

Questions for Prof. Winston Grady-Willis

Thursday, August 13, 2020 12:00pm EDT

Sincere thanks to everyone who sent well wishes and other kind words! I hope to touch base with you directly before the calendar year ends. To those of you who posed questions, please accept my most sincere apologies for the delay. It has been a tad bit busy of late! ~WGW

LIVE QUESTIONS

With the information provided today, how can students particularly at Skidmore, engage in a deep institutional change when it comes to an anti-oppressive conversation?

Submitted: Amanda G. '21

ANSWER

In order for this to happen, Amanda, I think students have to be willing to wage a long-distance struggle. To work toward meaningful, substantive, change takes time, and it takes a commitment to dialogue and difficult work. Almost five years took place from the time activists in NYC protested police violence there to the moment that the *We Charge Genocide* petition was published. Am I suggesting you have years? Of course, not! But students do have several months in which to organize, to work with willing staff and faculty, and to listen to the voices of members of the larger community. I also think that students should approach such work with a spirit of self-critique as well as critique, in the tradition of grassroots activists going back generations.

Hi Professor- Thank you for this thoughtful lecture. I work for the New York City Council where the defund NYPD movement has taken a strong hold. During this contentious budget cycle, the council voted to shift responsibilities away from the NYPD i.e. homeless outreach and school safety oversight. Many advocates feel that because \$1 billion was not cut from the NYPD budget, the council is not doing enough to hold the NYPD accountable. What are your thoughts about the defund movement and the progress made so far?

Submitted: Elizabeth A. '10

ANSWER

Elizabeth, I can appreciate the position of activists who contend that not enough was done in terms of shifting resources and holding the NYPD accountable. However, I also think that we would all do well to remember just how formidable the NYPD and the PBA (union) are and have been. I contend that the gains that have been made are significant. However, I also think that the key to deep, meaningful change is that such shifts in funding be regularized over the course of many years. I personally believe that resources absolutely must be shifted. Yet, I also intentionally have avoided the term *defund*, because in both practical and strategic terms, it turns a significant number of individuals away from the dialogue before it has even begun, and is being manipulated by certain politicians to maintain the status quo heading into the November

elections. [Note: I first answered this question prior to the elections. Although there are some Democrats who say this was not the case, I do think the loss of key Democratic seats in the House of Representatives speaks to this.]

Personally, I'm a prison & police abolitionist. What approach to community safety do you advocate for and why?

Submitted: Krista Z. '09

ANSWER

I am going to provide an entirely unsatisfactory answer to this question, in large part because my thinking is in flux. While I have moved closer to an abolitionist politics, Krista, I acknowledge that I am not there yet. Part of this thinking on my part is informed by my lived experiences. A driver who was heavily under the influence of alcohol killed my Grandma Bernice during my sophomore year in college. And I personally know Black police detectives and officers who have challenged racism in their respective departments, some paying a price for it. Yet as an intellectual I am well aware of the ways in which incarceration and policing are contemporary manifestations of chattel slavery and neo-slavery. And as a Black man I have had encounters with police that I *know* would not have happened to White counterparts. I do believe that the entire criminal (in)justice system is in need of radical reform, and that institutional accountability must become a priority in ways that it now is not. Yet, I also believe—in what is both an irony and a contradiction, perhaps—that law enforcement agencies will increasingly be called upon to quell what I believe will be an almost unprecedented rise in organized grassroots White nationalist violence in the coming years.

Thank you Winston. What do you think the impact of the of white male loss of cultural influence has had on human rights struggles in America, if any?

Submitted: Neil M. '97

ANSWER

As I mentioned during the Webinar, Neil, I am not convinced that White men have lost cultural influence (example: Bernie Sanders), although they might perceive that they have, which could be just as important. I will say this: the influence of women, irrespective of racial or ethnic background, and Indigenous, Black, Latinx and Asian American activists, as well as LGBTQ individuals, has certainly grown. More important, I think, the effort to complicate such struggles and acknowledge the significance of multiple identities, is crucial for the full realization of human rights worldwide.

Protests of the past have indelibly been linked to formal organizations like SNICC, NAACP, etc. What troubles me somewhat with the Black Lives Matter movement is it seems to have no clear leader or agenda. The end of systemic racism in all aspects of American life is a grand gesture, one that has not been achieved over the last 155 years since the end of slavery. Do you think this organization and its millennial following can or will be successful in achieving this goal? Are we

any closer?

Submitted: Wendy W. '96

ANSWER

Although much of the activism of the past few months has embraced the term *Black Lives Matter*, Wendy, by no means has all of it been directly tied to the Black Lives Matter Global Network (BLM), which began as #blacklivesmatter thanks to the work of Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi. In an elaboration on the Black Panther Party, the group's guiding principles, "What We Believe," does articulate a clear agenda, one that is profoundly more gendered than is often discussed, particularly in the mainstream media: <https://blacklivesmatter.com/what-we-believe/>. One of the most important legacies of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced "Snick") mentor Ella Baker was her insistence that movements be led from the ground up. Will BLM, in and of itself, be successful in eradicating systemic racism? I do not know. At the end of the day, much of BLM's value and legacy might be even more tied to its unapologetic affirmation of an intersectional politics that is incredibly important intraracially, or within the group, around confronting heterosexism and violence against members of transgender communities.

Given the recent events with police brutality in the cases of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery - do you think we're finally at a place where we, as a nation, can make meaningful change? If so, what makes this period different from other police brutality cases that have come to light in prior years?

Submitted: Emily G. '09

ANSWER

Emily, I do think that we are better positioned here in the United States to confront police brutality and White vigilantism. You may have already noticed that the pendulum is shifting once again away from the public sentiment that seemed to exist in May. However, one thing is fairly apparent: whereas police officers and policing tended to receive the benefit of the doubt from mainstream society beforehand, that is no longer the case. That has had plate-shifting consequences for some officers and departments. In a matter of a few months the dominant cultural narrative about police officers has gone from them being seen as heroes to them being seen as violating the public trust. And as a result, the critique of police brutality has been broader than ever before.

Professor, Thank you so much for holding this today. Can you speak to how we can best handle that emotional rage, exhaustion, especially in the context of our country today?

Submitted: Elena Milius

ANSWER

Elena, thank you for your question! I think one of the best ways to handle rage and exhaustion, as well as to confront fear, is to do what student and community activists always did during earlier phases of this long movement for human rights: tap our cultural resources for strength. If you ask

almost any veteran of the movement, such as those individuals who were organizers with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee or the Congress of Racial Equality, they will tell you that singing freedom songs made a critical difference. I have seen firsthand movements that started with extraordinary commitment and energy fall by the wayside when participants did not sing, did not write or read aloud poetry, did not create chants that were creative and life-affirming, or did not stage performances. Drawing on such cultural traditions is a link earlier to earlier struggles, a reminder that we have to nourish our souls precisely as we speak truth to power.

After Joe Biden announced Kamala Harris as his running mate, there has been a lot of inner conflict among of Black Lives Matter activists because of Harris's past affiliation with her enforcement of racist or otherwise discriminatory laws. Do you think that Harris being selected as possible future Vice President is a step forewards or backwards for the current Black Lives Matter movement?

Submitted: Louise S. '24

ANSWER

I am not trying to dodge your question, Louise, but I honestly think that Kamala Harris being the Democratic Party VP choice is ultimately neither a step forwards or backwards for BLM. I say this because Senator Harris largely share's Vice President Biden's positions regarding policing. BLM activists ("BLM" defined broadly, not necessarily the Black Lives Matter Global Network) will likely be critical of both individuals on the ticket for not having a progressive enough position. But they likely will be even more concerned with the GOP alternative. Strategically speaking, a convincing argument can be made that the Biden-Harris ticket will be seen as palatable for a wider range of voters, including suburban White voters.

What can be done about quick justice in terms of dismissal of offending police officers when 1. US Constitution does not allow deprivation of property interest without due process (and due process is not quick) and 2. police unions have power to resist contract provisions providing for quick punitive action?

Submitted: Wendy R. '63

ANSWER

Wendy, the point you make vis-à-vis your question is so well taken. My immediate answer, non-legal scholar that I am, is that the type of swift justice that you are talking about will continue to be incredibly difficult to come by without a culture shift that leads to substantive conversations at the local level as well as at the state and federal levels. The irony that hovers over this issue for me is that the full realization of due process has only been experienced by Blacks in this country, at best, for little more than my lifetime (55 years). And even that is debatable.

PRESUMBITED QUESTIONS

What are some things we can do on a daily basis to stay actively involved in this fight to end police brutality?

Submitted: Alex B. '13

ANSWER

Alex, I think we can do several things. One, I think it is important to pay close attention to both progressive and mainstream media outlets that provide substantive treatment of the issue, such as Democracy Now, NPR, PBS News Hour, Washington Post, and New York Times. I say this because one of the biggest setbacks in the fight against systemic racism is misinformation and disinformation. Two, I think it is important to attend meetings of municipal and county elected bodies such as city councils to get an even better sense of what policy struggles are in our own back yards. Three, I think it is important to get involved in organizations, whether at the local, state, national or international levels. There are a range of groups out there, groups that exist across the political spectrum. Fourth, I think it is worthwhile to engage in dialogue with friends and family members, especially across generational lines, to better understand a range of perspectives.

How does the internet/social media play a role in forgetting? Is it hindering institutional progress while at the same time allowing for greater connectivity/messaging?

Submitted: Alison N. '09

ANSWER

I confess that I am biased in this regard, Alison! My wife/soulmate and I have been social media resisters, for the most part. The Internet/social media does allow for connectivity and messaging. There is no question about that. Black Lives Matter activists have been able to mobilize groups in a matter of minutes for particular actions in ways that could not have been accomplished a decade ago, let alone two decades ago. But social media also tends to dampen a spirit of dialogue, which takes time to cultivate. It also tends to lessen accountability for people as they express opinions to others, especially when they do so anonymously. Ultimately, though, I honestly am not sure of the extent to which the Internet/social media makes us forget. It is also important to remember that the Internet/social media, particularly Facebook groups, can also be sites for rightwing mobilizing, as the alleged kidnapping plot in Michigan underscores.

What can we do during these times to cultivate civic and civil discourse when we disagree with people? How do we work together when neither of us feel heard or seen?

Submitted: Angela B. '15

ANSWER

Angela, I think part of the answer to your question is an extension of the answer to the previous question. Specifically, I think we need to engage in social media activity less and be present – now often virtually – for civic meetings more, be they in a city council, board of commissioners, school board or task force context. One of the hallmark strengths of the Skidmore Intergroup Relations (IGR) program and minor established by Professor Kristie Ford and now led by Professor Jenni

Mueller and Professor Lisa Grady-Willis is that it is a living, breathing curricular and cocurricular model of how to elevate dialogue over debate. The work involved is not easy work!

A lot of white people are very hung up on protestors who "riot and loot" and use this to discredit these recent protests. Is there a place for "rioting and looting" and has this led to meaningful change in the past? Can this even be measured?

Submitted: Amanda P. '17

ANSWER

I honestly think that the concern with "rioting and looting" is not exclusive to some Whites, Amanda, in part because of there is such a focus on the individual pursuit and maintenance of property here in the U.S. Violent grassroots protests were a cornerstone of the Black Power movement, with protestors often breaking the windows of police cruisers, and sometimes setting businesses on fire. Beginning in 1966, however, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. consistently made an effort to complicate the narrative. "I think that we've got to see that a riot is the language of the unheard. And, what is it that America has failed to hear?" Dr. King asked. "It has failed to hear that the economic plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years." There are two things that we need to consider in 2020. One, as a baseline strategic matter, violence – except I believe when used in defense against violence – is usually a big mistake for the reason you mention in your question. The overall thrust of particular movements is discredited or dismissed out of hand. Two, we need to pay careful attention to which individuals and groups are connected to such violence. It has become increasingly apparent that key acts of violence, both in Minneapolis and elsewhere, were perpetrated by individuals with ties to rightwing antigovernment or white supremacist groups.

What are your thoughts on "defunding" police depts.

Submitted: Miriam L. P'

ANSWER

Miriam, thanks for your question. Please see my response to Elizabeth.

In what specific ways can Skidmore affect positive change on the wider Saratoga community? Are our anti-racist obligations strictly limited to campus activities?

Submitted: Cara G. '20

ANSWER

I think that positive change can be affected overall, Cara, if Skidmore *partners equitably* with the larger Saratoga community. That means avoiding assumptions that allow for us at Skidmore to look down upon members of the larger community. Town and gown tensions are real in so many communities across the country, and often that is because institutions of higher education fail to acknowledge their position of privilege in such relationships. In my opinion, there is simply too much work to be done on campus with respect to engaging in antiracism for us to approach the

larger community with a haughty attitude. Having said all of this, however, I do think that we should do work beyond campus, to answer your second question. The key is how we go about that work.

Considering the moment we're in, what do you hope to achieve on the city's task force for police reform?

Submitted: Cristal M. '20

ANSWER

First, Cristal, I should be candid and tell you that I hesitated for more than a second before agreeing to accept Mayor Kelly's invitation to serve on the Task Force. While I respect the work of individual officers, I have been and will continue to be very critical of law enforcement agencies in terms of their structural relationships to the communities they are supposed to serve. I personally had far more negative interactions with police than positive ones as a young Black man. That has changed, partly due to the fact that I am older, but mainly due to the fact that my socioeconomic class position has changed. The main thing that a number of us on the Task Force hope to achieve is putting forward recommendations that call for a substantive reimagining of what policing should look like. For instance, will de-escalation become the norm, and the use of force the absolute last resort? Will antibias training be substantive and antiracist rather than superficial and a box-checking exercise? There are some really dedicated folks on the Task Force. It remains to be seen if, once we do submit our recommendations, the City Council and the city's powers that be act upon them with integrity. I will say this: Police Chief Shane Crooks has been active and engaged as a member of the group, and has made an effort to answer every question.

In a post #blacklivesmatter world, how do we win the struggle against institutional RWS and state sanctioned police brutality

Submitted: Darren W. '13

ANSWER

Darren, forgive me, but I am not sure what "RWS" means in your question. If you could circle back to me, I would be more than happy to respond.

Next best steps? His opinion on how to eliminate white fragility?

Submitted: Jean Y. '66

ANSWER

Jean, I believe I attempted to answer your question in real time during the webinar. Thank you again for posing it!

How do we move forward?

Submitted: Dale G. '69

ANSWER

Dale, I think we need to move forward with integrity. By *with integrity*, I mean that we need to heed the guidance of elder statespersons like Rev. James Lawson, the theoretician of nonviolent direct action who reminds us that we have to be patient enough to be in conversation with individuals with whom we disagree – sometimes fundamentally – about certain issues. I mean that we have to interrogate the isms that we benefit from precisely as we challenge the ways that individuals benefit from privilege in other contexts. I can remain steadfast in condemning white supremacy; however, if I make no effort to challenge the ways that I benefit from cisgender heterosexual privilege – the ways that I benefit from U.S. citizenship privilege, from Christian privilege – I am not walking with integrity in the world.

What does Mr. Grady-Willis think of the recent events in Saratoga? Do you think it represents "typical" small town minded mentality, especially when it comes to race matters?

Submitted: D Harvey '98

ANSWER

My response is no longer timely, D Harvey, and I apologize. The July 30 Back the Blue rally, All of Us counterprotest, and response of law enforcement (particularly the Saratoga County Sheriff's Office) to the counterprotest, was actually somewhat atypical, in my opinion. Specifically, the militarized presence and use of pepper spray (or some other agent) represented a profound overreach. There was no justification for it. Those of us on the police reform task force are trying to better understand the specific relationship between the Saratoga Springs Police Department and the Saratoga County Sheriff. There are still more questions than answers.

Might you speak about the role of the social work program at Skidmore in connection with this history and present moment?

Submitted: Dawn M. '76

ANSWER

Dawn, I am afraid that I am not equipped to answer your question. However, I do know that from Professor Pat Oles to Professor June Paul, faculty in Social Work have been a part of virtually every conversation about confronting social justice on campus and beyond. And I am aware that some current Social Work majors are considering the new Black Studies minor.

Police harassment, excessive force and abuse of power I see as part of police brutality/institutional racism. Friends and family (including myself) have experienced police abuse of power. In what ways do you see individuals address or cope with police abuse of power to institutional racism?

Submitted: Luanne B.J. '75

ANSWER

Luanne, you may agree with me that addressing this issue and coping with it can be very different. When I was in my twenties I do not think I coped very well at all. Like so many Black and Brown folks, I let a deep-seated anger develop within me that was not healthy. In terms of addressing –

indeed, confronting – police brutality and the ways in which it is inextricably bound to institutional racism, we have seen a range of responses, from grassroots protest, to support for political candidates that take the issue(s) seriously, to having difficult conversations with colleagues and family members.

Protesting and lectures help to bring light to this issue. What are other options all individuals should consider to make a difference?

Submitted: Luanne B.J. '75

ANSWER

Luanne, I have attempted to answer some aspects of your important question elsewhere in the document, but let me add that I think doing independent reading – whether individually or in a study group – is an additional option for those who want to make a difference. I suggest providing a balance between contemporary and historical writings, and fiction as well as nonfiction.

How do we move forward? What impact do these protests have long term? Why do things not change faster or more permanently?

Submitted: Jessica H. '07

ANSWER

Jessica, thank you for your constellation of questions. I have attempted to answer some of them in other places, but I would like to address your final one. The key reason why things do not change faster or with more permanency is that, to paraphrase groundbreaking Black feminist bell hooks, interlocking systems of oppression such as white male supremacy and socioeconomic class exploitation are structural, deeply embedded, and benefit powerful people in material ways. At the same time, however, I think these structures are impediments to the realization of full human rights and a check upon democracy.

Can you speak about the recent incident(s) in Saratoga Springs with the police, protestors and counter-protestors?

Submitted: Jeremy S. '08

ANSWER

Jeremy, I attempted to address your question in my response to D Harvey above. But let me add this. One of the most egregious things that happened on the evening of July 30 was that there seemed to be a double standard in terms of law enforcement intervention. Several individuals have commented that there was no effort by law enforcement to respond when a few Back the Blue demonstrators initiated physical contact with All of Us counterdemonstrators. Yet, when All of Us demonstrators did not leave the scene, the Sheriff's Office intervened in ways that still have some young activists – including Skidmore students who were present – traumatized and frustrated.

What can we learn from current events? How can we learn?

Submitted: Joan B. '74

ANSWER

Joan, I think we can remind ourselves that everything that is taking place now represents both a change from and continuity with prior events. From a social justice perspective, we know that the scope and nature of BLM protests are different. Yet, we also know that in other ways they are the latest manifestation of what the late, great historian Vincent Harding termed the Tradition of Black Protest. From the perspective of the Trump presidency, we know that it represents perhaps the most fully formed manifestation, at least in the U.S., of the centuries-old practice of utilizing "othering" to mobilize great numbers of people in support of individuals who, ultimately, have little more than contempt for them. It certainly happened in the apartheid U.S., as a number of poor Whites joined groups like the Ku Klux Klan despite the fact that they themselves were destitute and disfranchised. Yet respecting history also allows us to appreciate, for instance, that not all poor Southern Whites were down with the Confederacy, that some of the fiercest and most courageous human rights activists of the 1960s were Southern Whites like Bob and Dottie Zellner.

More historical context. What worked in the past that is applicable now and that isn't applicable now?

Submitted: Julia D. '13

ANSWER

Julia, thank you for your question. I have attempted to answer it in a few other places. However, if that effort is unsatisfactory, please follow up with me directly: wgradywi@skidmore.edu. Thanks!

What are the impacts of long term, systemic racism?

Submitted: J T '03

ANSWER

J T, the impacts of long-term, systemic racism are expressed everyday through sobering gaps in income, home ownership, and resources for public schools along racial lines. They are expressed in the school to prison pipeline, the frighteningly high infant mortality rate for Black women, and the issues around policing that have been discussed at length recently. There are other impacts, too, in terms of post-traumatic stress, internalized self-hatred, and internecine violence in far too many urban neighborhoods. Yet, there is also resilience in the face of it all, because we continue to press forward, buoyed by the fact that we stand on the shoulders of millions.

Given that it feels like a cyclical journey, what markers can we lean on to propel our social justice movement towards progress and political wins?

Submitted: Persio L. '90

ANSWER

Persio L., I think your question is an incredibly important one, especially at moments like this when fatigue set in, when victory might not seem to be fully at hand. I think key markers can be found in these areas: a reduction in the aforementioned infant mortality rate for Black women; a measurable increase in safety for Indigenous women and for transgender people of color; concrete curricular improvements at the K-12 as well as college levels; increased pathways to *affordable* higher educational experiences; a reduction in the prison population *that is combined* with entry into the workforce for those who have been incarcerated; increased numbers of young people involving themselves in electoral politics as well as grassroots activist politics. Those are just a few...

How can we change what has remained, essentially, the same, through my life (and I'm 77!)

Submitted: Kathie A. '65

ANSWER

Kathie, I have attempted to touch upon your question in my response to others, and no doubt, have done so unsatisfactorily! Perhaps we can chat at some point. I say this because I think you are the one with some of the answers.

We hear a lot about a lack of centralized leadership in today's protests - is this true and does it matter?

Submitted: Krista Z. '09

ANSWER

Krista, I have attempted to answer your important question in a few other places. However, if you disagree, please follow up with me directly: wgradywi@skidmore.edu. Thanks!

What can we do especially to dismantle white supremacy and systemic racism while we are self-isolating

Submitted: Lizamarie M. '09

ANSWER

Thanks for your question, Lizamarie! I think I have hinted at some possible answers in my responses to others, like Mary below. In an effort to get to the heart of your question, though, I think there are a few things that we can do. Individuals who have the time and resources to do some additional reading should check out some of the suggested material that was included in the solidarity statement written and endorsed by faculty and staff member Leya Moore for inclusion in the solidarity statement written and endorsed by the Black Faculty Staff Group this summer. You can find it [here](#), along with the statement, on the Black Studies website. Individuals who enjoy documentaries – especially those who have, know, or work with teenagers – should revisit the classic *Eyes on the Prize* series (both parts) for a much needed history lesson and reminder that

speaking truth to power isn't new. You can access some of it on YouTube, or purchase it [here](#). Individuals who are really into social media, and who have the necessary skillset and courage, can consider being online integrity warriors. Online integrity warriors are folks who are willing to disrupt flows of disinformation, respectfully challenge inaccuracies in conversations in Facebook groups, etc. As a social media resister, I can say without hesitation that I am not one of these people. But I respect anyone who can bring a respect for dialogue, social justice, and the need for open minds into that space.

From your perspective, what does racial equity look like (in addition to equal treatment under the law)?

Submitted: Laurie L. '72

ANSWER

Laurie, I think racial equity should manifest itself as institutions – including educational institutions like Skidmore – acknowledging that accountability for confronting past and present harm has to be an institutional priority in order for the future to be an equitable one. More to the point, the responsibility for recruiting and especially *retaining* individuals from underrepresented groups is an institutional one. That means, for me, working to strengthen affirmative action so that the primary beneficiaries of it are persons of color, as well as examining the workplace and campus as sites of belonging and not exclusion. The University of Southern California (USC) is the site of several important initiatives around issues of race and equity. I also think equity will absolutely have to look like the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines being privileged in Indigenous, Black, and Latinx communities.

Do you see a Biden presidency helping or simply stalling the achievement of racial equity in the US?

Submitted: Laurie L. '72

ANSWER

Laurie, I do think the Biden-Harris ticket will help, although if these first few weeks after the election are any indication, its efforts will be stymied. Time will no doubt tell...

No but I am still grateful for his course Black Feminist Thoughts back when I was a student!

Submitted: Margaret S. '12

ANSWER

Thanks, Margaret!!!

What action items can I incorporate into my own life?

Submitted: Mary Rynasko '11

ANSWER

Mary, I think that I may have answered your question, at least on the fringes, with some of my other responses. More directly, I encourage you to do the following things, if you are not already doing so: watch/listen to an episode of *Democracy Now* at least once a week, and your local NPR station daily; be vigilant about your own mental, physical and spiritual (broadly defined) health; consider attending (now virtually) city council/town board meetings to get a sense of the often mundane by life or death policy discussions that impact your community.

What are some ways individuals and communities can respond to police brutality? What are some ways we can talk to young folks about this disturbing social phenomenon?

Submitted: Miriam A. '09

ANSWER

Thank you for your questions, Miriam. I think I have touched upon your first one in some of my other responses. But in addressing your second one, I think it might be worthwhile to “flip the script” a bit and have them provide their perspectives with us. One of the highlights of being on the Saratoga Springs Police Reform Task Force the past few months has been work with Daesha Harris and Chuck Caputo on the Youth Subcommittee. We had an incredible forum with college-age young people two weeks ago and will have another forum with high school students in early December. What they tell us is worth more than anything I can tell them. For instance, we heard some really impactful and sophisticated responses about

How do we organize and protest without getting the message muddy. Sometimes it's unclear what some protest represent.

Submitted: Mo M. P'

ANSWER

Mo M., you are correct about the absence of clarity that sometimes bedevils protest movements. As I pause for a moment, though, I am beginning to think that some of the muddiness, some of the messiness, might not be so bad. I say this because that can be an indication of just how eclectic a social movement can be sometimes. Individuals participate in protest movements for different reasons, and when you have such a diverse group of people on the streets and engaged on social media, “interesting” things are bound to happen. Now, having said that, I know that movement discipline is important, including through messaging. The work by leaders of the Black Lives Matter Global Network to continually update the group’s website is worth applauding. The rise of social media (and its concomitant culture) is probably the biggest challenge in terms of this issue.

What is the institutional racism to avoid in patient care- on a one to one basis?

Submitted: MaryPat R. '76

ANSWER

MaryPat, you ask a very important question, one that I admit I cannot answer from a position of scholarly expertise. My apologies! But I can state from the experiences of family members that working-class and poor people often get short shrift when it comes to being actively listened to by some health care providers, individuals who are themselves overworked and underpaid. At the same time, however, because of atrocities such as unethical experiments and surgeries on enslaved Africans, the forced sterilization of Black, Brown and poor White women, and the notorious Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male, there is such a palpable mistrust of health systems, there is often an unwillingness to even seek medical care. Public health professionals and scholars have been incredibly active the past two decades in trying to reverse the tide. Yet, it goes without saying that the current presidential administration has engaged in what amounts to gross criminal negligence, in my opinion.

How can alum support students in these efforts considering the dynamic in Saratoga due to recent events?

Submitted: Nigel S. '19

ANSWER

Nigel, you ask a very timely question, particularly given recent incidents on campus in which students of color have been taking on the responsibility for making sure their White peers abide by social distancing guidelines. Once such student, an Asian American woman, ended up receiving a concussion doing so when they were apparently pushed to the ground by a White student at an unsanctioned party at, get this, the Case Center! Indeed, Asian American students have had a particularly difficult time in the wake of the pandemic. Several students have been reaching out to faculty and staff members to see who would be willing to be on a contact/resource list. I am not sure if current students are doing similar outreach with alums or not. I encourage you to contact Megan Mercier of Alumni Relations, who can point you and other concerned alums in the right direction.

What role can labor unions play in the fight for racial justice?

Submitted: Olivia D. '09

ANSWER

Olivia, the history of labor unions and their relationship to racial justice in the United States has been one of exclusion as well as inclusion and integrity-filled work. Without question, the foremost expert on this issue is longtime labor activist and social justice intellectual Bill Fletcher. [Learn more about him and his publications here.](#)

I am very excited about the founding and beginning of the Black Studies department at Skidmore College that is long overdue-- I would love to hear a little bit about Professor Grady-Willis' journey to Skidmore, departure, and then journey back to the college to direct this department!

Submitted: Ruby T. '18

ANSWER

Ruby, when we first arrived here, my soulmate, Lisa Grady-Willis, had a part-time position in the Theater Department, and I was an associate professor in American Studies. I was also Director of Intercultural Studies, the faculty representative in a three-person diversity, equity, and inclusion leadership team that included Mariel Martin (now Associate Dean of Students) and Herb Crossman (equity officer in Human Resources, now retired). We were here from winter 2008 to summer 2011. The main reason why we left was that I had an opportunity to chair the Department of African and African American Studies at MSU Denver, a public access institution in my hometown. After five years at MSU Denver and three years at Portland State as inaugural director of the School of Gender, Race and Nations, I had an opportunity to interview for the new position here. (One of the reasons why we left Skidmore was the absence of Africana or Black Studies.) When I interviewed I was *blown away* by the group of students with whom I interacted. They reminded me so much of what I had missed interacting with Courtney, Danny, David, Elena, Ellie, Fred, Jacob, Kali, Leah, Lizamarie, Lizzy, Margaret, Preety, and so many others.

What, if anything, is different about the BLM movement today as compared to the Rodney King riots or even as recent as Ferguson? What sustained actions can drive meaningful change?

Submitted: Sarina N. '11

ANSWER

Sarina, I think the key differences between the movements today, in 1992 (Los Angeles) and in 2014-2015 (Ferguson and later Baltimore), is that this current moment is (a) both national and international in scope, and that it is (b) much more multiracial and multigenerational. Another key difference that should be recognized is the development of grassroots local leadership over the course of the past decade. Finally, there is no question but that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a factor, both in terms of allowing for deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd to capture the focus of media attention in such a focused way, as well as in reminding everyone of the structural contradictions that make Black, Brown and Indigenous lives particularly tenuous. In terms of sustained actions, I think that doing the difficult (and often less than scintillating) work of tying grassroots mobilization to long-term civic education and public policy changes is crucial. We know that on the ground activism led directly to passage of both the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. We know that civil disobedience by groups like ACT-UP throughout the 1990s led to major public policy victories regarding the way AIDS/HIV is defined and combatted.

How can I be a better ally?

Submitted: Sari Sasha R. P

ANSWER

Sari Sasha, you ask one of those foundational questions. I will try to answer it from my personal perspective as a heterosexual Black man who has sought to be a principled ally in of those who are most directly impacted by sexism and heterosexism. That means (a) getting educated about the ways I benefit from cisgender male and heterosexual privilege; (b) confronting and interrogating such privilege; (c) challenging other men, including friends and members of my family, to

examine their privilege(s); (d) working to avoid patting myself on the back for doing so; and (e) understanding that when members of targeted communities want me to stay the hell out of the way (not attend certain meetings or be a part of certain conversations), I respectfully keep my mouth shut and honor them.

Not a question but just wanted to say I am so glad he and the wonderful Lisa Grady-Willis are back at Skidmore!

Submitted: Sarah F. '12

ANSWER

We are glad to be back, Sarah F.!

What will help sustain the energy of the present BLM protests?

Submitted: Sarah G., Retiree

ANSWER

Former Skidmore comrade in IGR, I have been so tardy in responding, it is ridiculous! But in an attempt to answer your question, Professor Emerita Sarah G., as many of us were watching Kamala Harris and Joe Biden address the nation, members of a local group called All of Us were holding a demonstration in downtown Saratoga Springs that over a dozen Skidmore students participated in last night. I think local conditions and groups will dictate the extent to which energy will continue. It is also important to note that a number of Black Lives Matter groups have pivoted to local/state political issues. This has certainly been the case in Georgia, where the work of Stacey Abrams and other activists has helped fuel a major grassroots voting effort.

I would like to know more ways you can inspire students to think beyond their own relatively-limited experience and think systemically about this important problem in our society.

Submitted: Scott J. P'24

ANSWER

As limited as students' respective experiences might be, Scott, those experiences can still provide a window into those of individuals who live or have lived in different contexts. If we apply the principle of Sankofa, which stresses the dynamic interplay between past and present, students can look, for instance, to nineteenth-century quasi-free Black activist David Walker, whose *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* offered an insightful early Pan African critique of slavery. Walker's 1829 manifesto is important because he reiterated the significance of what we today might call cross-class solidarity. It is also important to look at what other young people have done in a more contemporary context. Today's students can study what Black student activists did at the University of Missouri in 2015. Their combination of analysis, discipline, and coalition-building led to the resignation of not one, but two, leaders in the University of Missouri system.

How do we contextualize this on-going problem within the larger analysis of race - class- gender?

Submitted: Scott J. P'24

ANSWER

Scott, I think one way – and certainly not the only way – to contextualize this moment is to understand that a driving force behind BLM and many of the grassroots protests are Black women, including queer Black women. Ever since Anna Julia Cooper wrote *A Voice from the South* in 1892, a case has been made that Black women – arguably the most marginalized group in U.S. society – have the potential to be the most revolutionary force precisely because of their marginalization. Police violence has increasingly impacted these women, including Black trans women, directly, not only indirectly. Such violence can also impact their families. And structural racism – inequities in terms of home ownership, the overall wealth gap, health disparities including an alarming infant mortality rate, underemployment and underemployment for Black men, the school to prison pipeline – has impacted Black families they lead or co-lead disproportionately. Put another way, Black women recognize as well, if not better, than any other group, that police violence is part and parcel of larger structural forces that have developed and been reshaped ever since the ancestors of these individuals worked alongside their enslaved African male counterparts in tobacco, sugarcane, and cotton fields in the Americas.

First question: Diplomacy aside, how would you explain the current situation on the ground to people outside of U.S. (who only get snippets in news taglines)? Second question: how can we help?

Submitted: Taimur K. '17

ANSWER

To attempt to answer your first question, Taimur, I would explain to those outside the U.S. that the current situation on the ground represents the most widespread assertion of human rights activism on behalf of Black and Brown people in the U.S. since the early 1970s. If you talk about such activism within the context of *civil rights*, it will not resonate internationally in the same way. The reaction to the activist upsurge should be seen as part of a larger rightwing politics that has emerged as a significant force in a number of places throughout the world. To answer your second question, I would suggest that the best way to help is to further examine what happens and has happened here in the U.S. without being tied to notions of so-called American exceptionalism. When we do this I think we are better able to appreciate how important it is to be socially engaged and civic-minded in this particular moment, including voting in November's elections.

Would Black activists follow Martin Luther King and his beliefs, if he was alive today?

Submitted: Valerie W. '74

ANSWER

Valerie, your question is an intriguing one. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a key practitioner of nonviolent direct action in part because he was keenly aware of how to use the media. Early on he embraced such protest because it meant so much to him on a deep, philosophical level. However,

in time, his assertion of it began to mean more *strategically*. He recognized that camera footage of violence meted out to protesters was an incredibly effective tool. Would current activists follow King? I think it might be worth contemplating whether King would follow – or at least, be in solidarity with – today’s protesters? Given his effort to be in solidarity with the working poor when he was alive, I think that he would be. Virtually all BLM protests have embraced nonviolent direct action and/or civil disobedience.