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For the Greater Glory of Whom? A Perspective on Occupy SLU

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Dr. Stefan Bradley is Associate Professor of History and of African American Studies at Saint Louis University (SLU). As of fall 2017, he will be chair of the Department of African American Studies at Loyola Marymount University. During the events of Occupy SLU, he was director of SLU's African American Studies Program. Bradley is an expert in the influence of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, with focus on the role that black college students have played in shaping post-WWII American society. Among his students, he is known for cura personalis. The day after Michael Brown was killed in August 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, a student called him to report that another student had been injured in a demonstration. Bradley spent the next weeks and months in active solidarity with his students — helping them speak with the media and mentoring those who had taken to the streets to protest. He served in a similar role during the events of Occupy SLU, helping the protestors channel their anger over injustices into actions, and ensuring that SLU's Black Student Alliance was involved in the agreement between protestors and the administration that ended the week-long occupation of SLU. He also was among the handful of black faculty who advised the SLU president, Dr. Fred Pestello, as he discerned how to respond to the occupation.

Bradley's perspective calls us to not whitewash the past, to not forget the unofficial history surrounding Occupy SLU, to remember the tension and chaos of the week-long occupation, to keep the community of protestors and their concerns always at the center of the narrative. He also cautions us against complacency as we move into the future. He reminds us that the work of justice is hard and that we must not lose sight of its urgency.

I. Introduction

Fatefully, in October 2014 I played a minor role in the occupation of Saint Louis University (called #OccupySLU) and its resolution. At the time of the demonstration, I was an associate professor in the Department of History with a joint appointment in the African American Studies Program. A year earlier, I was appointed director of African American Studies, and one of my goals was to draw the program closer to the black community. My own research regarding the influence of Civil Rights and Black Power on elite institutions in the 1960s informed this endeavor. When researching and taking the appointment, I could not have predicted that a new movement would unfurl before me. After spending months with activists protesting in Ferguson and St. Louis, Missouri, turmoil erupted on my own campus. During the week of occupation, I spent many hours engaging with the occupiers, students, staff, faculty, and administration. The following is my perspective on Occupy SLU as well as my thoughts on the demonstrations' significance to higher education in general.

The narrative of Occupy SLU is under threat of hindsight. In 2017, the renderings of the week-long demonstration of black community members and students at the Clock Tower seem rather clean. To the contrary, October 2014 was a remarkably tense time, and no one knew exactly what was going to happen next. Many lost friends, and others lost social standing during that brief period. Feelings were hurt and not every decision was right. There is, however, one thing for certain: black and poor people pressed the university to live up to the rhetoric it espouses. Just as it took poor and black people offering their bodies for the nation's soul to get the Civil Rights legislation and policies passed in the 1960s, black students, community members, and others used their bodies to occupy the conscience of SLU in 2014. They should always be given primary credit for that. Often, those remembering the past center actors with respectable titles and positions. In this case, young people who would have frightened those with respectable titles off campus allied themselves with black SLU



Occupy SLU Collection

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[Lucas et al., The Impact of Flag Desecration on Social Justice Movements: The Case of Occupy SLU](#)

[Linsenmeyer & Lucas, Student Development During the Occupy SLU Movement Through the Lens of Perry](#)

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students to force a much-needed dialogue about race and poverty. We can honor their efforts by making sure that each of the thirteen points on the agreement that ended the occupation (known as the Clock Tower Accords) is fulfilled in a meaningful and substantial way. Doing so will take money, space, energy, devotion, and time.

II. Context

Prior to Occupy SLU, there was a burgeoning conversation regarding race, racism, and oppression at SLU. A contingent of black faculty and staff voluntarily assisted with black admissions and retention, seeing minimal results. I had been in contact with the division of enrollment and retention management about admission strategies to attract black students. Similarly, I worked with the Division of Student Development about retention strategies and programs for primarily black students. Everyone with whom I worked had good intentions and a desire to eradicate racism at SLU, but we did not always completely agree on the best way to do so. In my estimation, the university inched forward toward social justice as it regarded race.

Unfortunately, the rate of black admissions and retention was dropping. That was frustrating for those whom racism oppressed because we saw how quickly institutions could accommodate issues when decision-makers felt pressed. When assuming the directorship of the African American Studies Program, I sought to ensure the conversation extended to the campus and surrounding community.

Campus-wide discussions about race were typically provoked by individual acts of racism that black students and others experienced. They included threats, racial epithets, and stereotyping. There were also the slights that black students felt but could not prove were racist in nature. It hurt to watch the effects they had on black students, who sometimes became disillusioned with what they thought SLU's mission represented. With that in mind, I attempted to serve on every "diversity" committee I could and, additionally, I raised issues of racial justice in meetings that had nothing to do with diversity. Perhaps I was contentious at times with administrators and committees when it appeared to me that SLU was

resigning itself to be in St. Louis what a scholar once called an urban, predominantly white higher education institution in Philadelphia: the "Island of University" in a black sea. I was weary of struggling, but I maintained a clear conscience about my attempts to highlight race and class in the discussion of social justice.

In spring 2014, SLU's Black Student Alliance (BSA) mobilized to address the university's response to an incident of racist behavior. The conversations that BSA had were an extension of those that began previously. BSA had issued a list of demands regarding admissions rates and accommodations for black people on campus. Administrators, students, and faculty members had been looking at ways to address the points that BSA made.

That August, some BSA members' lives changed forever. The day after Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson gunned down Michael Brown, Jr., a student called to let me know another student had been injured in a demonstration near the QuikTrip gas station that burned after Brown's death. I knew what I had to do. I taught, traveled with, and advised the students who were in the streets protesting the police response to demonstrators and what they viewed as the errant killing of their peer. Understanding the historic role of Black Studies leaders in the past, I chose to be with my students as well as the working class and lower-income people who cried for justice. When news outlets like the *New York Times*, BBC, Al-Jazeera, and MSNBC asked for comment, I attempted to center the role of youth and to ensure that young people had the opportunity to speak for themselves. My goal was to add some nuance and diversity to the representation of black youth in the media. For months in Ferguson I stood with young people who consistently protested through the fall. I saw and felt firsthand the commitment of black youth for justice; it was unforgettable.

III. Experience

Then, Occupy SLU occurred in October. For many at SLU, the occupation shook them. It was an intense time, but it was also humorous to observe people whom I could recall never mentioning a word about racism at any of the

hundreds of meetings I attended in the past wax poetically about the need to “do something” about these issues. Additionally, it was interesting to see others who earlier had remained inert on such issues feel emboldened by the occupation. Clearly, the issue of racism pressed SLU in a way it had not since the 1960s, and officials reacted quickly. Unsmiling black activists camped out in the middle of campus seemed to inspire purposeful reflection and a sense of urgency all at once.

I remember everyone talking about the occupation from different perspectives. In formal settings, the president, administrators, and some faculty members met constantly to prevent the occupation from becoming a tragedy. I did not worry that it would, but many people’s senses were heightened because of the images of the burning QuikTrip in Ferguson that ran on the news. No one wanted anyone to get hurt. I was able to broker a meeting between Tribe X, which was a group of young activists and SLU students that formed after Brown’s death, and the president. Early on, the formal meetings were especially trying because SLU officials needed to know what exactly the protesters wanted in order to end the occupation. Black faculty members in those meetings balanced that desire by highlighting this as the perfect moment for SLU to deal directly with the issue of race and class.

The mostly white administrators who had worked with concerned black faculty and staff members before recognized the opportunity. The president, hired months earlier, depended heavily on those who had been at SLU for a while. He seemed to be notably shaken, but he dealt earnestly with the activists. Frankly, he acquitted himself well for the circumstances by choosing dialogue. In retrospect, however, there was little choice for him. Having the demonstrators arrested may have been an option, but provoking the rage of the nearby black community that did not always hold SLU in the highest regard — especially at a moment when black youth boldly confronted (sometimes physically) police in protest — was a dangerous prospect. Thankfully, the president listened to those who had been having these conversations regularly, and he made the best decision he could. There was no violence.

The occupiers were very intelligent and unrelenting. They did not initially deliver a list of demands but instead chose to discuss racism in general and how it affected the poor black people who lived two blocks away from SLU and in America. They were fearless in their critiques, and they knew they had momentum on their side. Many of those people who initially marched onto campus came from out of town and were here for Ferguson October events. In the formal meetings, the occupiers knew they had a national network to mobilize when they delivered their demands. Everyone in the room knew it.

Informally, we were busy. I was in constant contact with some student members of Tribe X since the day of Brown’s death. They shared their concerns and how they wanted the university to improve with respect to black people on and off campus. I encouraged them to be specific about what they wanted because I knew that everyone at the university was listening. They came up with a list of ways that the university could address race and class internally and externally. I also spoke with dozens of community members and students about their thoughts regarding the occupation. With colleagues, reactions ranged from fear for the rest of the students and of property being harmed to “this is pretty cool” to “how can I give my midterms with all this going on?”

Other officials dealt with the most dangerous creatures on earth: parents fearful for the safety of their offspring. At every step, some of us reminded everyone we could that the occupiers had not harmed anyone. In fact, the most effective student-to-student/peer-to-peer conversations about race and class had occurred at the Clock Tower — the location on campus where the occupation physically took place. Where our classrooms and programs were not enough, the young people taught and learned a great deal informally. As an educator, I felt that was inspirational and aspirational.

IV. Action

The members of Tribe X, M-SLICE (a local activist group), BSA, and the president came to an agreement that an external consultant later called the Clock Tower Accords. The occupiers insisted on transitional access programs for high school

students in Ferguson and the Shaw neighborhood (nearby SLU) as well as measures to increase scholarship and retention funds for current SLU students. They also stipulated funds for speakers on race and poverty and also an increased budget for the African American Studies program. Additionally, they demanded that a monument, of sorts, be constructed to remind future students of the importance of the work that they did. Finally, they called for SLU to establish a community center and for scholars of race and poverty to be recruited to the university. The meeting at which the president signed the agreement was fraught with a sense of distrust that the activists had of university affiliates and officials. That session, however, ended with handshakes and commitments.

Weeks and months after, there were countless conversations held in what were called the president's Access and Success team meetings. The Access and Success team consisted of university administrators, faculty, students, and community representatives, most of whom had been there for the occupation. I enjoyed the meetings because of the diversity of the body, but they often ended without any concrete resolutions as to how and when things would be accomplished. This was, in part, because of timing. The meetings were short, but also issues arose during the meetings that required the president's and other administrators' attention. For instance, the anticipated announcement regarding the indictment of Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson (who killed Michael Brown in August 2014) loomed over the meetings until November. Then, the campus conversations shifted to whether SLU would be safe when the announcement — of indictment or non-indictment — came. Some officials were concerned about the prospect of St. Xavier College Church being harmed by demonstrators. The idea was laughable because in the four months prior, churches were the places that some of us went in Ferguson to be safe from teargas, rubber pellets, and militarized police. Not one of the thousands of people that I encountered in the months leading up to the announcement ever mentioned harming a church. Some black faculty members suggested that the College Church should be a safe space for anyone who needed it once the announcement came. As it was, mostly

white students used it in that capacity. In the end, no demonstrators attacked the church. At the time, I thought that once again we were concerned with protecting the most privileged white people while demonizing the oppressed. As it was, the effort made the students feel safe, and the mission was accomplished.

Another controversy arose when SLU School of Law students invited St. Louis County prosecutor Robert McCulloch to lecture on campus. This was his first public discussion of the decision not to indict Wilson. Some members of the Access and Success team found it offensive and an indicator of how SLU fell on the issue. Others believed the timing was bad; and, others thought it would be a good exercise in intellectual debate. We tried our best in those meetings to achieve goals, but there was little discussion of budgets or timelines, which would have helped with progress.

V. Reflection and Evaluation

As the frequency of Access and Success meetings diminished, the campus commemorated the occupation in 2015 and 2016. I did not know if they were celebrations that SLU got the occupiers to leave or that the university acknowledged that SLU played a role in improving or depriving black people's life chances or something else. Was it navel gazing or merely a time to remember what happened? I am sure these events helped our mostly middle and upper-income white student body to make sense of the occupation and to discuss race, but the fact that the black student population again decreased from 6.9 percent in 2014 to 6.4 percent in 2015 and that most of the agreements had not come to fruition rankled.

The university fulfilled its commitment to offer more resources to African American Studies. The students greatly benefited. Equally, the program was able to improve the already stellar outreach effort that it had been making into the black community on and off campus.

In the years since the occupation, SLU affiliates have done well to talk about aspects of race, class, oppression, and privilege. People are certainly being more intentional about initiating those conversations, and that is good. The president appointed a special assistant for diversity and

community engagement (who later became the university's chief diversity officer and then vice president for diversity), and there was a mini-conference that featured local activists, politicians, educators, students, and concerned citizens. Substantially, however, little has changed in the way of black admissions, retention, and several other agreements. The university recently acquired 400 acres of midtown for the purposes of expansion and redevelopment. It remains to be seen if the relationship between community and SLU improves markedly.

Occupy SLU was significant to me on several levels. The university, for the first time in my years of employ, was impelled to confront the issues of race and class that had always been present but maybe never pressing enough for decision-makers. I was glad to be part of the discussions and the facilitation of a peaceful end to the occupation. This, I believed, was the opportunity the university needed to grow. The occupation, to me, exposed many of the latent racialized fears and anxieties of white university affiliates. Observing the reactions of some people with whom I had worked for years gave me cause for reflection. This spoke to a larger issue within the institution. Everyone generally (and publicly) agreed that racial equity and increased opportunities for black people from lower economic backgrounds were good in the abstract. When, however, the prospect became praxis during the occupation, many were disturbed by how change is catalyzed.

The role of community members and students was inspiring to me, as they sacrificed their personal freedom and access. The threat of being arrested and/or expelled did not prevent the activists from raising their issues. In other cases throughout history, universities called police (and sometimes the National Guard) to remove demonstrators, and the scenes were often violent. I had personally witnessed the violent arrest of activists on the streets of Ferguson. The actions of the community members and students required a courage not known to many. That is why they should always be at the center of the narrative of Occupy SLU.

Today, there is much less of a sense of urgency. That is natural because of the time that has elapsed and because no one is currently

threatening to occupy the campus. The pressing issues today seem to be budget cuts and general enrollment. I do not believe SLU affiliates involved with the occupation are any less committed to improving the institution's stance on social justice, but I think many are breathing easier than they did during that week-long demonstration. The occupation has decidedly advanced the status of the university and some administrators in higher education circles. I assert, however, that if the university does not substantially fulfill the thirteen agreements that the president made in 2014, SLU will be another white institution that has issued empty promises of freedom and access to black citizens. Concerning Occupy SLU, I am left with the following questions:

- How do we collectively define the social justice that SLU claims is part of its mission?
- Which participants of the occupation are remembered and why?
- Who has directly benefitted from the occupation that poor black people led?
- Does anyone in the community or not affiliated with SLU commemorate the occupation? If so why, and if not why not?
- How do universities resolve issues fraught with racial tension today? HJE