Counter-Signification for Black Lives Matter

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Abstract

The need to bring religion into our teaching of race and white supremacy is critically important, but by simply naming it, we take the first step in inviting our students to understand the how's and why's of it. The pedagogy of naming described herein, which is inspired by the #BlackLivesMatter movement, is theoretically grounded in the theory of signification and counter-signification developed by scholars of religion, Charles H. Long and Richard Brent Turner. I explore how the act of naming, as a form of signification, can be employed to heuristically structure intersectional considerations of religion in the teaching of a Black Lives Matter course. Specifically, the study draws upon teaching units from my Black Lives Matter course in order to address how a critical analysis of Christian privilege and Christo-normativity, Islam, and religious history can figure into critical engagements with race and white supremacy.

Keywords

Black Lives Matter, Islam, Religious Studies, Intersectionality, Christian Privilege, Christian Supremacy, Christo-normativity, Charles Long, Signification, Religious Identity

#BlackLivesMatter

We live in a time and place where it is important to witness that #BlackLivesMatter. This witnessing is performed across a variety of spaces. It is witnessed in households and houses of worship. It is extended across yards, counters, and cubicles. It is staged in city plazas, town squares, and other public spaces. It is testified in courtrooms, police stations, and prisons. The very naming of #BlackLivesMatter continues to emerge across all these many sites of everyday life because the dilemma that it confronts, the structural entrenchment of racism and white supremacy, persists with deadly and deleterious consequences for all. The need to name #BlackLivesMatter, then, is no less critical and necessary in our classrooms and across our campuses. As a religious studies scholar, then, I have worked to incorporate in my teaching of #BlackLivesMatter the manifold ways that religion and religious identity figure into the discourse and also how it has and continues to accompany narratives of resistance. How I go about making this pedagogical intervention is rooted to both my teaching context and the experiences of my students.

With respect to teaching context, I primarily engage undergraduate students at Fairfield University, a Jesuit Catholic university. Situated squarely in Fairfield, Connecticut, one of the wealthiest counties in the United States, the university is a predominantly white institution that continues to grapple with issues of racial and economic diversity. As Simmons reports the *Princeton Review* ranked Fairfield University in 2009 “as the No. 1 school in the category for Little Class/Race Interactions” (2009). While different initiatives have been pursued since then, the work continues. In fact, the rise to prominence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement around 2013 spurred student activism and new interventions at Fairfield University. One concrete outcome was the formation and development of a Black Lives Matter course in the spring semester of 2016. Students, faculty, and staff came together to establish an interdisciplinary and action-oriented course with a diverse array of instructors rotating through the course. The final project for the course was designed intentionally to be student-driven and activist-oriented. I joined the teaching rotation for the second iteration of the course and served as the instructor of record for its fourth iteration. It was for this Black Lives Matter course that I developed and refined the pedagogical intervention that I share herein. My guiding question was how could I incorporate considerations of religion and religious identity in the critically important task of teaching about racial justice?

My entry points for making this desired for intervention are twofold: 1) intersectionality and 2) counter-signification. As the Black Lives Matter course at Fairfield University takes to heart,

understanding matters of race and racism is never just about understanding race and racism. As the scholarship of intersectionality makes demonstrably clear, matters of class, gender, sexual orientation, and many other identities and privileges further complicate and texture the systemic nature of racism, white supremacy, and other inter-related forms of oppression (see Pliner and Banks, 2012; Case, 2013 for scholarship on intersectionality and pedagogy). To invoke Crenshaw's original intervention, subordination occurs along more than "a single categorical axis" (1989, 140). The Black Lives Matter course, taught by many instructors, discloses the intersectional nature of racial injustice through the array of perspectives that cycle into the classroom. One of my contributions, as a scholar of religion, is to help students appreciate in nuanced ways how religion and religious identity are complicit with, subject to, or work to disrupt the prevailing racial discourses. I argue that how our students come to critically understand white supremacy and #BlackLivesMatter, ought to include a lens for religious analysis.

While intersectionality provides the theoretical grounds from which to approach religious considerations, I also needed to find an accessible way to engage my students in the classroom. One pedagogical technique that I have used to successfully make such an intervention is built upon Charles H. Long's theory of signification and counter-signification and the very words of #BlackLivesMatter itself. While my students may be unfamiliar with the critical theories underlying my teaching at the outset, they all enter the course with some familiarity with #BlackLivesMatter. Informed by the press of current events and social media, students possess some impression of the energy and tensions surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement as it has formed in popular American imaginations. Drawing upon the sense of familiarity and urgency surrounding movement, I center the words #BlackLivesMatter in class as an act of naming for two reasons. First, #BlackLivesMatter represents a paradigmatic case of counter-signification for us to critically explore for the purposes of better understanding racism, white supremacy, and intersectionality. Second, the naming of #BlackLivesMatter introduces students to the importance of naming as both a means of structuring the course and familiarizes them with a particular mode of inquiry in the classroom. Before delving in the pedagogical dimensions of naming, #BlackLivesMatter, and intersectional inquiry, however, Long's conception of counter-signification and signification requires further explanation.

Signification, Counter-Signification, and the Act of Naming

In speaking of signification I am drawing upon the work of two scholars of African American religions, Charles H. Long, whose work more broadly concerns the history of religions, and Brent Richard

Turner, whose research engages directly with African American Muslims. Long understands signification to be the ways through which a dominant group subjugates, denigrates, and/or marginalizes another group. Long (1986) provides a theoretical account of signification in the introduction to a collection of essays on the concept:

Signifying... obscures and obfuscates a discourse without taking responsibility for so doing. This verbal misdirection parallels the real argument but gains its power of meaning from the structure of the discourse itself without the signification being subjected to the rules of the discourse. As a matter of fact, the signifier may speak in agreement with a point of view, while the tone of the voice creates doubt in the very act and words of agreement. Or the signifier may simply add comments that move the conversation in another direction. Or the signifier will simply say a word or make a comment that has nothing to do with the context of the discourse, but immediately the conversation must be formulated at another level because of that word or phrase. Signifying is a very clever language game, and one has to be adept in the verbal arts either to signify or to keep from being signified upon (p. 1).

Long's relatively abstract description delineates the discernible contours and implicit strategies underlying acts of signification. While the ways of signification can be either overt or covert, apparent or subtle, the objective of signification is the same: to preserve and reinforce the structural inequalities that benefit the dominant group.

The subordinating process at work in signification is discernible in any number of contemporary racial flashpoints. Take for example the array of responses raised in 2016 in response to Colin Kaepernick, an American football quarterback at the time for the San Francisco 49ers. Kaepernick drew widespread attention when he refrained from standing for the national anthem staged at the beginning of National Football League games. He explained, "I am not going to stand up and show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color" (Wyche, 2016). Rather than engaging the issue of systemic racism raised by Kaepernick, the unsympathetic segments of the public, which included fans, media personalities, and politicians, responded with claims and queries that invoked a series of symbols, principles, and names aimed at shifting the discourse towards less socially discomfiting and more publicly manageable issues. The American flag and anthem as well as the role of veterans and athletes were raised to refocus attention on the voice of protest himself, Kaepernick, rather than the substance of his protest, systemic racial injustice. Kaepernick's patriotism, political agency, and personal integrity became the subject of intense scrutiny instead of the structural inequalities that he initially tried to protest. Not all of

these responding voices were overtly antagonistic necessarily, but they all worked to marginalize Kaepernick's protest in their own ways. The possessors and beneficiaries of the status quo were using "signification" against Kaepernick, just as signification had been wielded against earlier black athletes engaged in similar acts of protestation.¹ In every instance the goal was to subvert the original discourse. In Long's own work, signification often appears to highlight the ways that religion was used by European imperialists, Western colonizers, and the white American majority to maintain a white supremacy at the cost of others. In sum, signification is a discourse tactic deployed to maintain structural inequalities.

While signification is a rich subject to interrogate and analyze on its own, my interest in it is pedagogical. Indeed, I am interested in two aspects of Long's theorization. First, I am using signification as Turner (2003) does, primarily to mean "the issue of naming and identity" (p. 2). Following the analytical model set by Turner in his study of *Islam in the African-American Experience*, I am turning to names and the act of naming because of the concise heuristic framing that it provides for the community of learning in the classroom. A focus on naming allows the class to explore the ways that a single term or phrase can be deployed, interpreted, exploited, and subverted across a number of historic instances by a variety of persons, parties, and movements. There is also an abundance of recognizable and pertinent signified names – like "white," "urban," and the "war on drugs" – to introduce at different intervals in the term. Each act of naming serves as a signal moment in the classroom. It indicates to students that each life, idea, or movement named in the class has meaningful weight, warrants discovery, and seeks deeper disclosure. Additionally, naming provides a thematic device that can be used to tie together seemingly disparate periods, people, and movements.

Nonetheless, I recognize that the act of naming runs the risk of terminating with the act alone. Naming can be ephemerally and superficially performed without sustained action or serious follow through, as is often the case on social media. As feminist philosopher Alison Bailey points out, "We engage social injustices in safe ways by... following #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter, but not in our communities" (Yancey, 2017, p. 62). In the vacuous-ness of the internet, naming can easily be nothing more than a limited form of solidarity, which is more concerned with social posturing and outward presentation than actual engagement. At least within the classroom, where we gather as a community of learning and there is the regularity of face-to-face encounters, the act of naming carries with it a greater

¹ Strikingly similar forms of signification were used against the earlier protests of black athletes like Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf in 1996 who was an NBA guard for the Denver Nuggets that year and U.S. track and field Olympians Tommie C. Smith and John Carlos in 1968. See for example Grewal's film (2007) and Carlos and Zirin (2011).

degree of accountability. The writing, discussion, and collaborative work that takes place in and out of the classroom facilitates and sustains our inquiry into that which is named. Moreover, the continual turn to the act of naming is intended to translate for students into self-designed activist projects across campus by the conclusion of the term. Essentially by the end of the course, if not prior, students are asked to undertake the work of naming themselves.

The other element of Long's exposition on signification that is important to this pedagogy of naming is the impulse to resist signification or what Long expresses as the desire, "...to keep from being signified upon" (1986). Building upon Long, Turner more explicitly named this phenomenon "counter-signification," a convention that I follow here (2003). While the dominant group is working to maintain the unequal status quo, the communities targeted for subjugation are continually counter-signifying in response. It is precisely against their critique, protest, resistance, and other manifestations of agency and autonomy that the dominant group undertakes the work of signification. Long, for his part, clearly recognizes the interplay of competing strands of signification between dominant and subordinated groups. For example, when Long (1986) discusses how signification was marshaled against African Americans he writes:

...my community was a community that knew that one of the most important meanings about it was the fact that it was a community signified by another community. This signification constituted a subordinate relationship of power expressed through custom and legal structure. While aware of this fact, the community undercut this legitimated signification with a signification upon this legitimated signifying (p. 2).

Signification, then, is not solely the tool of the oppressor, but can also manifest as a resistive measure – as counter-signification. In the hands of the subordinated, it can be used to generate a counter-discourse that opposes, subverts, or undermines the discriminatory norms imposed by the dominant group.

Where Long and Turner developed their respective understandings of signification and counter-signification for the study of religion, I have worked to adapt their contributions for the pedagogical aim of exposing the intersection of religion and race in the classroom. Like Turner, my own usage of naming in the teaching of race and white supremacy focuses on the names that emerge out of those counter-discourses, including religious and specifically Muslim ones that seek to challenge the dominant discourse. Indeed, the foregrounding of #BlackLivesMatter at the outset of the course is intended to signal that how the class will go about studying racial injustices and white supremacy is primarily through the counter-

concepts and counter-significations developed in response and resistance to the prevailing structural inequalities.

Expanding Interventions

How we as a class go about unpacking the many layers of significance to #BlackLivesMatter establishes the model for how we will proceed with the persons, peoples, ideas, and movements that will be named later in the term. My students are invited to explore as fully as possible what animates these words. I have them consider what sort of work these words do. On one level, its concision is meant to capture public attention. As a form of counter-signification, #BlackLivesMatter is intended more as a proclamation or even a provocation, rather than as a question or descriptor. While it may describe a racial reality (that black lives do not matter to the culture of white supremacy), the framing of these words conveys a sense of urgency that demands widespread engagement and response. They invite inquiry. What do they mean? What problem(s) do these words name? Closely linked to these questions are those of social and historical context. Who first spoke these words? When did they appear? Then, given the persistent relevance of #BlackLivesMatters, who still speaks them still? When and where do they continue to appear? Although #BlackLivesMatter may have gained traction around in protest of the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin, the phrase still has counter-signifying power today (Taylor 2016; Lebron 2017). Its efficacy is multivalent. It names specific tragedies – the murder of black men, women, and children like Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, and Charleena Lyles. It names a call to action – the need to mobilize, organize, and precipitate changes in policy and culture. It names the systemic racial injustices of the United States: the prison industrial complex and the judicial and legislative manifestations of white supremacy. It names a movement – a trans-historical struggle stretching across the many decades and centuries of this country’s past. #BlackLivesMatter, as a counter-signification, draws attention to a host of issues for critical exploration.

Arriving at these points, however, is not always straightforward. Discussions can be contentious. Significations raised in opposition, like “all lives matter” or “blue lives matter,” are often raised in response to #BlackLivesMatter. Philosopher Alison Bailey calls these phrases “shadow texts” explaining that “[t]he word ‘shadow’ is intended to call to mind the image of something walking closely alongside another without engaging with it...” (Yancey, 69).

Exemplifying Long’s concept of signification, words like these are deployed to subvert, sublimate, or redirect the ongoing discourse. Yet, as Bailey advocates, such expressions ought to be engaged directly. By taking the time to analyze critically these responses and their respective genealogies, the nature and objective of dominant group significations can be made more readily apparent to the class. When all these signifying phrases like “all lives matter” are set alongside counter-signifying ones like “black lives matter” the stakes, histories, animating energy behind them come into sharper relief for the students. Rather than a genuine move to broader moral considerations, shadow texts serve to silence the original issue under protest.

Counter-examples to #BlackLivesMatter, of course, need not be the only way that signification and counter-signification are productively employed in the classroom. Naming can also be effectively leveraged at the concrete level of the individual person. Any of the names of the black lives taken by law enforcement officers in last half decade – like Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Freddie Grey, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, Terence Crutcher, Charleena Lyles, or Stephon Clark – could serve as an opportunity to extend the discussion of racism and white supremacy. Yet rather than turning to the naming unfolding in the present, I turn to names that direct the class along a more historical track:

Ramarley Graham
 Danroy Thomas Henry Jr.
 Aiyana Jones
 Oscar Grant III
 Sean Bell
 Timothy Stansbury Jr.
 Amadou Diallo

I list these names in this order for my students for several reasons. First, they invite students to delve into the specificities of each name prompting them to look for a common element. Students quickly discover that each name marks an unjust death much like those gaining attention today. Second, the names transport the class further back in time one name at a time: Ramarley Graham was slain by police in his New York apartment on February 2, 2012; Danroy Thomas Henry Jr. was shot and slain by police in New York City on October 17, 2010; Seven-year-old Aiyana Jones was killed in a police raid in Detroit on May 16, 2010; Oscar Grant III was shot and killed by police in Oakland on January 1, 2009; Sean Bell was shot and killed by plainclothes undercover police officers in New York on November 25, 2006, the morning of his wedding; Timothy Stansbury Jr. was slain by police in New York City on January 4, 2004; Amadou Diallo,

an immigrant from Guinea, was shot and killed by four plainclothes police officers in New York City on February 4, 1999. These names reveal a historical pattern of structural violence against black men, women, and children predating #BlackLivesMatter.

The names, however, are not only intended to highlight victimhood. A history of protest and resistance also emerges if the time is taken to investigate the communities to which these lives belonged. As philosopher Lebron (2017) writes in his reflection on the movement, “As I had turned those three words over in my mind – black lives matter – and read them in news stories and heard them spoken by commentators and friends, it became clear the three words themselves, as distinct from the particular strategies and agents of the movement, indicated a sentiment that was as old as the desire to be free from slavery” (p. xiii). The naming in the classroom, then, need not nor should not depend solely on headlines or ongoing activist work as important as they may be. There is a longer historical arc to be traced.

This movement into the past also serves another important pedagogical purpose. It allows me to make interventions on the religious front. I immediately follow the preceding names with these:

Fred Hampton

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Jimmie Lee Jackson

Malcolm X

Addie Mae Collins

Denise McNair

Carole Robertson

Cynthia Wesley

Medgar Evers

Emmett Till

Once more these names mark black lives slain under a regime of white supremacy. This shared fate is easier to surface in the classroom given the greater historical prominence that each person has acquired. Moreover, the names carry the students further back into the past. All of them were drawn into the Black American liberation struggle of the mid-twentieth century, though each understood and navigated that struggle in their own way. On December 4, 1969, Fred Hampton, a rising voice of leadership in the Black Panther Party, was slain in Chicago during a raid organized by local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies. On April 4, 1968 the outspoken civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. The Selma marches of 1965 drew upon the outrage and activist energy that emerged after civil rights

activist Jimmie Lee Jackson was fatally shot by Alabama State Troopers on February 26, 1965. Human rights activist Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21, 1965 in Harlem. On September 15, 1963, 11-year-old Denise McNair and 14-year-old Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley lost their lives in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama when white men affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan firebombed it. On June 12, 1963 civil rights activist Medgar Evers was assassinated by a Klansman. On August 28, 1955 Emmett Till, 14 years old, was lynched by two white men who were later acquitted of the heinous crime.

While all of these lives have a clear relevance for understanding the nature and history of anti-black racism and white supremacy in the United States, these same lives become more full-fledged when examined from an intersectional perspective. For example, in the months prior to his assassination Dr. King helped to organize the multiracial “Poor People’s Campaign” fully cognizant of the interrelatedness of economic justice to racial justice. Similarly, in his final year Malcolm X had turned to the wider international community for support, especially those newly independent African nations and the Muslim International (Daultazai, 2012; Tuck, 2014; Assensoh and Alex-Assensoh, 2016; Grewal, 2014). Malcolm X recognized the strikingly similar structural injustices at work in American segregation and European colonialism. An intersectional approach, then, is valuable for its ability to introduce a broader set of considerations to the teaching of race and white supremacy. My interest here, however, is more specifically concerned with how religion and religious identity figure or do not figure into these explorations.

While religion is often overlooked or dismissed as a vector of critical analysis, an growing number of religious studies scholars and theologians are producing significant studies exploring the complex and varied ways that religion figures into systemic racism and white supremacy. First, an intersectional analysis of religion can be used to surface the linkages between white supremacy and Christian supremacy. For example, the fire-bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church mentioned above becomes further complicated when taking into account the perpetrators, members of the Ku Klux Klan, which is a group informed as much by a particular strand of Christian supremacy as it is by white supremacy. The work of scholars like Burlein (2002) and Baker (2011) have done much to examine the religious dimensions of groups like the Ku Klux Klan and their interplay and intersection with American Christianity, particularly Protestantism.

The historical and social linkages between white supremacy and Christianity, however, run much deeper. Other scholars, such as Carter (2008), Jennings (2011), and Fletcher (2017), have critically mapped the genealogical ties between Christian supremacy and white supremacy from specifically

theological, historical, and colonial vantages. Present systemic racial injustices are built upon and indebted to Christian supremacy. Christian privilege and Christo-normativity emerge from out of Christian supremacy and they are pervasive. According to Blumenfeld and Jaekel (2012), Christian privilege is an “an invisible, unearned, and largely unacknowledged array of benefits given to Christians, with which they often unconsciously walk through life” (p. 128). Moreover, commitment to Christianity is not required to benefit from Christian privilege. Secularity does not bar one from it. A cultural Christo-normativity is all that is needed to accrue Christian privilege. As education specialist Accapadi (2009) explains, “...Christianity, and emulation of physical representations of Christianity, religious or secular, itself offers access and entry to mainstream societal norms in a way that no other religious identity can ever rival in the United States” (p. 123). Time is kept according to Christian calendars and holidays. Christian language pervades the expressions of the nation (“One nation under God,” “In God we trust,” “God bless America,” and “our inalienable rights endowed by the Creator”), while court oaths and oaths of office are ritually taken on bibles. As Johnson, et. al. (2012) have argued, Christianity has been privileged and prioritized in an ostensibly secular society, such that “Christianity” is nearly synonymous with that which is “American” and/or “moral,” which in turn makes it all the more difficult to recognize the complicity of Christianity in the social maintenance of heterosexism, homophobia, white supremacy, and other structural injustices. While such interventions are increasingly raised in theological and religious studies class contexts, it is just as important to include them in other disciplinary settings where race and white supremacy are being taught.

My turn to intersectionality, however, is not aimed solely at critiquing religion, religious identity, and various forms of religious privilege. Religion is also at work in counter-signifying discourses of resistance. As the above list of names from the mid-twentieth century reveal, an array of religious commitments animated these lives. The civil rights activist work undertaken by Dr. King, a Baptist minister, and Jimmie Lee Jackson, a Baptist deacon, was thoroughly shaped by their respective faith commitments. Their understandings of Christianity, which developed out of the Social Gospel movement of the early twentieth century, deeply informed their thoughts and actions and represented a challenge to other interpretations of Christianity that were complicit in American white supremacy (Johnson, 2015). Nor should the naming of religion and resistance in the teaching of race and white supremacy be limited to Christianity. Malcolm X, for much of his career, was a prominent minister in the Nation of Islam, a religious movement that consciously framed itself as the original black religion. Its leaders understood the religion of the Nation of Islam as a countersignifier to the white slave master religion of Christianity. In

the case of King, Jackson, and Malcolm X, religion and religious identity mark different forms of privilege, marginalization, and resistance. Religion became a source and means for altering the discourse against those in power. Rather than be set aside, religion and religious identity ought to be foregrounded more clearly in intersectional analyses of race and white supremacy in order to better understand both its complicity with and oppositionality to structural injustices.

Islam as a Religion of Resistance

Given the limited time that I have with the students in my Black Lives Matter course, I focus on Islam as the main case study for unearthing the resistive dimensions of religion for anti-black racism and white supremacy. Naturally, the name that has best facilitated this particular turn is the name discussed immediately above, Malcolm X. As Manning Marable (2011) has pointed out in his biography of Malcolm X, Malcolm's own life is replete with a host of names revealing different dimensions of his life. Each of these names, when signified and explored, offers a window into the broader African American experience of Islam and underscores the ways that marginalization, subjugation, resistance, and empowerment were imposed or made manifest. The names I typically present to students are as follows:

Malcolm Little

Red

Homeboy

Jack Carlton

Detroit Red

Big Red

Satan

Malachi Shabazz

Malcolm X

Malik el-Shabazz

El Hajj Malik El Shabazz

Omowale

Red and Detroit Red were nicknames Malcolm earned for his distinctive reddish hair, especially the bright red conk that he adopted during his young adult years in Michigan (X and Haley, 1965, pp. 78, 97). Malcolm turns to the name "Homeboy" in describing his transitional experience moving from Lansing, Michigan to Boston, Massachusetts. Jack Carlton was a stage name under which he performed in jazz

bars. These names can be mapped against the structural injustices, cultural prejudices, and social realities that African Americans faced in the early twentieth century.

When in prison, Malcolm became deeply antireligious, or more precisely anti-Christian, stating, "...my favorite targets were the Bible and God... Eventually, the men in the cellblock had a name for me: 'Satan.' Because of my antireligious attitude" (X and Haley, 1965, p. 154). Converting to the Nation of Islam while still imprisoned, he started signing his letters as Malachi Shabazz. As discussed by Evanzz (1922), Malachi, meaning "my messenger" in Hebrew, was taken from the Bible (pp. 12-14). As for Shabazz, Elijah Muhammad (1973) explains that it was the name of the tribe from which Blacks were descended (p. 31). These particular names trace out Malcolm's attempts to break with the prevailing Christo-normativity of his day. Under the name "Satan," Malcolm begins with an individualized anti-Christianity only to discover and join an entire community aimed counter-signifying Christian supremacy, the Nation of Islam. Indeed the name of Shabazz that he assumed pointed to a lost history of civilizational greatness, provided a powerful counter-narrative to white supremacist narratives of subordinate blackness. According to Marable (2011), Elijah Muhammad would ultimately rebuke Malcolm for attempting to replace his slave name by himself and insisted that he assume the "X" instead (p. 193). As Malcolm X (1965) explains, "The Muslim's 'X' symbolized the true African family name that he never could know. For me, my 'X' replaced by white slavemaster name of 'Little' which some blue-eyed devil named Little had imposed upon my paternal forebearers" (p. 201). It is notable, however, that the names Malachi and Shabazz recur throughout Malcolm's life (see Carson, 1991, pp. 101-2). In fact, he retains the name Shabazz after his break with the Nation of Islam as demonstrated by his post-Hajj name El Hajj Malik El Shabazz. Finally in Nigeria, after his break with the Nation, Malcolm was given the name "Omowale," which means in Yoruba "the son who has come home" (X and Haley, 1965, 356). The name is fitting since he received it while touring Africa and the Middle East in search of pan-Africanist and Muslim allies for the cause of African Americans back in the United States.

As powerful as the names of Malcolm X may be for counter-signification, Malcolm X is a microcosm of a wider horizon of Islam and resistance in the African American historical experience. The entire span of the twentieth century is replete with other counter-signifying examples. Alternatively, I have used the following names to broaden the class's engagement with religious privilege:

Noble Drew Ali

Daoud Ahmed Faisal

Wallace Fard Muhammad

Elijah Muhammad

Warith Deen Mohammed

Louis Farrakhan

Like the many names of Malcolm, these black lives represent different resistive responses from out of the African American community. Each named Islam in his own way as a symbolic, religious, and social identity aimed at disrupting Christonormativity and white supremacy in the American context. While scholars like Turner (2003), McCloud (1995), Curtis (2002), and Dannin (2002) have addressed the particular contributions of each in greater detail, I will review them briefly. Noble Drew Ali (d. 1929) is the name adopted by Timothy Drew, who founded a new religious movement based in Detroit in the early 1920s called the Moorish Science Temple. Drawing upon the symbolic universe of Islam, the Moorish Science Temple sought to replace the conventional racial identities placed upon its members – Colored, Negro, and African – with a set more distant in evocation – Moor, Moslem, and Asiatic. The former names were too strongly tied to the experience of domestic anti-black racism. The alternative names were employed by the adherents of the new faith in hopes of exchanging that denigrating and deadly experience with one more inflected with the dignity and fascination often afforded to foreign strangers. This intentional shift in naming was accompanied by distinctive changes in attire and bearing as well.

With the next two names, Islam figured more prominently in religious terms. In New York City in 1924, Daoud Ahmed Faisal (d. 1980) sought to spread Sunni Islam among the city's African Americans residents. Energized by anticolonialism and Islamic revivalism, Faisal wanted to connect his black convert faith community with the wider Muslim world in strikingly similar way to Malcolm X's later turn to the Muslim International (Dannin, 2002). Back in Detroit in 1930, Wallace Fard Muhammad appeared to establish the Lost-Found Nation of Islam, another new religious movement, amongst the predominantly Baptist African-American population. Rather than reframing or recasting black racial identity as Noble Drew Ali did, Wallace Fard Muhammad inverted the predominant racial narrative by speaking of a long and proud history of black civilizational excellence. While drawing upon a Christo-normative lexicon and relying upon the new community's biblical literacy, the Nation of Islam countersignified Christianity through a number of means including scriptural reinterpretations, new names upon conversion, distinctive sartorial standards, dietary regulations, and a morally-inflected set of habits, customs, and rituals. In many ways the Nation was being explicitly defined by its leading voices in contradistinction to Christian and white supremacy.

The last three names represent key lives in the later history of the Nation of Islam, much like Malcolm X. When the founder Wallace Fard Muhammad disappeared in 1934, Elijah Muhammad (d. 1975) would assume the mantle of leadership and guide the Nation for the next four decades continuing and magnifying the Nation's counter-signifying discourse. Elijah Muhammad's son, Warith Deen Mohammed (d. 2008), would transform the community even further by leading most of its practitioners in a mass conversion to Sunni Islam during the late 1970s, while Louis Farrakhan would resurrect the Nation of Islam in 1978 to readopt many of the original religious counter-significations that Wallace Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad had originally espoused. In all of these named lives, religion does not manifest as a buttress to structural anti-black racism, but as an oppositional force, though in significantly different ways. For these names and the respective movements they represent, religion was key to countersignifying a distinctive path of resistance.

The pedagogical turn to naming and Islam need not be restricted to the present or the twentieth century. The history of Islam and black religious countersignification can be traced back to the earliest decades of European settler colonialism. As Turner (2003) observes, "Resistance... was a global theme in New World black Islam in the eighteenth and nineteenth century" (p. 24). Turner and other scholars, like Austin (1984), Diouf (1998), and Gomez (2005), have documented and analyzed the early historical intersections of religion, race, and white supremacy through the lives of enslaved and formerly enslaved black men. The pedagogical use of naming, then, can also be used to carefully examine specific black lives from this earlier period of history:

Job ben Solomon

Yarrow Mamout

Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima

Bilali Muhammad

Lamine Kaba

Omar b. Said

Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua

Nicholas Said

Nearly all of them, with exception of Nicholas Said, were enslaved through the trans-Atlantic slave trade (see Said, 2000; al-Ahari, 2006; Said, 2011).² But in every case, Islam figured centrally into each life narrative. As Turner (2003) notes, "In the United States... African Muslims practices more subtle forms

² Nicholas Said was sold into slavery to an Arab-African and arrived in the United States as a free man.

of resistance to slavery – some of them kept their African names, wrote in Arabic, and continued to practice their religion... All of this constituted intellectual resistance to slavery...” (p. 24). For these men Islam lay at the heart of the counter-signifying discourse.

Abolitionists, for their part, were especially drawn to enslaved Muslim Africans because their faith was perceived to cleave closer to the Christian norm that underlay abolitionist efforts. Those enslaved Muslims who had religious learning, which many of the above named possessed, gained further attention for their ability to share and write their life experiences. The collection of narratives, testimonies, letters, and autobiographies that emerged from these enslaved African Muslims, then, becomes a powerful archive for interrogating the complex relationship of Christianity to Islam in the struggle for liberation of these early black lives. For some, conversion to Christianity facilitated their advancement or emancipation. For instance, Omar b. Said’s outward conversion to Christianity was instrumental in facilitating the recording and dissemination of his narrative. Yet a closer reading of his works, where a chapter of the Qur’an is written repeatedly from memory, reveals a potentially subversive element underlying Omar b. Said’s life and words (see Hunwick 2003; Said 2011).³ Abd al-Rahman Ibrahim more clearly used the missionizing aspirations of abolitions to secure his own return Africa while remaining committed to his Islamic faith (Turner, 2003). Precisely how each of these individuals navigated their religious identity, however, is a more complex question to analyze and one worth pursuing in the classroom.

Additionally, the motives of the abolitionists supporting these lives also should be interrogated with respect to race and religion. For many Christian abolitionists, repatriation back to Africa was intimately tied to manumission because of their particular vision of race relationships. While they may have desired an end to slavery, many could not fathom co-existence between blacks and whites, hence the drive to repatriation. Furthermore, the return to Africa served another purpose. Those freed by the abolitionists were meant to arrive back home as Christian missionaries. Even though the previously mentioned Abd al-Rahman Ibrahim never carried this out, his return home was facilitated precisely because of this abolitionist aspiration. Again, Christian supremacy pervades many of these lives upon closer inspection.

³ Specifically, Omar b. Said reproduces in his writings chapter 67 of the Qur’an, *Sūrat al-Mulk*, which asserts that dominion belongs to God alone. When read against the author’s personal circumstances, the scriptural invocation can be read as a Muslim protest to his enslaved condition.

The preceding examples that I have offered through the various sets of names above, #BlackLivesMatter included, are far from exhaustive in what a class can explore with respect to race and religion. My focus on Islam arises from my own teaching context. Other religious intersections, both contemporaneous and historical, could have been just as fruitfully plumbed with a pedagogical framework of naming and counter-signification. The various elements of Christian resistance underlying the work of Dr. King and Jackson, for example, marks another religious trajectory worth unpacking more thoroughly. However religion is explored, the class's examination should not rest on complicity alone. Just as significant for understanding Black liberation and racial justice are the many ways that religion and religious identity have also informed the development of communities of resistance.

What's in a Name?

The structural apparatus of racism and white supremacy may employ a wide array of signifying discourses to preserve the discriminatory and oppressive status quo, but counter-signifying discourses of resistance have always appeared alongside them in challenge. #BlackLivesMatter, then, ought not to be understood as an entirely new phenomenon. Rather, it represents more properly the most recent manifestation of a broader trans-historical, intersectional struggle for racial justice. Because of the ubiquity and urgency of #BlackLivesMatter, however, it also represents an accessible, adaptable, and important entry point for developing a pedagogy of naming aimed at exposing the intersectional nature of racism and white supremacy, especially its religious dimensions. What a pedagogy of naming offers is a highly flexible means of transporting students to different historical contexts and guiding them down specific avenues of intersectional inquiry – one accomplished through the careful curation of counter-signifying names as well as open, yet discerning conversation. As I have argued, the act of naming and the underlying heuristic structure it provides can be used to surface both how religion is deployed to support structures of domination and how it is used to resist them.

Naming is a powerful, dynamic act. To name something is to honor its memory. Simultaneously, to name something is also to address the underlying structural dilemmas that require radical change. My focus here has been on the ways in which the act of naming itself, as a pedagogical device, can be deployed to prompt critical inquiry and discussion in the classroom. Signification and counter-signification possesses rhetorical, reflective, heuristic power that can help shape and direct the learning that takes place in the classroom. When naming is used with concision it both draws attention and invites inquiry. Furthermore, foregrounding the act of naming establishes a habit of expectation among students such that

each new name signals a turn to a new set of concerns or an important expansion upon what has come earlier. Each name presented in the classroom, then, has the potential to transform the direction of the class entirely. Indeed, the names that one chooses to signify or counter-signify in the classroom are endless. The list is never complete. The record of black lives is ongoing, stretching both into the perilous future and the under-documented past. This overabundance of names, however, provides flexibility in how one chooses to introduce naming into the classroom.

Nonetheless, it must be kept in mind that all the lives named thus far were exceptional in their ability to have their stories preserved and related by themselves or others. Millions of other black lives, Muslim and otherwise, have been and all too often continue to be denied this privilege. While naming can do much to shine a light on discourses of resistance, not all who resist can be named. The act of naming, nonetheless, is one means of recognizing and shining a light on these gaps, omissions, and obfuscations of history. Other under-represented narratives can be named. Consider for example, how the named herein are overwhelmingly male, especially those of decades and centuries past. Within the classroom this ought to prompt a series of queries: What does this say about the un-named experience of women? In what ways did these named voices challenge or were complicit in patriarchy and other structural forms of power and privilege, while still ostensibly working against white supremacy? How do class, ability, sexual orientation, and other identity categories intersect with religious identity in America? What else is being missed through the naming of individuals? All these questions and more ought to accompany a pedagogy of naming so that students can be directed to both broader and deeper horizons of inquiry. As helpful as naming can be for structuring and directing intersectional investigations, it represents a beginning, rather than an end, to understanding the workings of racial injustices.

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