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# THE SYLLABUS AS ACTIVIST DOCUMENT

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The syllabus as an activist document is an action speaking back to dominant discourse that often ignores or silences the voices collected in the syllabi. Usually located inside the university, syllabi create, document, and reproduce systems of learning and knowledge-making that can mirror greater social and political inequity. Therefore, the syllabus as an activist document – inside and outside of the classroom – highlights subjects that do not make the standard curriculum. Presented to the public as what should be on everyone’s reading list, they foreground marginalized ideas, people and histories as integral to society as a whole.

Activist syllabi are collectively authored, publicly compiled, and digitally circulated via social media through the use of a hashtag, which allows searching across social media platforms. Initiated by an individual or collective, they quickly become publicly-created texts with calls to add suggested essays, books, films, and websites to the reading list. They recall the etymology of syllabus as a table of contents or list without policies and rubrics. I use the word action – the activist document ‘as an action speaking back’ – to emphasize the dynamic, praxis quality of these digital texts. They are activist in spirit and practice – as movements of thought and action, driven by political desires for social transformation. “A movement,” Sara Ahmed suggests, “requires us to be moved” (5). And an activist syllabi moves us from a document created by a single instructor or curriculum committee to one created by the general public, from the positions of teacher and learner to one of collective teaching and learning, and from strictly the classroom to other sites and modes of critical and creative knowledge making and sharing.

Some activist syllabi are created following tragedies to help faculty address the events in class with all the complexity they deserve, and to challenge the public to educate themselves about ongoing oppression that leads to these events. Following the 2015 racist murder of nine Emanuel AME Church attendees in Charleston, SC, Professors Chad Williams, Kidada Williams and Keisha N. Blain started the #Charlestonsyllabus. The 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting that killed 49 people in Orlando, Florida inspired archivists, librarians and teachers to initiate the #PulseOrlandoSyllabus. Both syllabi historicize injustice that continues into our contemporary moment as well as foreground intellectual and creative work connected to the issue at hand. As both documents are responses to hate crimes, they also communicate hope that education about difference and oppression might help us build a better future. Other activist syllabi seek to mobilize political support. For example, #StandingRockSyllabus began with the No Dakota Access Pipeline protests against building an oil pipeline through the Great Sioux Nation territory. Initiated by the NYC Stands with Standing Rock Collective, the syllabus traces a history of settler colonialism with a timeline and links to documents broad in range about Indigenous history and activism.

Whether initiated inside or outside academia, these syllabi are knowledge-making projects that archive histories of thought and present-day discourse within particular communities and subject areas, challenging those inside of academia to reassess who, what and how we teach in our classes.

**WORKS CITED**

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Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke UP, 2017. Print.