



1-16-2017

Martin Luther King, Jr. Teach-In: All the Lies Are White

Nicole Brown '99
Illinois Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/specialconvos>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brown '99, Nicole, "Martin Luther King, Jr. Teach-In: All the Lies Are White" (2017). *Special Convocations*. 2.

<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/specialconvos/2>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

MLK Teach-In - 1/16/17

Nicole M. Brown, Ph.D.

Visiting Assistant Professor, IWU

Research Affiliate, National Center for Supercomputing Applications, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Title: All The Lies Are White

Thank you Greta for that kind introduction and the work you do on this campus. I know that work is often rendered invisible but I want you to know that I see you.¹

I collect. I collect histories. I collect histories with lessons. I collect Black women's histories with lessons and make ... connections. I connect. I re-collect. I recollect. I collect.

It is an honor to be in the presence of such genius. Barbara Smith is one of my sheroes. Her courage, honesty, and authenticity has been a source of personal inspiration for me throughout my black feminist journey and it's an honor to be able to tell her face-to-face how grateful I am for her.

Before I begin the business of this talk, I need to acknowledge the indigenous tribes that once inhabited this land.² Whenever we talk about liberation we have to acknowledge this part of our history. This recognition is a humble and inadequate step toward reconciliation. Audre Lorde taught me "without community there is no liberation."³ So we must acknowledge our communities and histories that have been made invisible, if we all want to be free. Audre Lorde also taught me "When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak."⁴ So, I'm going to speak.

I decided at the last minute to change my talk a bit. I'm dedicating my talk to black girls. My comments are for you. The invisible, the hyper visible, the marginalized, the devalued, the brilliant, the immeasurable, the incredible black girls who hold sunshine in their eyes, and wind in their gravity defying hair and joy in their melanin-rich skin, and hope in their beautiful and creative minds. I love you. And it is because I love you, and the you in me and the me in you, that I offered an intervention in the form of a combatting anti-blackness initiative against women and girls, which I'll talk about in a minute. The idea was plain and accessible and the

¹ At the time of this speech, Greta Franklin serves as the Director of the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. I served as the Director of (what was then called) the Office of Multicultural Affairs from 2005-2009 when I left to pursue my Ph.D. I understand the challenges that come with advocating for students of color on a predominately white campus and wanted to ensure that Greta was recognized for her labor, much of which is not adequately compensated and rendered invisible. Barbara Smith discusses the exploitation of black women's labor in the Combahee River Collective Statement.

² Iroquois, Kickapoo and Miami tribes.

³ See Audre Lorde *Sister Outsider*

⁴ See Audre Lorde, *The Black Unicorn*

invitation was simple. Because black feminism teaches me if it's not accessible, it's not revolutionary. And now more than ever we need intellectual ammunition to fight in these white supremacist streets. But black feminism also teaches me that you don't fight alone. As my children would say, and as Barbara Smith reminded us a moment ago, you need a squad. So throughout my brief talk I will be invoking black women, calling them into the room because **June Jordan** teaches me that love is lifeforce.⁵

I was asked to come and speak because of my work last semester with the combatting anti blackness initiative. I'm still trying to figure out who I pissed off that they have my speaking after **Barbara Smith**. But I digress. After hearing of the university's theme "Women's Power, Women's Justice", the initiative came out of a concern - a concern that unless there was a deliberate effort to remind folks that black women are women too, we'd be left out.

In conjunction with this year's theme, I decided to create a campus-wide Combatting Anti-Blackness against women and girls initiative. To quote activist and BYP100 National Coordinator and fellow alum **Charlene Carruthers** '07, anti-blackness is "a system of beliefs and practices that destroy, erode and dictate the humanity of black people; the belief that there is something wrong with black people."⁶ The objectives of this initiative are a commitment to:

- combatting anti-blackness against black women and girls
- building community through celebration of black women and girls
- creating cross-disciplinary expressions of love and appreciation through scholarship

I'll say it again, it was an intervention. And intervening is not glamorous work.

But last semester this intervention yielded results. Over 20 faculty participated, with representation from education, physics, sociology, anthropology, history, music composition, english, nursing, as well as the library and the Office of Diversity and Inclusion.⁷

Our keynote, Barbara Smith is here because of a seed that was planted by this initiative. We also hosted **Ruby Mendenhall**, an accomplished professor of Sociology at the University of Illinois, as well as **Ruth Nicole Brown**, another wonderful professor and black girl genius from UIUC.⁸

⁵ During a 1977 conference talk at UC Berkeley related to children's literature, June Jordan shared "love is lifeforce", which was her theory of life, love and energy.

⁶ Charlene Carruthers '07 was the keynote speaker for the 2016 Colorblind Racism Summit hosted at IWU

⁷ The group met several times over the fall semester and several faculty members included language related to the Initiative in their syllabi.

⁸ One of the goals of the initiative was to make black women more visible on campus by inviting them to speak at every opportunity. When I was approached to speak at the MLK Teach-In, I suggested

3 out of the 11 groups who presented for the campus cluster closing ceremony presented classwork directly related to black women. Students from my Black Feminist Imaginings class were among those students to present at the closing ceremony, sharing their research on the Roxbury Murders and how they created a Wikipedia page to educate people about the women who were killed and the organizing that Barbara Smith and others did to ensure black women on the margins could feel safe in their own communities.⁹

Ok, But why Nicole? Why do you assume black women wouldn't have been included? Or why not focus on all women? Aren't you just contributing to the problem by talking about it? Being divisive?

No. And No is a complete sentence.

I will say this. It is much more dangerous for me to say these things here than any discomfort folks might experience hearing it. In other words, its much riskier for me to speak on anti blackness against women and girls than it is for you to hear about it for a few minutes. I say this because the first white lie that tends to surface is that any efforts for black women to get free come secondary to white people's desire to avoid discomfort. In other words, the first white lie is that black women should always be last.

Ashley Farmer, an Assistant Professor of History and African American Studies at Boston University has much more patience than I do and she explains very well by providing a very current example in the upcoming Women's March on Washington on January 21st.¹⁰ Dr. Farmer reminds us that The Women's March on Washington takes its name from the March on Washington held on August 28, 1963. This is where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his now famous 'I Have a Dream' speech. Dr. Farmer also reminds us how black women were left out then- despite the crucial roles they played in making that 1963 march happen. Despite the crucial roles they played in the movement. Dr. King's own sexism within the movement is very well documented. And Dr. Farmer reminds us that something similar happened at the Million Man March in 1995 - and recall this 2017 Women's March was originally called the million woman march before they changed the name. So they went from naming the event after one black march to naming it after another.

Barbara Smith would be a wonderful person to bring to campus. When the Sociology department asked for suggestions for a colloquium speaker, I advocated for Ruby Mendenhall to speak about her work related to black mothers experiences with trauma. I invited Ruth Nicole Brown to speak to my Black Feminism class about Hip Hop feminism. Faculty who were part of the Initiative were encouraged to provide the names of black women to their department chairs as potential candidates for guest speakers.

⁹ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roxbury_Murders

¹⁰ See Dr. Farmer's article "The Long History of Black Women's Exclusion in Historic Marches in Washington" <http://portside.org/2017-01-04/long-history-black-women's-exclusion-historic-marches-washington>

But what's true for this march, as was true for the two previously mentioned marches that centered black men, was the lack of (as Dr Farmer puts it) "holistic representation". This 2017 DC march, at least initially, centered white women and their disappointment and their efforts to separate themselves from their white sisters who voted for their opponent. And to name it a women's march, and not acknowledge the ways in which the term 'women' is often made to be synonymous with 'white women', was another white lie. A lie that served to simultaneously erase women of color as well as the white imagination from which it originated. That women of color were added to the leadership team later was a corrective, it was a quick corrective, but it was a corrective none the less.

So, this is why we need interventions. Reminders that black women are women too. **Sojourner Truth** teaches me that the answer to the question of "ain't I a woman?"¹¹ is yes, even if I'm standing in a crooked room.¹² So if we seek power and justice for women, as our annual theme suggests, that includes black women.

I said throughout this brief talk I'd be bringing black women into the room. At this time, the black woman I'd like to bring into the room is **Kimberlee Crenshaw**. Several years ago I heard Dr. Crenshaw speak at a conference and her insight profoundly changed my thinking. She said "when the frame doesn't fit, the facts don't matter".¹³

I'd like to do a quick exercise I learned from Dr. Crenshaw. I'd like you to take a look at this picture. What do you see?

[Pic 1]



How about now? What changed?

[Pic 2]

¹¹ Sojourner Truth delivered the speech "Ain't I A Woman?" in 1851 at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio to bring attention to the issues unique to 19th century black women.

¹² See Melissa Harris-Perry *Sister Citizen*

¹³ I heard Dr. Crenshaw speak at the 2014 Faculty Women of Color Conference held at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. During her keynote, she showed the audience a picture of cows in a pasture. She then showed the same picture with a broader frame, which exposed a twister in the distance above the cows. She discussed her theory of framing and how it relates to intersectionality (the term she coined to articulate the interlocking oppressions of race and gender that render black women invisible within the legal system). She echoes her 2014 remarks in a 2016 Ted Talk



What changed was the frame.

Dr. Crenshaw shared how “communications scholars tell us that when facts do not fit with our available frames, we have a difficult time incorporating new facts into our way of thinking about a problem.”¹⁴ If I only showed you the first picture its unlikely you’d accept there was a real danger present.

She says “black women slip through our consciousness because there are no frames with which to see us, no frames for people to remember us, no frames for people to hold us.”¹⁵ Crenshaw explains how when we think about police or vigilante violence against black people in the media we often hear about unarmed men, far less frequently do we hear about women.¹⁶ And Dr. Crenshaw says as a consequence, reporters don't report our stories, policymakers don't consider our needs, and politicians aren't encouraged to speak to us.¹⁷

Without frames that allow us to see all of a particular group (meaning our full humanity), or all of a particular context, we run the risk of misunderstanding, misremembering, misinterpreting, and misdirecting.

I truly feel in Dr. Crenshaw's statements there is insight into how we've entered this post-factual era we find ourselves in. And perhaps a way to get out of it. We are having a grand failure of imagination. Perhaps our inability to produce frames that help us to cognitively accept new factual information has us gobbling up 'fake news' and everything else 'post-truth'. The answer is not giving you all more new information, it's getting you to change your frame.

Speaking of frames – and if you can’t say ‘amen’, say ‘ouch’ - King visited Illinois Wesleyan in 1961 and 1966, you’d be hard pressed not to hear about this during MLK day and Black History Month. I don’t have enough fingers to count the number of times I’ve been reminded of this fact. It’s always struck me as perplexing. It’s so curious. Why do we brag about this as an institution? That he visited? Now, I have three degrees from three different institutions including this one – I’ve “visited” a lot – I’m visiting NOW - that doesn’t make any of these institutions any less anti-black. What does it mean that a prominent leader visited us twice and yet our institution is

¹⁴ See Dr. Crenshaw’s Ted Talk on the subject of intersectionality and framing https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

not much ideologically different from when Dr. King was here? Why do we keep digging him up?

I suspect it's because of another white lie. A lie where we conflate proximity with commitment. Proximity gives us the perception of commitment but it's temporary, there is no substantive investment and no reciprocity. More is taken than given.

Imagine engaging institutions that actually loved and appreciated black women instead of just trying to be in proximity to us.

But I do not believe academic institutions want to be transformative (I'm sorry)¹⁸, we want to be marketable.¹⁹ Students are not change agents, you are consumers engaging in the global educational marketplace, not of ideas but credentials. Intellectual labor is used in service to capitalism. You are a number that makes up a bottom line that ensures the bottoms and the sides remain there, but you will be grateful for your marginalized position and condition because you have been told you're better than most.

To make matters worse, academic institutions want black faces sitting in their seats but not at podiums. We want black feminism in our course catalogues but not black women in our tenure lines. Detect the lie.²⁰ bell hooks teaches me that this is the natural outcome when we operate within what she calls a neoliberal, white supremacist, patriarchal, heteronormative, capitalist frame.²¹ We've adopted a corporate model of higher education with the increased adjunctification of faculty, the average age of an adjunct instructor on a college campus is 50, and 31% of part-time faculty live in poverty.²²

King said in his April 1967 Chicago speech "A Time to Break the Silence"

¹⁸ I'm not sorry.

¹⁹ At the time of this speech, the State of Illinois was still experiencing a funding crisis, with the state government offering partial stopgap funding for schools as they fought over the state budget. Small colleges across the country, including Illinois Wesleyan, were seeing decreased enrollment and panicking as they struggled to make a case for why students should attend schools that were substantially more expensive with less name recognition. See IWU's initiative on 'Signature Work'.

²⁰ I reluctantly made the decision to tell this inconvenient truth understanding that it might be dismissed as 'sour grapes'. But these issues are systemic. The reality is that at the time of this speech, the university had made numerous public claims that it wished to increase faculty racial diversity. Yet, IWU had only one black tenure-line faculty member (out of 170 faculty) and zero black women faculty. Once more, during 2015, five black Illinois Wesleyan alums earned Ph.D.s. Also worth noting is that during my time as Director of Multicultural Affairs (2005-2009) there were at least five black women faculty on campus. As such, there also needs to be more conversation around what would make universities like Illinois Wesleyan more attractive to potential black faculty. To date, the university's efforts to increase racial diversity of faculty has not been attached with financial resources.

²¹ See The bell hooks Institute <http://www.bellhooksinstitute.com>

²² See Service Employees International Unions Faculty Forward website <http://seiufacultyforward.org/professors-in-poverty/>

"When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered." Guess what, friends, we've arrived.

And make no mistake, these institutions have let go of us way before we let go of them.

Students are reduced to revenue dollars and spaces that have the potential to bring together, respect and nurture those in the margins of our society become a marketplace for abstract, everchanging definitions of diversity and inclusion and faux-intersectional pimping.

Rather than interrogate the systems that push us to the margins and write us off as outcasts, we choose to focus on conformity and complicity and call it peace.

King said 'a riot is the language of the unheard'²³ but we'd rather focus on the shouting and the tone than focusing on why we choose to silence people, or why we construct policies and procedures that deliberately isolate some of us, discredit our agitation and stomp out our resistance. But Audre Lorde taught me that there is a righteous utility in our anger.²⁴ And that white guilt is but an attempt to silence us.²⁵ She taught me that white guilt is another white lie.²⁶ It distracts and focuses attention on the site of the oppression rather than the change required to eradicate it.

When there is more conversation around football players taking a knee during the national anthem than there is conversation about why civilians are gunned down by civil servants, without due process, trial or jury - this is a damning, but clear, illustration that we have no interest in justice. You can't be for justice if you're not about the margins. Justice is found in the margins. There is NO respectable protest. Just as there are no benevolent dictators. We rewrite history and reframe King as if people weren't calling him a monkey as he peacefully marched. Racists during that time did not characterize nonviolent direct action as respectful protest. Nor do they today. Too often black people's mere presence in these spaces, our existence in our black bodies, our breath, is enough to kick up the anti-blackness situated within many people.

Change does not come from respectability, civility, from speaking in soft voices and taking ginger steps. Change does not come out of convenience. Change comes from disruption, and institutions across the nation and world refuse to build a tolerance for disruption, refuse to nurture it. We devalue the pearl, because we don't want to deal with the agitation required to cultivate it.

²³ See King's March 14, 1968 speech "The Other America"

²⁴ See Audre Lorde's essay "Uses of Anger" in *Sister Outsider*

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

Dr. King once said that white people would rather destroy democracy than have equality with black people.²⁷ Now look at where we find ourselves today, on the eve of this presidential inauguration. The biggest threat to systems which operate under a neoliberal, white supremacist, patriarchal, heteronormative, capitalist frame is outlined in Dr. King's 1967 book *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*. He says:

"White Americans must recognize that justice for black people cannot be achieved without radical changes in the structure of our society. The comfortable, entrenched, the privileged cannot continue to tremble at the prospect of change of the status quo. ... This is a multiracial nation where all groups are dependent on each other. ... There is no separate white path to power and fulfillment, short of social disaster, that does not share power with black aspirations for freedom and human dignity."

As a friend once told me 'truth is power's greatest enemy' and the truth is most white folks are still struggling to understand that their liberation is tied to combatting anti-blackness, and specifically anti-blackness against women and girls. Anti-blackness is about promoting the absence of freedom and dignity for black people. If you are complicit in this, you are also diminished. Our humanity is in our wholeness – and in our connectedness. **Fannie Lou Hamer** taught us this.²⁸

But as the saying goes, no one raindrop blames itself for the flood.

We must let go of this idea that humanity is contingent. My humanity is not contingent on my race, or gender, or sex, or religion, or sexuality, or ability, or citizenship, or size, or occupation. And yet everyday, we treat other people's humanity as if it is. Well, guess what? I am not waiting for someone else to recognize my humanity. **Toni Morrison** teaches me to recognize it in myself.²⁹

I don't want my justice in heaven. I want my justice now. I want my humanity now. And I will have it.

Because every black girl deserves to see the fullness of her humanity reflected back at her. And if there is to be any justice in this world, surely it will come from the heart of a black girl.

Thank you.

²⁷ See King's April 16, 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail" where he discusses the inaction of the white moderate to address issues of white supremacy that directly threaten democracy. See also King's 1967 book "Where Do We Go From Here"

²⁸ See Fannie Lou Hamer's 1971 speech "Its in Your Hands"

²⁹ See Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *God Help the Child*

Discussion Questions:

1. What would your personal, professional and educational experiences look, feel and sound like if black women and girls were appreciated for their contributions?
2. Kimberle Crenshaw teaches us that 'if the frame doesn't fit, the facts don't matter.' Assume for a moment that our liberation is indeed tied together, and that it is not possible for you to be free until black women and girls are free. What would be required to change this country's frame? To see black women and girls in their full humanity so that the anti-blackness we face would end? What might you do to help us get there?