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Racial Tension On Display: Engaging with Black Lives Matter and Negotiating Public Push-back

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Racial Tension On Display: Engaging with Black Lives Matter and Negotiating Public Push-back

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James Madison University; Libraries & Educational Technologies (LET)

Introduction

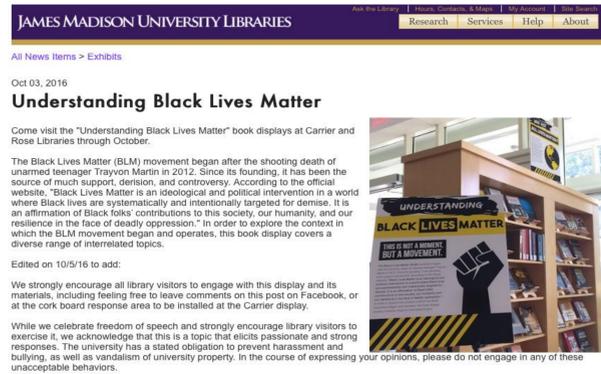
Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a non-violent international activist movement focusing on police accountability, racial profiling, police brutality, and institutionalized racism et al. Yet, in the media and in other fora, there has been confusion about BLM’s goals, name, structure, and strategy.

James Madison University (JMU) is a predominantly white institution, with less than 5% of the student body identifying as African American or Black. While many campuses experienced student marches and protests during the 2015-2016 academic year, the response at JMU was more muted.

With the support of administration and the LET Diversity Council, JMU Libraries produced a book display in the fall entitled “Understanding Black Lives Matter,” to educate students on the BLM movement and the historical context for the movement’s need to exist.

Vandalism Incident

Within 48 hours of the display going live, it was vandalized in one of the library locations. The perpetrator crossed out the word “Black” with a pen and replaced it with the word “ALL.” This was a disheartening event for many, because a) “All Lives Matter” has been a rhetorical response to BLM that distracts from BLM’s focus and derails important conversations, and b) the display preemptively addressed “All Lives Matter” with signage explaining why it was an inadequate response.



Our Response

Together with Kristen Shuyler, Director of Outreach and Partnerships, we acted quickly to move the signage about “All Lives Matter” closer to the vandalized sign and crafted messages, both on the display and in online promotion of the display, strongly discouraging any further vandalism.

As disturbing as this incident was, we did not want to remove or “paper over” the vandalized display. By preserving the defaced display and calling out its inappropriateness (citing University and ALA policy), we could acknowledge the emotional impact of the incident on our users who identify with BLM and draw a clear line between healthy free expression and unacceptable, hostile action. Preservation of the act, while protecting those impacted by the act, is a delicate balance.



Author	Title	Year	Library	Carrier	
Alexander-Floyd, Nile	Gender, race and nationalism in contemporary black politics	E185.615 .A39 2007		BlkExperience	Carrier
	Bridging race divides : Black nationalism, feminism, and integration in the United States, 1895-1935				
Dossett, Kate.	The new Black history : revisiting the second Reconstruction	E185.6 .D69 2008		BlkExperience	Rose
	We who are dark : the philosophical foundations of Black solidarity	E185.615 .A37 2011		BlkExperience	Rose
Shelby, Tommie	Integration : the African American experience in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Part of an oral history project	E185.615 .S475 2005		BlkExperience	Rose
Fisher, Todd	Black is a country : race and the unfinished struggle for democracy	F234.H31 I48 1997		BlkExperience	Rose
Singh, Nikhil Pal	Black and Latino/a politics : issues in political development in the United States	E185.61 .S6144 2004		BlkExperience	Rose
	Veiled visions : the 1906 Atlanta race riot and the reshaping of American race relations	E185.615 .B536 2005		BlkExperience	Rose
Godshalk, David For	Jim Crow Wisdom : Memory and Identity in Black America since 1940	F294.A89 N439 2005		BlkExperience	Rose
Holloway, Jonathan	Before Jim Crow : the politics of race in postemancipation Virginia	E185.625 .H64 2013		BlkExperience	Carrier
Dailey, Jane Elizabeth		F231 .D24 2000		BlkExperience	Carrier
			This is due in January\		
Alexander, Michelle	The new Jim Crow : mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness	HV9950 .A437 2010		BlkExperience	Carrier
Piven, Frances Fox.	Keeping down the black vote : race and the demobilization of American Long overdue : the politics of racial reparations	JK1924 .P68 2009		BlkExperience	Carrier
Henry, Charles P.	Whiteness and morality : pursuing racial justice through reparations and sovereignty	E185.89.R45 H46 2007		BlkExperience	Carrier
Harvey, Jennifer	Managing white supremacy : race, politics, and citizenship in Jim Crow	E184.A1 H3528 2007		BlkExperience	Carrier
Smith, J. Douglas	Beyond redistribution : White supremacy and racial justice	F235.A1 S65 2002		BlkExperience	Carrier
Graham, Kevin M.	Deluxe Jim Crow : civil rights and American health policy, 1935-1954	HT1521 .G675 2010		BlkExperience	Carrier
Thomas, Karen Krus	The rise and fall of the Voting Rights Act	RA563.M56 T46 2011		BlkExperience	Rose
Bullock, Charles S.	Voting rights under fire : the continuing struggle for people of color	KF4891 .B85 2016		BlkExperience	Rose
Brown, Donathan L.	Living with Jim Crow : African American women and memories of the segregated South	KF4893 .B76 2015		BlkExperience	Rose
Valk, Anne	Race, riots, and roller coasters : the struggle over segregated recreation in Reconstruction America	E185.61 .V35 2010		BlkExperience	Rose
Wolcott, Victoria W.	Fighting chance : the struggle over woman suffrage and Black suffrage in Reconstruction America	E185.86 .W65 2012		BlkExperience	Rose
Dudden, Faye E	The first civil right : how liberals built prison America	JK1896 .D79 2011		BlkExperience	Rose
Murakawa, Naomi	Trayvon Martin, race, and American justice : writing wrong	HV9950 .M86 2014		JusticeSystem	Rose
edited by Kenneth J.	Racial justice in the age of Obama	HV671 .I73 2014		JusticeSystem	Rose
Brooks, Roy L.	Race, racism, and American law	E185.615 .B7297 2009		JusticeSystem	Rose
Bell, Derrick A	Black resistance, white law : a history of constitutional racism in America	KF4757 .B35 1980		JusticeSystem	Rose
Berry, Mary Frances	Racial issues in criminal justice : the case of African Americans	E185.61 .B45 HV9950 .R33 2003		JusticeSystem	Rose

What We Learned

We were able to take several lessons away from this experience. In selecting titles from our collection that covered the wide range of topics germane to BLM, we identified gaps in coverage – most direly among queer Black voices. Faculty in the History and English departments requested copies of the display bibliography, indicating that they were looking for ways to engage with the topic, but lacked an entry point/topic knowledge to draw their students to the literature.

With Kristen, we presented this information at JMU’s annual conference dedicated to Diversity topics. The session was very well-attended, including participation from many in administrative roles, as well as students. At the end of the session, we were gratified to learn how much our faculty, staff, and students, especially students of color, were paying attention to the events surrounding this display. They offered positive feedback to the library’s handling of events and new ideas to explore for future outreach activities.

The Diversity Council is looking forward to producing at least one book display every year, addressing a topical issue, with the intent to help build student awareness and engagement.