

Alex Schein:

Last fall we launched our podcast In These Times with an examination of COVID-19 and its far reaching impacts. We spoke with students and faculty who shared their personal experiences with the epidemic along with perspectives drawn from history, science politics and beyond.

A recurring theme of our first season was the crisis within the COVID crisis. How racial inequality was playing out in the context of the pandemic revealing itself in unequal health outcomes and boiling over with the death of George Floyd. This season, we wanted to dive more deeply into this theme to focus on Black lives and the call for justice.

We'll explore the nation's complex history with race and consider some challenging questions, who controls the narrative about the US? How far have we moved beyond our history of enslavement and Jim Crow? Are we at a moment of reckoning? In These Times, knowledge is more important than ever.

Speaker 2:

No Justice!

Speaker 3:

No Peace!

Speaker 2:

No Justice!

Speaker 3:

No Peace!

Speaker 4:

For the twelfth night in a row, a coast-to-coast call to action.

Speaker 5:

No Justice!

Speaker 6:

No Peace!

Speaker 4:

From Washington's newly named Black Lives Matter Plaza...

Speaker 6:

Say his Name!

Speaker 5:

George Floyd!

Speaker 4:

To San Francisco's golden gate bridge.

Speaker 7:

I can't breathe! I can't breathe!

Alex Schein:

We wanted to begin Season 2 of In These Times with a focus on that explosive moment of last summer, when millions of Americans of all races and ethnicities, in cities across the nation joined in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Shortly before we began our interviews, the Capitol was attacked by supporters of the former president who sought to overturn the outcome of the 2020 election.

Norah O'Donnell:

The US Capitol has been placed on lockdown.

Speaker 9:

USA! USA! Stop the Steal! USA! USA!

Alex Schein:

When we talk to faculty and students, the protests of summer 2020 and the insurrection on January 6th were inextricably linked.

Tukufu Zuberi:

A Confederate flag in the Capitol, on the Senate floor in 2021.

Breanna Moore:

Talking to my friends, talking to my family a lot of us were just so shocked that these quote unquote "protestors," these insiders, these... I think they call themselves patriots were actually able to get inside of the Capitol.

Heather Williams:

And the thought that was through my mind was, "My God, if these were Black people they'd be treated so differently."

Herman Beavers:

So as a friend of mine put it, "The only woke Whiteness that there is, is confronting what happened on January 6. Everything else is really immaterial."

Camille Charles:

You can't un-ring this bell. It's not like day after tomorrow it's all going to go back to the way it was. It's not. And it's going to be years undoing this.

Alex Schein:

In this episode, we'll hear some more reactions to this moment from faculty speakers who will be featured later in our season. We'll also hear from two students who reflect on the events of this past year and share a glimpse of their experiences as young Black adults, finding their path in a nation that has yet to come to terms with its legacy of racism and White supremacy. Welcome to Episode 1: The Largest Movement in History.

Heather Williams is the Geraldine R. Segal Professor of American Social Thought and a professor of Africana Studies. A scholar of African-American history, race and slavery in the American South, professor Williams' books include *American Slavery: A Very Short Introduction*. She sees our current period of division through a broader historical lens.

Heather Williams:

The day... What is it? Three weeks, two weeks ago now? When I watched, I was taking a lunch break and I was watching the Senate debates, I was watching on the New York Times page and so the reporters were [inaudible 00:04:28] and they started reporting on what was happening outside. And I sat and I watched it for four or five hours. And the thought that was through my mind was, "My God, if these were Black people they'd be treated so differently."

And, of course, in the succeeding days, I realized a lot of Black people were thinking that way. And I think now some White people were thinking that way because they had lived through the previous year of violence, right? So some people are becoming more aware.

But it was so clear to me, and that's because it's built up over time. And that there was a way in which it's not just the numbers that overpowered. It was also the Whiteness that overpowered. What do you deploy? What physical force do you deploy against White men and women who come marching in here? Totally, totally different.

I remember saying to a friend a couple of times, "This reminds me of the 1850s," the division in the country, but not just division among individuals, but somebody at the helm who's sowing that division and encouraging it. And she said the "1850s? Not the 1960s?" And I said, "Yeah, 1960s, it was intense. It was powerful," but it's the 1850s when the country was so divided over slavery and abolitionists were pushing more and more against slavery. And the pro-slavery people in the South and elsewhere are saying, "No, we've got to hold on to slavery."

And 1856, maybe? I may be off by a year? Charles Sumner, a Senator, was beaten on the floor of the Senate by a representative. So Congressman goes in and beats a Senator and it was about slavery and about abolition. And that's what I saw, and coming into this year. So you've got these forces that so much of it goes back to slavery and power and who's going to be in control and who feels threatened.

Alex Schein:

We'll be hearing more about this long struggle from Dr. Heather Williams in our next episode of the season, *Embedded in History*. While the institution of slavery may have been abolished, undoing its legacy has proven to be a different story.

Camille Charles the Walter H. and Leonore C. Annenberg Professor in the Social Sciences is a sociologist who has documented the causes and impacts of persistent residential segregation. Here, she reflects on the connection between our history and the perpetuation of race-based inequality today.

Camille Charles:

Certainly we are a nation founded on the idea of Black inferiority, and because we have never really dealt with that origin story, right, that original sin we don't educate our children in a way that would address that and then begin undoing it. Right? So that for everything that we might see in society that we would think would make it better, I think there's too much that remains in our society, beginning with K to 12 education, that really just perpetuates that origin story. Or, at least the piece of it that suggests that somehow slavery wasn't so bad and Blacks are to blame for their subpar economic position, right?

That if they just worked harder, if they valued education more, that they wouldn't be in the position that they're in. Not really understanding that, having put them in this position, that Blacks do end up disproportionately living on welfare, relying on underground economies to make ends meet.

And so, they then perpetuate, in some ways, the stereotypes that Whites used in order to keep them from being equal participants in the economy and the polity in the first place. And so you sort of have this vicious cycle and as long as we don't do something to stop it, in some ways it's, it's kind of like breathing. It's sort of in the air everywhere we go all the time and so it is extremely difficult to break down under those circumstances, particularly when we know that there remain people who believe it and would prefer that we were living in that earlier era.

It's just part of walking around and living. And so when we talk about this sort of chronic health issues that have been tied to the experience of racism, things around cardiovascular health and high blood pressure, depression, fatigue, anxiety, it's not because we think that there are Klansmen around every corner, right? It's having to constantly prove that we belong in particular spaces.

Alex Schein:

We'll hear more from Dr. Camille Charles as we explore the problem of institutionalizing racism in Episode 3, later this season.

The pandemic's unequal impacts, the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and other Black Americans, the Black Lives Matter protests, the January 6th insurrection in DC. The past year has left a little room to ignore the persistence of racial injustice. What does this mean to our own community at Penn? How have students been absorbing these events?

We spoke with Herman Beavers the Julie Beren Platt and Marc E. Platt President's Distinguished Professor of English and Africana Studies about how the past year has played out in his classrooms. Dr. Beavers teaches courses in African-American and American literature. We'll be speaking with professor beavers again in Episode 5 of this season, which takes a look at environmental justice and race.

Herman Beavers:

From the very beginning of class last semester, I had to acknowledge that there was stuff going on that we had no control over and that nobody asked for. Nobody asked for a pandemic, nobody asked for the image, this sort of lingering image of a Black man being suffocated by a White police officer, nobody asked for any of those things.

And so one of the things that I decided needed to happen is that I needed to check in with my students on a regular basis just about how they were feeling. And then I had to figure out how to develop a pedagogy that could scaffold how they were feeling by using the class material to engage some of those questions.

So to answer the sort of larger question, "What has it been like and how has it been?" I would say part of me is really optimistic because my students last semester... The best way to say it is that they were singularly eloquent some days about how they were feeling and what they were seeing and their overall sense of things. And it made me really happy to be teaching at a place like Penn.

Now, in terms of my own response, I knew by the middle of 2017 that we were well on our way to becoming a fascist authoritarian state. And by 2021, when 45 left office, that's what we were. So the coup attempt on the 6th, and that's exactly what it was, the coup attempt on the 6th is what happens in a fascist authoritarian state, where people are doing what they think the authoritarian leader wants them to do. So it was disheartening.

The other thing is this, White supremacy and systemic racism have become, if not household words, certainly sort of public watch words. And I'm skeptical about how deeply invested people are, particularly White people are, in addressing those things. And my skepticism has not... Nothing that I've seen, including White people participating in street protests, nothing that I've seen has induced me to think that we have reached at what people are calling an "inflection point". Because, January 6th undoes all of that. If we were on our way to it, it's all undone. Because for better, for worse, we live on a country whose history is built around the idea that White people are central to everything that happens and everybody else is an add-on or an imposition or an intrusion that needs to be either silenced or erased or removed.

So, the only people that can turn that around is White people. I reject that whole language of White people being my allies, I just reject that because I didn't advance White supremacy, racism. I didn't invent those things. So my expectation is that people who are really serious about engaging White supremacy and systemic racism, they need to take January 6th as the arena in which they need to enter to challenge those things.

As a friend of mine put it, "The only woke Whiteness that there is, is confronting what happened on January 6th. Everything else is really immaterial." And I've been saying that all along, it's easy to be in a crowd of Black people on a street. It's easy because the police are going to single out the Black people to hit with their billy clubs.

This other thing is harder. And we know that because people are afraid to confront their racist uncle at Thanksgiving. So how are you going to confront the people that were in the Capitol if you can't do that? And that, that really is the challenge. Now, that's a long winded way of saying that I'm still optimistic, but we have work to do. And the thing is we always have work to do. We just were not willing to do it. And they make people like me feel like we were crazy for saying, "Hey, we have work to do."

Alex Schein:

In all of our interviews, the theme was repeated, while the Black Lives Matter protests of the summer spoke to the need for change, January 6th was a reminder that change won't be easy. What does it mean to grow up in a society where, in the words of Dr. Heather Williams, "The struggle is ongoing over who is going to be in control and who feels threatened."

One of the students who spoke with us about his experience of this unique and challenging moment is Jelani Williams. Jelani is a communications major with a concentration in Advocacy and Activism and an African Studies minor. He's also a point guard on the men's basketball team and a mentor for high school and middle school students in the West Philadelphia community. He describes what was going on in his life when last summer's protests happened.

Jelani Williams:

It was an interesting scenario this summer, where everybody was in the pandemic and we were inside and people were struggling with mental health and a lot of other things. And I was frustrated with my own personal challenges with basketball and not being able to work out and find a gym and everybody felt like their personal issues were the biggest thing going on. You know what I mean? Everybody was so self-absorbed with what kind of toll the pandemic was taking on them.

And I think that this summer, at least for me, it really broadened my scope as far as everything that has to be fixed and everything that is problematic with how we live and just the systems that we've been raised in and grown up in. So, for me it was sort of a wake-up call. You know, I had always... As a Black man in America you obviously know about police brutality and how things are set up and how they're not necessarily set up for you or your people. But it was definitely a wake-up call to see it and then to see all the support. We had worldwide protests, every major city in America. So it was, it was just crazy to see the amount of support and the amount of people that came out and how that moved through the summer.

But me personally, I was out in DC, out on Capitol Hill, probably for two or three weeks after George Floyd was murdered, just trying to be a part of it and really see, feel the pulse of the people. And just understand the moment that we were in and try and motivate myself and motivate the people around me to try and create change where I can. So that eventually, generations after this will hopefully, one day not have to deal with the trauma that was 2020 and that summer.

Alex Schein:

Like many others we spoke to, Jelani saw the events of January 6th as a predictable consequence of the path that our country has long been on.

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Jelani Williams:

The thing about January 6th is that it wasn't very surprising to me. And people like me, I feel like, kind of understand that that undercurrent has been in our country since the beginning. It's just been kind of pushed to the margins. And obviously it was a shocking event. You have hundreds of people gathering in front of the Capitol building while electoral votes are being counted. And the process of democracy here is being put through, but at the same time... It just felt like I could almost see it coming.

When you see the energy that the President was putting out trying to discredit the election results and really stoking his base, which we know is diehard for him, and has been for the past four years. It was not surprising, but at the same time, it was pretty disheartening as someone who had been out on those very steps outside the Capitol this summer.

And you can just see the complete difference in the way that we were treated. Like we weren't even allowed within 200 feet of the Capitol building this summer. And I turned on CNN and I see all these people literally hanging off the side of the building, walking through with Confederate flags and so many things that are not supposed to be what this country represents.

And all of that stems from the reality that Black people went out and voted, in my opinion, and helped Biden win pretty handily. And so for me, just seeing that, that contrast between the way we were treated and the way things went down on January 6th was definitely something that stuck with me and has stuck with me. And I think it hopefully has illuminated to a lot of people that there is still a really big issue with race in this country.

Alex Schein:

At a time when issues of racial injustice have been pushed to the front of our national dialogue, Jelani notes that conversation itself remains problematic.

Jelani Williams:

I think the most frustrating thing for me over the course of this summer is that some people still just don't get it. I feel like I have a lot of people who have had sort of a cultural awakening and they understand what the issues are and what's going on to some extent, and they want to be a part of making things better and fixing and righting the past.

But I think the frustrating part for me comes from, one, the everyday conversations that you might have with people who don't fully understand or fully grasp the experience. And so it becomes almost an academic conversation. When we talk about like police brutality or even what happened at the Capitol, although those weren't Black people, it's generational trauma for African-Americans and people of color in this country.

I think the most frustrating thing for me is, it's a very emotional topic. And while I know a good amount about it, it still is very emotional. And so when you have conversations with people who it doesn't affect personally, I think the frustrating piece of it is a lot of times you'll find the conversation going into some place where you're picking out little parts of the issue or you're talking about things that don't really

matter in the grand scheme of things. Because it's not emotional for so many people. It's something that can be picked apart and being academic.

And I think that's something that is very prevalent at Penn, is I think that we have so many brilliant people and so many kids who want to have a deep understanding of a lot of different things that it's tough to really express that here, that so many people... It's not academic for so many people. You know what I mean? Like, I get pulled over and I'm scared to death. It's a real world experience, a real world fear that I have, is not something to like really chop up and like find all the facts for and try and provide devil's advocacy and interesting counter commentary. For me, at least.

And so that's what's been most frustrating for me. Just, people see me as someone who knows a lot about it and wants to talk about it and they take that as, "Alright, let me try and argue or like bring different perspectives to it." And for me it's like, "I know what I know, and I believe what I believe, and I know what I lived, what I've lived and, and the way I have to live because of this."

And so, for me, that's the frustrating part of it is trying to remove your emotions from it so that you can get through to someone who doesn't have emotions attached to it. And I think that's not just a problem at Penn, but a problem everywhere. I think that's sort of what leads to the slow movement, I think. And slow change that we've seen, not just at Penn, but at a mass scale and even all the way up to politics. That's been sort of frustrating for me is like, it's been such a hot button issue and everybody has an opinion on it that it's no longer something that's driven by emotion and something that can be pushed to where, "Alright, we need to get something done, because this is actually affecting real people."

It's no longer... I feel like the conversation has gotten to a point where, like I said, it's academic. It's a political issue. Like, Black people are a political issue. Black Lives Matter is a political issue and it shouldn't be that. It should never have been that. For me it's like, it's a human issue, a human rights issue. So I don't know. It's tough. It's been tough to see it be sort of capitalized on and it's been tough to see it politicized. I think those are the two most frustrating parts of it for me.

Alex Schein:

Jelani agrees that there's a great deal of work to be done. And it's work that he believes all of us need to be part of.

Jelani Williams:

I think that it's important right now to continue listening and to continue learning about what's going on and what's happening. But it's even more important to try and make change and try and like really enact change as swiftly as you can. You know what I mean? Whether that be, for here and alum, and it's in the workplace and you're pushing for more representation in your workplace. Or, if you're a student and you're having a back and forth with another student, or one of your friends who may not see eye to eye. Or, if you're a student athlete and you feel that there is inequities within the athletic department, or your coach says something or something like that. It's important to not only feel that you're on the right side of it and feel that you've done what you need to do to be right with yourself on this issue.

The next step is to make that a lifestyle change and really understand that this is not something that came up this summer and will be fixed by next summer. This has been a long process to even get to this point where we can have this conversation and it's going to be even longer to get to a place where we can say that it's behind us. And so, that has to start now in my opinion. And for a lot of people it has already started, but we're a couple months removed from the protests and the election and all the crazy stuff that came with 2020. So just to kind of put that in people's minds and ears that it has to be a constant movement and a constant attitude shift.

Alex Schein:

Finally, we spoke to Breanna Moore. Breanna graduated from the College of Arts and Sciences in 2015. Today she is a second year PhD student in Penn's history department where her work includes the study of slavery, the slave trade, and the US South, with a special focus on South Carolina where her family is from. For Breanna, the death of George Floyd and the ensuing protests were not just events of 2020. They were part of a story that began many years earlier.

Breanna Moore:

It feels as if we're watching the same episode on repeat and nobody's trying to change the channel. I would say for me, I see it as a culmination of something that's been in the works, that's been brewing basically since African people have gotten here. For my generation, I would say one of the key moments that snapped me and some of my friends and family members my age into the reality that we still live in a White supremacist nation was my freshman year in college.

I was 19 years old and I heard about Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman. And I remember attending my first protest, we did a March... I was at college in Charleston and did a march in downtown Charleston and we were just protesting simply for George Zimmerman to get arrested. And we were all just so shocked and outraged that he wasn't even arrested.

And so when you see these protests come up all over the nation and finally they actually arrest him. And so when the verdict came out that... I'll say this, before the verdict came out, I feel like myself and a lot of people my age, we really believed that he was going to be found guilty. We were thinking, "How could he not be found guilty?"

When the verdict came out, we were all just so shocked, so hurt that this could actually happen. But talking to my parents and talking to other elders, they weren't surprised at all. To them it was like, "Of course this was going to happen," like, "This is America." So I feel like that moment really opened a lot of young people's eyes to the reality that we've inherited a legacy of racial discrimination that extends even beyond police brutality. And I feel like that, for me, was really the launch moment of what today we call Black Lives Matter. Some people will say it started in Ferguson with Michael Brown. But I would say for myself personally, was the moment where Trayvon Martin happened.

Speaker 17:

I am!

Speaker 18:

Trayvon Martin!

Speaker 17:

I am!

Speaker 18:

Trayvon Martin!

Alex Schein:

Throughout her life as an undergraduate and now a graduate student, Breanna has explored the African-American narrative both in and outside of the classroom. Two separate study abroad experiences in Ghana connected her to her family's deeper past in West Africa. These trips inspired her creatively as well as academically and led her on a path that culminated in her co-designing a piece titled Dress that is part of the re-installed Africa galleries at the Penn Museum.

Breanna Moore:

It started off as a fashion line in Ghana, I worked with tailors and seamstresses in Kumasi, Ghana to make the clothing. And later on I launched LaBré Bazaar which sold my clothing then it was also a platform for different designers in Ghana and Canada and the African diaspora to sell their products through. And so I did this for about two to three years, and then I stopped doing it once I started the PhD program.

But Dr. Zuberi, he was aware of my prior work with LaBré and he commissioned me along with the Penn Museum to create a dress for the Penn new Africa Galleries. And I was able to collaborate with a fellow artist named Emerson Ruffin who's very outstanding, his work is amazing. And we were able to create the current piece in the Africa Galleries right now.

Alex Schein:

Breanna has remained engaged in creative production while working towards her PhD.

Breanna Moore:

We're working on an exhibit that's going to be at ICA in spring of next year. And hopefully if COVID allows, the vaccine allows, we'll be having different workshops at ICA this fall 2021. We're also working in partner with [inaudible 00:31:30] where we might also have some different workshops there at [inaudible 00:31:33] this fall, and hopefully the summer, God willing, and then next spring.

So, our project is basically looking at the importance of mask in the African diaspora and on the continent. We're exploring several different themes, slavery, emancipation, colonialism, Western beauty standards, surveillance, different tools for liberation that all stem from brainstorming about how masks have shown up from pre-colonial times to the present day. And we're using virtual reality. We're using augmented reality. We're using different multi-modal art forms, including videography and illustrations to tell the story. So this is a project that I'm currently working on, I'm very excited to see it bloom and come to fruition.

Alex Schein:

For Brianna, art is a critical extension of her intellectual pursuits and a critical expression of the human spirit.

Breanna Moore:

For me, art and being creative is so important because having to live in a reality that is shaped by racism and by White supremacy one of the most important things that you need to survive is your imagination, is your belief in hope and faith that one day it will be better. Based on my earlier comment, I don't think that it's never going to be better. I think right now, I'm not encouraged that it's going to be better, say, the next few months or a year or two.

I think it's going to take a long time for the true change or freedom that we want to come. So for example, say slavery lasted 300 years. It might take 300 years plus for White supremacy really to become a thing of the past in this country and globally. That's one important thing about imagination, like when you're a child is so untampered it's so vast and expansive because you aren't as polluted with the trial and tribulation of the world. Five-year-olds, right now, they don't know about the Capitol being stormed or Black woman being shot in her bedroom or her apartment. Ignorance is bliss. And I feel as though with your imagination, it's not just about being blissfully ignorant. It's about being able to have the freedom to be blissed despite the negativity, the depression, the anxiety that you may go through on a daily basis.

It's a sacred space that you can exist just as yourself and see what comes out of that creative space of just existing and prioritizing your joy and speculating on a present and a future that you would like to experience, even though you may one day never experience it. But using that inspiration to create an art piece, whatever the art piece may be. And then to go back full circle, because that art is going to inspire somebody else and it may be a generation after you who's not here right now, and you may not be alive to see them. But they'll still get the art and it'll continue to aid their motivations, their struggle and hey, maybe 300 years later the world will be different.

Alex Schein:

Breanna sees a fundamental misunderstanding of the idea of race in the US, and the way that concept has been misused has become an issue that today threatens every aspect of our society.

Breanna Moore:

If we think about like essentially human core, there's no such thing as race, it's a social construct, we're all human beings. But the fact that race has been so essential to the fabric of this country and being able to claim that you were more raised to be recognized as being this race, that it allows you to be able to quote unquote, "Have an insurrection." To be able to breach the Capitol building and walk away unscathed. It really shows you how serious the idea of race is to America and what it allows you to get away with.

And until we start thinking about race and racism as a truly national emergency, just how we think about terrorism as a national emergency and national threat, then the nation is going to eat itself from the inside. Racism and race has to be thought of as a national emergency, not just a terrible standard of our nation's past, it's our original sin. I think we need to look at it as, yes, it was the original sin. It was

something that happened in the past, but it's still so very alive today and it's going to be so very alive in the future if nothing is directly done about it. It's going to continue to entrench our politics, our education, our religion. It's going to entrench every aspect of American society beyond just the political realm if there's nothing done about it.

Alex Schein:

This concludes Episode 1 of In These Times: Black Lives and the Call for Justice. Please join us in two weeks for Episode 2: Embedded in History, which covers the evolution of laws about slavery, the long lasting effects of 20th century policies like urban renewal and the societal repercussions of colonialism and fascism.

In These Times is a production of Penn Arts and Sciences. Special thanks to Breanna Moore, Jelani Williams, Dr. Heather Williams, Dr. Camille Charles and Dr. Herman Beavers. I'm Alex Schein, thanks for listening.

Be sure to subscribe to the Omnia podcast by Penn Arts and Sciences on Apple iTunes or wherever you find your podcasts to listen to all six episodes of Season 2 of In These Times: Black Lives and the Call for Justice.