Will Cohen, Editor
Christian Krokus, Associate Editor
5/16/2022
Issue 6
CCG NEWS
Christians for the Common Good

We have the Blueprint: Pastness and Moral Memory in Black Studies and Christian Practice

By Nicole Hoskins, Ph.D.

Editor's Note: On Thursday, 28 April 2022, as part of the Office of Equity and Diversity's Lunch & Learn Series, the University's Black History subcommittee of the Council on Diversity and Inclusion presented "Re-Membering Blackness at the University of Scranton: History as a Call to Action." The presentation included discoveries from the library's digital archives in relation to the University's Black history (see: www.scranton.edu/rememberingblackness). Predictably, some of it was encouraging, while much of it was troubling and painful. At least 100 people attended either in-person or online, and common sentiment seemed to be that this was a necessary and good—though certainly not sufficient—step for the University to have taken toward healing and creating an atmosphere in which Black students and alumni feel welcome, heard, and safe. As part of the presentation, senior psychology major Koebe Diaz presented on interviews she conducted with members of the Stanley Louis Brown Black Student Union at the University of Scranton about their experiences on campus, as part of an independent study she completed with Dr. Nicole Hoskins of the Theology/Religious Studies department. The following remarks are Dr. Hoskins' preliminary comments before introducing Ms. Diaz.

The horrors of the transatlantic slave trade, chattel slavery, and Jim Crow segregation have forever marked and stained the flesh and consciousness of our world. Many understand these as past events, but what would it mean to see them as present?

We readily understand and have language for living in a "post" world. Scholars and teachers understand what post-Enlightenment, post-modernity, and post-9/11 mean. And now we are considering what it would mean to live in a post-Covid world. We know how these events have shaped our present, but when it comes to the transatlantic slave trade, chattel slavery, and Jim Crow segregation, black scholars and black people are often met with questions like, Isn't that over? Isn't that done with? Why are we still talking about that? These sentiments naturally lead us to deeper questions, broadly but also specifically for the University of Scranton: Whose stories count as history? Whose stories get to be remembered? What gets to be remembered? And how?

If we understand that living in a "post" world means paying attention to how certain events continue to shape our future, it is imperative then, that we begin to think about what it means to live in what Saidiya Hartman calls the afterlife of slavery. That is—to understand, as Hartman would say, "how black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that was entrenched centuries ago" (*Lose your Mother*, 6). The afterlife of slavery matters because it points to how black people have "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, high rates of premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (Hartman, *Lose your Mother*, 6). In other words, the materiality of black lives and the possibility of a black future are still imperiled by having once been propertied.

In black studies, being in the afterlife of slavery is the ground from which we theorize. It is precisely what many in the world (and might I say at this university) want to ignore. "This is the past," they say. "Get over it." But we must come to terms with the reality that we are living in this afterlife. In other words, the past is not yet past. It is what anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls *pastness*. He notes that the past does not exist independently from the present. "Indeed, the past is only past because there is a present…Thus, in no way can we identify the past as past" (Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 15). So, the past is, more accurately, "pastness." It is something that is unfolding still, even as we speak.

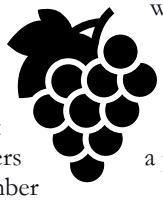
Today, I believe, The University of Scranton is at the intersection of ethical possibility. The advent of the black history archives is a possibility to ethically re-member black history in order to build more just futures at the university. But let's be clear, the work is not just to remember certain black people who stood out in the crowd, not just to memorialize the first African Americans to do this or that as a way to feel good about ourselves, but to tell the truth about the conditions of what it meant to exist here, to pay attention to the ways in which black students have to strategize to make it here, and to honor their brilliance over and against a system that often terrorizes them in secret. This is what womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas understands as moral memory. She notes that we need moral memory. "Moral memory is nothing less than telling the truth about the past and your relationship to it. Moral memory is not about exonerating ourselves for the past. Rather, it is taking responsibility for it. To have a moral memory is to recognize the past we carry within us" (Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 221). A past that is not past.

I hope this doesn't feel daunting to a place like the University of Scranton. As a theologian, I naturally want to lean on the

ABOUT CCG NEWS

CCG News is a publication of Peace and Justice Studies in collaboration with Christians for the Common Good, a reading and discussion group co-founded in 2017 by Will Cohen and Christian Krokus, faculty members in the Department of Theology / Religious Studies at the University of Scranton. The views expressed in CCG News do not necessarily reflect those of the University or the Department of Theology / Religious Studies.

side of hopefulness. So consider this: our identity as a Catholic and Jesuit university makes us especially well positioned to understand what pastness means. We, more than most universities, should understand how the violence of the past marks our present lives. And more than most institutions, we have the blueprint for how to re-member it. Is that not what partaking in the Eucharist is? During the last supper, Jesus insisted that his followers re-member him. And so every week, many of us re-member Jesus' broken brown body and flesh poured out for us. The Eucharist helps us re-member the past and be present to the broken black and brown bodies of the world today. We are also well positioned to understand what pastness means because of our Jesuit value and commitment to *cura personalis* – care for the whole person. The late Maya Angelou said, "I come as one, but I stand as ten thousand." In this way, the whole of who we are also includes our ancestors. Our commitment to *cura personalis* should be an ethical demand to honor the whole person as an embodiment of a past that is not yet past.



We have a blueprint and a practice for re-membering. But how will we make use of it?

An "Exit Interview" with Tiannah Adams and Koebe Diaz of the Black Student Union

Editor's note: *CCGNews* Issue 4, published in Spring 2021, contained an interview with Ms. Adams (TA) and Ms. Diaz (KD), founding members of the Stanley Louis Brown Black Student Union at the University of Scranton, in which they reflected on the need for the University community to look at issues of racial injustice and insensitivity on campus both historically and today. What follows are some parting thoughts as Ms. Adams and Ms. Diaz graduate from the University of Scranton in the coming days. The interview was conducted and edited for style and length by Drs. Will Cohen and Christian Krokus of the Theology/Religious Studies department.

On the accomplishments of which Ms. Adams and Ms. Diaz, as founders of the Black Student Union, are most proud

TA: I'm very excited about our space. It took a few years for us to finally get it, but after all of our hard work we were able to do it. I think it's going to come together nicely within the next few years and be a great safe space for Black students to have on campus and also just get to know each other, because it's something that we haven't had before.

KD: I really enjoyed doing archival research with Dr. Hoskins and as a part of the subcommittee on Black History. That really brought everything full circle for me, because I was able to include some of the people I met through the BSU and to talk about what the BSU means for other students and the impact that that's making. And also, I was able to look at the past and see what it means for our future and for our current experience. I can see moving forward how other Black students on campus can be involved in the research that's ongoing. There's a momentum that's building there.

TA: When the BSU was just an idea in my head, I was in Dr. Gail Kemp's office during my sophomore year. We wrote an idea board of everything I would like to accomplish, and luckily everything I wanted to do we did accomplish. It's been a surreal experience, starting from the first BSU meeting on Zoom, and then in-person, to actually having our space and getting a chance to talk to the administration about the Black experience. It's all been gratifying, although there have been many struggles that have gone along with it.

On some of the remaining challenges in relation to the BSU space at the Gonzaga House

KD: At first, we were just thinking of maybe a lounge area, and then we started having more conversations with administrators. We talked with Father Marina about it, and Father Marina actually proposed having some sort of house, and that got us thinking bigger. Since then there has been a lot of back-and-forth with the language of whether the space is permanent or temporary. We were under the impression that we were looking at permanent spaces.

TA: At one point we were told that the space, any space that we picked when we first toured multiple spaces, could be permanent and would be ours, and it was just up to us. But as soon as we decided, that's when we were told that it was not going to be a permanent space. We wanted certain furniture, but we also wanted smaller things like plaques commemorating the founding members or a new name for the house, and we were told we couldn't have such things, because it's only a temporary space. It's the changes that would make it feel most like home that we couldn't make.

On the concern that the BSU's work and story will not be properly honored or sustained

KD: I worry that in a few years, the space won't be here anymore. That's my biggest fear, that something will happen or there'll be some kind of push for things to go back to the way they were.

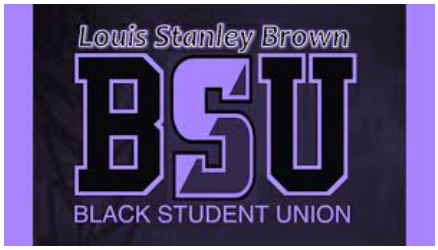
TA: I have the same worry, but I also worry that the University will take credit for orchestrating the space instead of sharing with everyone all the hard work that the founding cabinet had to do to get this space.

KD: It's really weird, because it's like the school was doing it for us, but we were the ones basically begging for a space, and so the University is taking credit for the labor that their Black students are doing. Instead of saying something like, look at this thing that the Black Student Union did for Black students on campus, instead the school is saying, look what we did, we were trying to help, but that's just not an accurate representation of what's been happening.

TA: It's reminiscent of the pushback I received when I started the BSU. And something to add to what Koebe was saying about the BSU space, when I first started the BSU in 2020, we understood that there would be a safe space or "counterspace" we would have as soon as it started. But we didn't have our space until the first day of Black history month [February] of this year.

On the kinds of things University administrators can do to improve the experience of Black students

KD: I would like them to hold themselves accountable. I remember sophomore year during one of those zoom sessions, where administrators were on the zoom call listening to students and asking what we wanted. One of the things I said was that I would like to see the students who are doing racist, offensive things held accountable for their actions. Now here I am two or three years later, saying that I wish the university, with just the administrators, will hold themselves accountable because I think that's what I'm realizing: they're not going to hold students accountable when they're not holding themselves accountable. I think about the presentation I did a few weeks ago as a part of my tutorial with Dr. Hoskins. There were only a few administrators who attended, and the ones who did see the video later, or who know of the video, I haven't really heard anything about it from them, not from the ones who are higher up. I mean maybe they're working on it privately but based on their other actions I can't really say that I would know that.



TA: I was also disappointed that more administrators were not at Koebe's presentation. I think they would have learned a lot about the Black experience at the University if they were there, and they claim that's what they want to know about. So I think the first step is to actually show up to the events that give them more insight.

KD: I remember attending a meeting with administrators after the murder of George Floyd, and the whole thing was like, we're just here to listen, we're not going to respond. Initially, hearing that, I thought, oh wow, they really want to listen to us. But in fact, the no-response part of it actually, at least for me, made me feel worse, because here I am on this Zoom call, at my family home in the middle of the pandemic, telling these people, this is how I feel being at the University and it's not good, and then the only thing that comes after that is "thank you for sharing," and then the next student shares. You can listen to someone and also respond to them at the same time.

TA: With the assistant dean of students, I spent close to a month and a half organizing a Town Hall about the mock slave auctions, and along the process it became a multicultural Town Hall, not just for specifically Black students anymore, which was also the University's response when we were requesting a space for the BSU.

KD: I think this is the way the University does look at issues when it involves Black students, like more of an all lives matter kind of approach, which isn't enough.

On the kinds of things white students at the University can do to improve the experience of their Black peers

KD: I would say, first, to be aware that you have an effect on the way Black students feel at the university. You have to think about your actions and think about how on a day-to-day basis they are affecting the lives of Black students on campus.

TA: I can think of something smaller and something larger. On a larger scale, it would be to talk to the administration and to voice your opinion about the lack of diversity on our campus. You can also bring attention to Black voices and other voices of color on campus. On a smaller scale, try to make Black students and other students of color feel more comfortable and less excluded. When I got here, I felt like I didn't belong; I don't want any other student to feel that way, and I think it starts with white students just being more friendly and kind to Black students on campus.

KD: I agree with both of those points. Many white students hold important positions on campus or are close with administrators or other important figures on campus. There's a great opportunity to let them know that these are things you care about, things that you're thinking about. Also, in the classroom, when a professor or another student says something that's racist or insensitive, don't just wait for the Black student in the classroom to say something. Say something first. Speak up about it. You know when something is wrong, and you don't need to be Black to say that something was racist.

TA: We always have to be the ones to speak up, and then after class students may say, oh I can't believe that happened, I can't believe someone said that, that's so racist. There was a time to speak up and say something.

Some parting advice for Black students at the University of Scranton

KD: Keep thinking of things to ask for. In the time that we've been a BSU, we've come up with a list of things that we wanted to see, like more Black faculty, Black counselors at the counseling Center, and a dedicated space. Black students should think about what they need while they're here, and ask for it. If it's going to take a while to get those things, at least

you're paving the way for other students to pick up from where you're leaving off and continue the momentum.

TA: I completely agree. They should just keep asking, and not settle for anything less than what they want and deserve, just because they think that's all they can get.

KD: Yeah, it's okay to be angry, to be upset, and to speak up. Being in a white space can make Black students feel like they have to just take what they're given and find a different way to be comfortable. It is amazing and beautiful that we find community among ourselves, but if something doesn't feel great, you don't have to suffer through it. You can speak up and let your opinion and your feelings be known, because there are people who will agree with you.

Democracy, Retreats, and Political Love

By Joseph Barry, Class of 2023, Political Science Major

Few deny that retreats offer unique opportunities for spiritual rest and revitalization of faith. The spiritual consolation resulting from a retreat weekend often provides an opportunity for retreatants to act upon lessons learned together. We rightfully want to utilize that opportunity, but the reality is that most of us fall right back into habitual conditions from before the retreat weekend. Promises to communicate more with acquaintances made over the retreat often go unfulfilled. Desires to change one's lifestyle for the better remain unrealized. Work, academic studies, family concerns, or cheap entertainment distract people from carrying out the noble missions they were inspired on retreat to pursue. Too often we relapse quickly to the status quo of life.

The drastic fluctuations of those retreat experiences apply to more than spiritual concerns alone. Contemporary democracy in the United States seems to experience similar movements. Whether during election cycles, domestic tragedies, or international crises, we enthusiastically intend to solve some social problem only to succumb eventually to political fatigue. We dive right back into the world which makes us feel secure, often without intending to. Part of the problem is that people are exhausted as media inundate our supposedly safe world with constant news content. We're faced with a choice similar to the one presented at the end of a retreat, especially once feelings of consolation disappear: either passionate action or relative indifference.

The first reaction can be seen clearly in the outrage at the Russian onslaught against the people of Ukraine, which has sparked supply drives, prayer vigils, and even legislation in support of the Ukrainian people. Repeated stories of school shootings or unjust police killing of Black citizens have led to nationwide protests for gun control policies and police reform. Yet, too often once the shocking horror of war and violence becomes less prominent in news headlines, citizens lose their determination to better the conditions of others, until the next catastrophe. Political activity wanes. Voters become less informed and less interested, and political leadership takes advantage of the public's distraction and fails the general welfare for which they are obliged to provide. Citizens grow indifferent to their collective responsibilities, and the crisis inevitably returns.

The problem is that indifference ultimately leads to despair. For example, the lingering effects of climate change have persisted. Wildfires and earthquakes seemingly torn from the Book of Revelation rage across the West Coast. Flooding and tornadoes reshape entire Midwest communities. Hurricanes and snowstorms blanket East Coast cities under shrouds of darkness. Instead of pursuing available options for mitigating these disasters and for protecting their own health and environment, citizens are trapped by feelings of hopelessness and no longer feel empowered to act, despite the immense external pressure and need to do so. In both our politics and our spirituality, we seem to hit a wall.

In the case of our democracy, shattering the cycle of relapse requires recommitment to foundational American political principles – reasserting the value of each vote, protecting free and fair elections, ensuring the diverse and active participation of all citizens, and expanding access and quality of civic education. What Pope Francis describes in his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* as "political love" – an act of charity that "spurs people to create more sound institutions, more just regulations, more supportive structures" – would have us cling to the principles of citizenship originated by the framers of our government. One may even refer to this "political love" as a sort of *civic agape*. If we are to formulate innovative and sustainable public policies, citizens must be reminded that their input within the political process remains valid, pragmatic, and empowering. Successfully navigating moments of consolation and desolation, whether of a spiritual retreat or of the American experiment of democracy, relies on our willingness to maintain a responsible commitment to faith and to our fellow citizens, so that we may learn to discern God's kingdom and to live out our own civic vocations, being the political and spiritual change we wish to see within the world.

CCG Participates in the Synod on Synodality

By Will Cohen and Christian Krokus

"Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Rev. 2:29).

In October 2021, a synod began in the Catholic Church called the "Synod on Synodality." It will continue into the fall of 2023. The word synod comes from the Greek *syn-hodos*, which means walking together on the way. Historically, synods were meetings of bishops, usually convened to address some disputed issue and to help the Church move forward together in the same direction. Since 1965, the Synod of Bishops that Pope Paul VI established to sustain the practice of fraternal dialogue and exchange he witnessed among gathered bishops at Vatican II has met every 2-3 years to discuss such issues as the Eucharist, the family, and most recently, in 2019, the Amazon region and the value of integral ecology. In October 2023, in Rome, there will be the next such meeting of bishops. But this synod, more than previous ones, has had the aim of realizing the widest possible participation. It has sought input from everyone in the Church and even from those who do not identify as members of the Church but who are interested enough to participate.

The Pope has called upon each Catholic diocese and religious order, and each Catholic-affiliated institution, to find some way of holding listening and discussion sessions. This was to take place before the end of March 2022. Comments from these sessions were to be collected and consolidated and passed on up the line – to the diocesan and then the regional and global levels of church leadership over another period of months.

The response among Catholic universities, like the response among Catholic dioceses, has been mixed. Some have responded robustly. St. Ambrose University in Iowa, for example, held listening sessions in every one of its theology classes and with its Black and Latino student groups, its campus group promoting respect for sexual minorities, and its student government. One of our sister Jesuit institutions, the University of Loyola Chicago, organized a listening session over Zoom with students from around the world who had previously met in small groups and who shared insights with Pope Francis himself, who could be seen dutifully taking notes, even or especially when the students had strongly critical things to say.

Others responded more modestly, and although our University falls into that category, it is important to note what we did. Campus Ministries organized a listening session for students after one of the Sunday evening Masses, and our own reading and discussion group, Christians for the Common Good (CCG), planned and held an event as part of the Synod on Synodality. It took place on March 25th and the eleven of us who gathered – a mix of students, staff/administration, and faculty, Catholic and Protestant – engaged for fifty minutes in very lively and meaningful conversation at two separate tables in the Rose Room in Brennan Hall. Each person at each of the tables offered thoughts on each of three questions – What do you most love about the Church? What breaks your heart about the Church? and How can the Church live up to its calling? We did not engage in debate, but everyone heard everyone. Of the dozens of themes and perspectives put forward, we have space here to summarize only a few.

- In response to the first question, participants expressed profound love for the sacramental connection to God's presence that is made available in and through the Church's ritual, ministry, and communion of saints.
- In response to the second question, participants lamented the times Church officials have failed to listen to the voices of their fellow Catholics, including lay persons generally, or specifically women, victims of clergy sexual abuse, and those identifying as LGBTQ.
- In response to the third question, participants urged the Church to embrace the Gospel simply and with vulnerability, to listen especially to critical voices, and to emphasize interpersonal communion among Catholics as a call to action.

It may be that a project as ambitious as a global listening session is bound to disappoint those who are looking for a quick fix to this or that issue, but that does not seem to be the point of the Synod on Synodality. The point seems more to be about getting Catholics into the habit of open discussion among themselves and with their non-Catholic and non-Christian neighbors. That starts with us, whoever and wherever we are, and it demands being intentional about it. CCG's own contribution to the global process will turn out to have been minimal in terms of direct impact, but those few of us who gathered sensed in one another a real desire to be led by the Holy Spirit, even if it should disrupt or complicate some of our own ideas. That's a pretty good start.

FALL 2022 CCG MEETING DATES

September 16
September 30
October 14
November 04
December 02

All Fridays at NOON.
Pizza provided.
Location TBA.

For more information contact
christian.krokus@scranton.edu