

# **Pratt Black Lives Matter Assessment, 2015-16**

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Due to the increased reports of student, faculty, and staff concerns regarding issues of racial tension on campus during the 2014-2015 year, the faculty from the Social Practice seminar, inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, decided to organize a series of talks throughout the year, and a Teach-In in April 2016. At Pratt, Black Lives Matter meant addressing systemic racism and white supremacist ideology inherent in institutions of higher learning in America. For us, it meant creating dialog around the racial inequality within our institutions, and fostering activism within our campus body. It meant confronting anti-Blackness openly and honestly.

This document provides an assessment of the year's programming which culminates in a list of institutional demands that have been culled through the year of discussions, and workshops with students, faculty and staff during the Teach-In.

Throughout the year, over 300 people attended BLM programming, and the Teach-in documented over 275 people who RSVP-ed and signed in (we estimate 350 attendees in total to account for those who did not sign in but attended based on reporting from sessions).

**Assessment Summary:** The data gathered in this document illustrates the clear and unequivocal need for institutional response, directed change, including but not limited to structural/administrative changes regarding race and issues of social justice on campus. The data collected also clearly illustrates that the Pratt community (students/faculty/staff) understand these issues and are committed to working together to make change happen at all levels.

## **BLM Programming 2015-2016**

- November 2, 2015: Black Solidarity Day, we came together to conduct a reading of *A Day of Absence: A Satirical Fantasy*, written in 1965 by Douglas Turner Ward as political satire. This play was read at Brooklyn College in 1969 and inspired Black Solidarity Day. It marks a day on college campuses for us to take stock of race, class, and politics. Attended: 68; Granola Bars for students handed out: 250
- November 17th, 2015: Intimate (by design) session by TalkRACE, entitled "An Uncomfortable Conversation about Race". This session was packed, even though we had tried to limit the number of people – which to us demonstrated that, if nothing else, our

community on campus was ready to have uncomfortable conversations about race.

Attended: 37

- November 30<sup>th</sup>, the social practice faculty came together with BLM@Pratt and hosted “Supporting Student Well-Being: Talking about social and racial justice” – which was overwhelmingly attended by faculty and staff, making it imminently clear that faculty and staff recognized that students required that support, and yet, the students were not able to find those spaces, yet. Two discussion groups were formed; one for students, and the other for faculty/staff. Of the students who did attend, only 50% of them felt safe enough to talk about their experiences openly with other students or the group. It was clear that faculty had to support our students to author these conversations on their own. Four students were stipended to help shape and facilitate two listening sessions on the meaning of justice, with a focus on racial inequalities, for students at Pratt – this was funded through an external grant that Caitlin Cahill and Ann Holder received; one listening session was held during the Teach-in. Attended: 43
- January 20, 2016: Talk by Associate Professor of Sustainability, Carl Zimring, entitled, “Martin Luther King Jr. and the Struggle Against Environmental Racism in the United States”. Talk focused on the deep links between race and sustainability; how to think about environmental racism and environmental justice in the broad scope of telling American history. Attended: 67
- February 2, 2016: Concerning Violence: Film Screening and Talk-back with faculty, Todd Ayoung. Concerning Violence is a 2014 documentary written and directed by Göran Olsson based on Franz Fanon’s essay of the same name from the book “The Wretched of the Earth” (1961). The film explores African nationalist and independence movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Attended: 54
- February 21-27: Film screenings: For the final week of Black History Month, Black Lives Matter Pratt partnered with Pratt Libraries to screen films pertaining to Black culture. These films will play on repeat on the monitors on the Lower Level in the Multi-Media Services Department. Films included: Rosewood; Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975; Some Place Like Home: The Fight Against Gentrification in Downtown Brooklyn; The Murder of Fred Hampton; Dear White People; Out in the Night; and Every Mother’s Son. Attended: Unable to quantify for assessment.
- February 29, 2016: Talk “Image/Re-image: Visualizing why ‘Black Lives Matter’ now”; Associate Professor of History Ann Holder, focused on how the relationship between visual culture and “Black Lives” exposes the limitations of U.S. democracy, revealing active practices of Black citizenship that have posed new paths toward an expansive American politics. Too often the alternative visions have been rendered invisible through various forms of cultural erasure. Re-surfacing them requires challenging the silences and “failures to see” that characterize distinctly US forms of racial fundamentalism and structural racism. Attended: 43

The year of programming for Black Lives Matter culminated in the the Teach-In. The following is an assessment of the Pratt Black Lives Matter Teach-In. It has two component parts: (1) a qualitative appraisal of the Teach-In's events and outcomes, and (2) a request for institutional support from President Thomas Schutte and his Senior Staff for the purpose of continuing the work begun at the teach-in.

## **APPRAISAL OF THE TEACH-IN**

### *Event Structure*

The two-day teach-in had the general three-part structure: (1) morning general information panels followed a recitation of the names of unarmed black people who were killed by the police (In 2015, over 1,134 people were killed). (2) afternoon breakout sessions dedicated to specific issues, and (3) evening plenary sessions that reassembled participants into a single group. Pratt Black Lives Matter's aim in conducting the teach-in was to not only bring the concerns of the Pratt community together in open forum to discuss issues of race and inclusion on campus, but also to arrange and coordinate actual bodies for further campus action and conscious-raising.

### *Themes & Attendance*

#### Information Panels

The April 8<sup>th</sup> morning informational session inaugurated the event as a whole, and introduced the history of Black Lives Matter and specifically in the context of New York City given by first-hand participants and organizers of the movement alongside other local groups in solidarity. Pratt Black Lives Matter would like to note that of all the Institute's Senior Staff and Leadership, newly hired Provost Kirk Pillow and Vice President of Student Affairs Helen Matusow-Ayres were the only members of the Institute's Senior Leadership to attend the event; alongside Dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Dean Andrew Barnes. The second day of the Teach-In, April 9<sup>th</sup>, began with a panel on policing and gentrification that included Pratt faculty presentations alongside different community outreach and advocacy groups that deal with citizens' rights and city planning.

Once again these general morning session set the tone for more focused afternoon breakout sessions.

## Breakout Sessions

The afternoons of the two-day teach-in were comprised of 19 overlapping breakout sessions. According to reports, the recorded attendance went from an intimate 5 to lively 20.

Here is a breakdown of the sessions:

- **Student Led Sessions**
  - Empowerment Summit: A Space of Reclamation and Education
  - Conversations with Student Government Association Pratt
  
- **Faculty Presentations**
  - The Commonwealth: Race, Gender, Class, and Sexuality
  - Fashion and Race: The Black Dress
  - The African American Experience in Architecture
  
- **Community/Advocacy Group Presentations**
  - Disrupt the Police by Knowing Your Rights
  - Black Lives Matter and Palestine: What does solidarity look like?
  
- **Panels on the Intersection of Art and Activism**
  - Question Bridge: Black Males in America
  - What does diversity in the creative arts look like and how does one engage in it without attaching distortions to personal cultural constructs?
  - ‘Documents of Resistance: Artists of Color Protest’ Presentation + Artists of Color Bloc Educational Working Group
  
- **Collaborations between Pratt Faculty and Community Leaders/Organizations**
  - Barriers to Entry: The Prohibitive Cost of Higher Education, Racial Equity and Paths to a Debt Free Degree
  - Architecture, Design and Race: SHADE
  
- **Working Groups and Forums**
  - Institutional Demands Working Group
  - Black Lives Matter Workshop with Diversity Initiatives Group (DIG)
  - Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ)
  - TalkRACE Forum
  
- **Interactive Sessions and Performances**
  - Project WHO SHOT YA? – *Between me and you: WHO SHOT YA?*
  - *By Her Grace...*

- Sonic Explorations with William Parker and Cooper-Moore
- Micro-Aggression Role Play
- *Even Death Will Not Stop Me*

In addition to inaugurating campus conversation and initiating community-building with sources outside of campus, the breakouts were occasions to engage in more detail with issues relevant to racial justice on or around campus as well as for individual and groups on campus to share experiences in line with the content of the sessions. The sessions served as the basis for common struggle and future action.

### Plenaries

Photographer and self-styled ‘actionist’ Sheila Pree Bright gave a retrospective not only on her recent project 1960Now but also her outlook on the how art can contribute to the wider conversation surrounding Black Lives Matter and other similar social struggles. One of the more enlightening connections made by Bright in her talk was the strong affinities she made between the young Civil Rights era student leaders and the African-American youth of today, especially the confidence expressed by some older leaders that the youth of today will find their way in the organizing against racial injustice. The other plenary was given by Pratt’s own Tracie Morris, who read and performed some of her recent work and also spoke on her own experiences concerning issues of race. She also shared both her hope, particularly with the young students in the room, in continuing the struggle against racial injustice. Both Bright and Morris were inspirations and great models for how the students, staff, and faculty would begin to tailor effective action and intelligible conversation on campus.

## **Survey from Students from the Empowerment Summit 2016**

**Questions:** Have you experienced and/or witnessed racism at Pratt?

How have racial micro/macroaggressions impacted your experience at Pratt?

### **Responses:**

1. Yes. Professors are definitely guilty of this and it has hurt me to see that this institution would support faculty like this.
2. No. Being a minority can be frustrating. Not that many Black students at Pratt.
3. Yes. Hiring preferences.
4. Yes, too much... living on campus has been torture.
5. Yes. Microaggressions have lessened my love for Pratt. It’s so normalized that person don’t realize their effect.
6. Yes... a professor “made fun” of a student for not talking because she is Asian. Conversations have to happen. I will always open discussion about aggressions and some get upset.
7. Yes... from faculty and visitors. It keeps my ears open and my side-eye on 100%.

8. Yes, many times. From faculty, students and administrators. (It's triggering to talk about), but all of the altercations made me feel less than human and disregarded.
9. Yes, faculty/students/administration. It's hard to be creative when racism is being activated.
10. Yes, faculty/students/administration. It's a major distraction. They throw off my concentration... (create) anxiety.
11. Yes, students and visitors... now that I have a definition of these terms I feel ready to be more aware on and off campus as well as to react, if I'm safe enough to.
12. Yes, students. It's sad to say but I feel like I've experienced it so much that I'm a bit immune or have become accustomed on how to deal with it.
13. Yes, faculty/students/administration. Racism has not impacted my experience, only because I've learned how to continue my education without the weight of prejudice. I've been formed/taught how to keep going.
14. Yes, all. Not impacted, but gave me an insight on how people on campus around me think.
15. Yes. They distract and devalue me.

### *Preliminary Conclusions & Propositions Moving Forward*

The final plenary conducted by the Pratt Black Lives Matter Steering Committee sought to reflect upon what had been gained and shared over the course of the movement at the Institute, culminating in the teach-in; as well as develop an agenda of how Pratt Black Lives Matter would continue building, maintaining, and fostering further action. Through small group discussions, actionable items were collected at the final plenary. These reflect the needs of student, faculty, and staff. Some of these also appear in the list of Institutional Demands that are submitted.

#### ● **Immediately Actionable Items.**

- Improve mentorship across the Institute.
- Improvement of cultural awareness across all campuses.
- Develop and support mandatory cultural and diversity training for faculty and staff on campus.
- Diversify staff and faculty hirings, Institute-wide, through policy, strategic planning and resource allocation.
- Diversify student admissions to reflect our immediate community and changing society through policy, strategic planning and resource allocation.
- Diversify Institutional leadership at the senior administration and board levels through policy, strategic planning and resource allocation.
- Establish policies and processes that ensure transparency and accountability regarding the Diversity Office and the Women Writers of Color Reading Room at the Pratt Brooklyn Campus Library.

- Include cultural and diversity awareness in assessments across the Institute.
  - Review curriculum with special emphasis on diversity.
- **Further On Campus Action.**
    - Although there were students in attendance, there were concerns that there would have been more participation if the teach-in was more visible and if it was conducted during a time more convenient for the average student's schedule.
    - Improve cultural awareness: one suggestion was to include residence assistants and other relevant individuals on campus who are involved in and mediate inter-personal relationships of students.
    - Improve and facilitate communications: another suggestion is to have relevant information booths and materials made available in high traffic areas on campus, especially during the time between classes.
    - There was a vibrant call for the continuance of discussion and the call to action regarding issues brought up in the breakout sessions - especially with regard to actual sustainable safe spaces capable of remaining equitable.
    - A better attempt to bring the different cultural campus organizations and clubs together.
- **Relationship between On Campus and Wider Community Action.**
    - There was a lot of fruitful interaction with off-campus advocacy groups and community organizations, which led to questions regarding the fortification of the connections made at the teach-in and curiosity regarding other potential connections.
    - Improving the relationship with the surrounding neighborhood around Pratt, especially with respect to recruiting students.
    - Having an open discussion about the gates surrounding Pratt.
- **Conceptual/Curricular Issues Worth Exploring Further**
    - How can courses and curriculum better address issues of race and diversity? Can a foundational course in art history be established that isn't just given from the traditional Eurocentric perspective?
    - How can the arts and media challenge the dominant portrayals and narratives of black identity? How can we build and sustain alternatives?
    - The inclusion of more arenas to critically assess and engage the complex relations between the majors the student are pursuing and the social issues that they might intervene in with their knowledge and expertise. For example, the challenge of equitable and affordable urban planning or the possibility of sustainable architecture and its relationship to economic development.

- The need to connect present struggles and their relationship to art and activism with past ones in order to learn from them.
- How can the visual and making in general aid historical and social consciousness?
- What is the role of education? Who has access to it?
- How can a better and more effective ‘critique culture’ take shape, especially one sensitive to the cultural differences of the students? Can we explore better alternatives than the ones presently in place.

### Committees Established at the Teach-In

In response to the issues listed above, participants communally formed the action committees with the intention of continuing the discussion begun at the teach-in into the future. The committees are as follows:

- Student Support
- Pratt’s Place in the Community
- Continuing the Conversation
- Hiring
- Curriculum
- Data and Research
- Funding
- Mentorship

Each committee was assigned a lead and participants signed up. Pratt’s Senior Leadership should expect to be contacted soon regarding each of the themes of the action committees.

### **REQUIREMENT FOR FURTHER SUPPORT**

It is clear from the participation in the teach-in and suggestions gathered from it that further action and conversation is need at Pratt. This is something echoed by the administration itself in the April 15<sup>th</sup> equity and inclusion email sent out by Vice President of Student Affairs, Helen Matusow-Ayres.

Pratt Black Lives Matter appreciates the administration’s acknowledgement of the gravity of the situation and its ‘zero tolerance’ of discrimination on campus. However, we as an organization think that the problems and possible solutions at present are incapable of being fully addressed, or even preferably addressed, by the administration on its own. That is to say, the community-building and the work cannot simply be resolved along the normal administrative channels and policies. The magnitude of the problem is something that requires more.

Pratt Black Lives Matter sees itself as ally in the administration’s larger diversity initiatives; it is nevertheless important that we insist on our independence—as a group organized from among

the population of students, staff, and faculty of Pratt—in the wider diversification and social justice initiatives and conversations on campus. It is our belief that part of a rich and productive campus life includes the ability to voice active concerns in areas and collectives on campus that are not directly overseen by, sometimes even critical of, Pratt policies. In fact, this very capacity to engage in critical discourse on campus is something that falls under some explicit aims expressed under the “Expanding Horizon” and “Building Capacities” heading of Pratt’s own Strategic Plan (2012-17).

Therefore, we respectfully request and call upon President Schutte and his Senior Staff to support Pratt Black Lives Matter, not just nominally but also by providing the necessary space, forums, and opportunities for wider campus action and conversation. This support is integral for creating, maintaining, and fostering a much more diverse, racially just, and inclusive environment at Pratt. For if it is true that Pratt Institute’s expressed mission is “to educate artists and creative professionals to be responsible contributors to society,” then we see no issue in Pratt Black Lives Matter’s presence on campus as well as any reason why the administration might not aid in the type of interventions and transformations it seeks to engage in. And if art and design make the contemporary world legible, it would seem befitting that Pratt encourage its students to fill a socio-cultural need by incorporating such a relevant issue into the everyday and educational experience of every citizen of Pratt - past, present, and future. How better contribute to society than engage in an education instills within its students a chance make a lasting mark? What better way to stake a claim in the betterment of society than provide the opportunity for students to cultivate, create, and collaborate in the formation of a language *needed* for a progressive and equitable social consciousness. We can no longer remain oblivious or silent on such matters.

Attached to this assessment are our Institutional Demands that we would ask that we have on-going conversations with administration about; a specific request for an upper administrative position (VP of Social Justice); and a request that for the next two years, we hire a BLM Co-coordinator (part time) who will aid in the programming. We think it imperative that the senior staff of Pratt Institute take these requests into serious consideration.

BLM Steering Committee (2015-16):

P. Aurora M. Robinson-Baptiste, Caitlin Cahill, Donna Gorsline, Christian Hawkey, Ann Holder, Christopher Kennedy, Jenny Lee, Jennifer Miller, Mendi Obadike, Uzma Z. Rizvi (Chair), Meredith TenHoor, Anthony Williams, Ellery Washington, and Daniel Wright.