

Dear members of the Tufts WGSS community,

The Covid-19 pandemic quickly brought into relief those who are most vulnerable amongst us and most disposable to the state: workers, migrants, immunocompromised and other disabled people, the elderly, young queer and trans folks for whom home is not a safe place, incarcerated people, and people of color--Asian folks subject to racist backlash, and Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people disenfranchised by an inadequate healthcare system, unable to socially distance in tighter living quarters, and forced to work in risky conditions. This pandemic overlaps with another: the historical and everyday traumas that Black people in the Americas and globally must survive under racial capitalism, a struggle for breath alone, an ongoing subjugation that manifests spectacularly in the filmed murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police. The Movement for Black Lives has been fueled by this and many other recent murders of Black people, and every US state as well as many other countries have seen protests, vigils, and marches lifting up Black life and condemning white supremacy.

At the center of the Movement for Black Lives are Black women, queer, trans, and nonbinary folks. Black queer women--Alicia Garza, Opal Tometti, Patrisse Cullors--started the Black Lives Matter movement, the mothers of victims of police murder continue to speak at vigils and marches, Black queens vogue and Black girls dance Bomba bringing movement to the movement, and trans, non-binary, lesbian Black people have coordinated teach-ins, town halls, rallies, and protests over the last two weeks. And yet the murders of Breonna Taylor and Tony McDade are given less attention in public discourse; also, McDade, a Black trans man, is often misgendered and dead-named in media and memorials. The violence endured by Black trans women, the murder of Nina Pop or the brutality against Iyanna Dior, go un-investigated and are evidence of the state's failure to protect and care for trans life.

This uneven landscape of attention, care, and justice was boldly named by the Combahee River Collective in 1977: "it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our [Black women's] specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression ... the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work." The agenda they set forth--committing to a lifetime of struggle toward liberation for all Black people--is one that we must all adopt. The Collective invites others to commit to this work if they are willing to eliminate racism in their own movements and communities, and if they acknowledge the interlocking nature of oppression rather than single-issue identity politics. Our commitment must be unwavering; Alexis Pauline-Gumbs reminds us that the only white people abolitionist Harriet Tubman could trust were those "willing to use their privilege to literally stand between her and the law."

As a field, women's, gender, and sexuality studies has relied on single-issue politics, asking how gender or sexual difference produce inequality. Leaving whiteness unmarked in the study of difference has rendered our field complicit in anti-Black racism, even as we rely so dearly on Black feminist theories of intersectionality, identity

politics, and marginality. As a program, we commit ourselves to the work of uplifting and defending all Black life through our curricula, programming, and instruction. We also commit to recognizing the inequalities that persist in our university and larger system of education and to building an accountable and just community.

Black feminist, queer, and trans studies teaches us that embodiment is theory, that theory requires practice, and all this requires individual and collective work. To quote James Baldwin, “one of the paradoxes of education was that precisely at the point when you begin to develop a conscience, you must find yourself at war with your society. It is your responsibility to change society if you think of yourself as an educated person.” But education itself is a privilege. Amidst calling for free education, accessible housing, reformed judiciary processes, and the right to self-determine one’s gender and sexuality, the Third World Gay Liberation manifesto (1971) also demands, “We want an immediate end to the fascist police force.” Mainstream feminist and gay politics has often been complicit with practices that uphold white-supremacy by pushing for policing, incarceration, and the privatization of public space as solutions to problems of gender and sexuality-based violence. Feminist, queer, and trans movements and manifestos teach us that defunding and abolishing police, currently at the center of the Movement for Black Lives, must be accompanied by reforms in the education, medical, and legal industrial complexes. The road is long, the fight will be hard.

As a program, we commit to providing our students the tools to name, understand, and historicize systemic violence, white supremacy, and global anti-Blackness. We will do so by centering Black feminist, queer, and trans theory; women of color and postcolonial feminisms; and queer and trans of color critique in our core classes. In the spirit of Audre Lorde, we will make room for anger, with its capacity to carry information and energy, and the erotic, with the capacity for joy and redistribution.

We look forward to ongoing work with you in the spirit and practice of the Movement for Black Lives.

The Program in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Tufts

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