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Meaning Behind the Movement: Black Lives Matter

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Protesters take to the streets of Albuquerque

Credit: Emma Hotz

(</file?fid=5ef648f62cfac2069369e0a8>)

Meaning behind the movement: Black Lives Matter

By Marissa Lucero © June 26, 2020

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To understand the power of a movement that began in 2013, we have to jump back nearly 400 years and grasp onto perhaps the same struggle the Black community fought then; the idea that all people should be treated fairly in the eyes of the law and in every institution.

"Ultimately when our responses become human responses as opposed to racial responses, that is when we're going to change as a society." - Dr. Finnie Coleman, UNM Associate Professor

The University of New Mexico Associate Professor Finnie Coleman said the Black Lives Matter movement mirrors similar ambitions of the NAACP in the 1920s, when the association led the Black civil rights struggle in fighting injustices that included voting rights, racial violence, discrimination in employment and segregated public facilities. He said it's also no different than the Black Panther Party movement that began in 1966.

"We are quick to forget what we are told in this country," Coleman said. "The idea that we should have to ask certain groups for permission to exercise our rights that the Constitution already guarantees us; that's a huge disconnect and I think it's one of the reasons why we have a difficult time talking about race."

In fact, Coleman explained Black Lives Matter doesn't *want* to be given anything. Instead, he said, what Black people want is to be able to leave their homes, to peacefully assemble and address government without fearing for their lives.

In 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was fatally shot as he walked home from a convenience store. George Zimmerman, who was patrolling the townhouse community in Sanford, Florida, pulled the trigger. Zimmerman later claimed to have shot the teenager in self-defense during a physical altercation. It took weeks before Zimmerman was eventually arrested and charged with Martin's murder. Black Lives Matter was founded in 2013 in response to Zimmerman's acquittal.



The global organization says its mission is to "eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes. By combating and countering acts of violence, creating space for Black imagination and innovation, and centering Black joy, we are winning immediate improvements in our lives." Black Lives Matter's three founders, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, say the project is now a member-led global network that includes more than 40 chapters.

Trevier Gonzalez

“In a really important way, the Black Lives Matter movement circles us back to the beating of Rodney

King in March 1991 and the riots that followed the acquittal of the four police officers in April 1992,” Coleman said. “I reference Rodney King because it has to do with surveillance and the ability of average citizens to produce evidence for the public record. It’s not so much that we have an epidemic of police brutality; cell phones and social media now allow the average person witnessing a tragedy to capture it and upload it in real-time.”

Coleman explained there are a lot of misconceptions when it comes to the Black Lives Matter movement. He said the struggle is for not only the Black community, but for all people to be treated fairly.

“In every institution, whether it’s religious, academic, governmental, economic, all aspects of American life, the *want* is to be treated equally,” he said. “I think there’s a huge mistake and a conceit by people who find themselves in the dominant culture, who imagine that the Black Lives Matter movement is asking them for something. What the movement is asking is to stop doing certain things. ‘Stop preventing me from exercising my rights. I’m not asking you to give me my rights; I’m asking you to stop preventing me from exercising my rights.’”

In recent weeks, protests and riots have erupted around the globe after the murder of George Floyd. The 46-year-old’s death while in police custody in Minneapolis has re-ignited a nationwide movement against police killings of Black Americans. Coleman said as people around the world watched details surrounding Floyd’s murder unfold, individuals in the “dominant” culture were quick to offer the wrong type of response.

“The dominant culture is quick to say, ‘That’s a horrible thing that’s happened to you guys. How can we help you?’ Coleman said. “But when I see that video, my response is a human response, not a racial response – my response was not an us versus them response. I felt the same way every other human being should have felt when they saw what happened to George Floyd. It did not matter to me who was under the officer’s knee; in this case, it just so happened to be a Black man. That incident made me as angry as I could be not solely because George Floyd was Black, but because no person should ever be senselessly brutalized and murdered by an officer of the law.”



Trevier Gonzalez

According to Coleman, the Black community’s taut relationship with law enforcement stems from the historical development of law enforcement in America; law enforcement’s roots in the policing of a slaved South.

“From the very beginning, police have had a relationship with the Black community that has been primarily focused upon surveillance,” he said. “When they were enforcing the law, for much of our country’s history, they were enforcing laws that were differential where race was concerned; where it was against the law for Black people to drink from that fountain, get an education, be in a certain part of town after 5 p.m. Historically, police had a very different relationship with Black people than they have had with other groups in this country. For most white people, their first instinct is to believe that the police are here to protect

them and their property, but for many Black people, their first instinct is that the police are there to protect someone else from them – they are there to make sure that you do not break the law not to protect you from lawbreakers.”

A majority of recent protests have centered around police brutality. Photos from around the U.S. show protesters staged outside police precincts, holding signs that read, “defund the police.” Coleman said he believes there is no one meaning for this term.

“For some people defunding means, abolish police. For others it means, let’s have a look at the amount of money cities and states pour into police departments and see if we might not redistribute those resources in ways that make more sense,” he said.

Some of the protests have led to riots and violence.

“I know there are a lot of people who are critical of the violence in the protests that are happening all over the country, and while I don’t condone the violence and property destruction, I do understand the energy behind those reactions and I don’t necessarily condemn the people using whatever voice they see fit,” Coleman said. “If you don’t hear me and I’m telling you, I can’t breathe, what do you expect me to do? If I break a window or burn down a building, will that get you to take your knee off my neck?’ We have to be really careful about our outrage about the outrage.”



Emma Hotz

Coleman said many of his sentiments he shares are the same he lectures in front of his students at UNM. Coleman, who served in the U.S. Army for 11 years, said he encourages his students to continue to have more sophisticated conversations about these topics. Only then, he said, will people start to see a change in society.

“Our arrogance often prevents us from having these conversations,” he said. “It’s imperative that we move beyond white supremacy, hegemonic masculinity, and racism that allow rogue policeman and neighborhood vigilantes to destroy black bodies in public spaces.”

Coleman said he’s optimistic about the future because he believes the beauty of this nation is shown in the very moment people begin to protest.

“We must continue to progress to that place where America lives up to its ideals; ideals spelled out in the Constitution of the United States,” Coleman said. “When we get to the point where our responses aren’t conditioned by our position and our racial attitudes; ultimately when our responses become human

responses as opposed to racial responses, that is when we’re going to change as a society.”

Thank you to Dr. Finnie Coleman (<https://english.unm.edu/about-us/people/faculty/coleman-finnie.html>), Associate Professor, American Literary Studies in the Department of English Language and Literature, and current Faculty Senate President.

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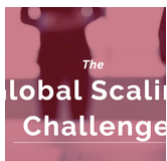
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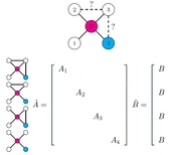
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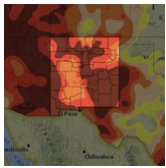
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