Before I came to Boston College, I worked for [New York Mayor Rudy] Giuliani’s administration on civil rights cases filed against the New York City Police Department. In this capacity, I specialized in the kind of police interactions that make front page headlines—just like the tragedy of Trayvon Martin, which happened a year ago. One of the things I realized on this job was institutional change doesn't just happen overnight. It happens because some relentless voice demands it.

Now that I have been on the campus of Boston College for 3 years, I've not heard many demands from anybody for anything.

This semester, in [BK267] “Red, Whites, and Blues,” we are talking about the [so-called] American Dream and how every kid is born in the middle of its story, and that [s/he may not be aware of it.] In America, issues of race and the tragedy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade make this [idea] especially relevant. If you are part of the African Diaspora, you have to grab bits and bites [of this “dream”] where you can and hopefully [in the process] you will discover that more important than the history in your texts is the history that no one has bothered to write down.

So what happens when the dreams a young man, like Trayvon Martin, are aborted and by one who the state protects? Who makes it their responsibility to record this tragedy?

Since I have been [a part of AADS faculty], I have design several courses that reveal the role of protest music in American history. Last year, just before Trayvon's murder, several students [in my classes] explained how BC students in general are not the type to protest anything that doesn't impact them personally. Soon after the murder, I discovered that some students in my [BK???] “Jazz and Social Change” course, and many others in [BK???] “The “Disintegration of Hip Hop,” participated in a demonstration to protest the state’s failure to arrest and prosecute George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin.

Anyone who has heard about the 1955 murder of Emmett Till can't help but compare and contrast the two terrifying incidents. Whereas the press and public reaction to Till's murder galvanized an entire generation to demand that the social economic inequality pervasive in American life be eradicated, the reaction to Martin's murder occupied Facebook statuses for a few weeks and then it was replaced by a TMZ headline.

Whereas Mamie Till's decision to allow Jet Magazine to photograph her son's body led to the initiation of the Civil Rights Movement, the movement initiated by Martin's murder was as short-lived as a viral video.
The story is as old as Jim Crow. As long as you obey the rules of society, you might avoid getting into trouble. The rule Emmett disobeyed was speaking to a white woman. The rule Trayvon disobeyed was walking through a suburban neighborhood that Zimmerman didn't believe his family could afford to live in. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Our outrage at this senseless tragedy is part and parcel of the story of the African American experience in the United States, which—thanks to the curriculum of AADS—is available for study at our illustrious institution. But all too often we have little time for black peoples’ stories and all the time for the trinkets of success and arrival that should make this study seem obsolete.

One of the main reasons programs like AADS exist on this campus is to inform students of the diverse history of this country and oblige our students to know why they are here and take advantage of the resources afforded them. So, when tragedies like Trayvon Martin’s murder strike, we will know how to think about it and then we’ll know what to do about.

As excited as I initially was to see that students on this campus were moved to participate in some organized protest, I regret that it seems that their activism ended when the cameras stopped rolling.

Last week, I joined members of Voices of Imani Gospel Choir in a trip to Washington, DC over Spring Break; in the process of visiting local churches, we visited the Martin Luther King Memorial. Many were amazed to see how, after all of these years, there is enough interest in the story of American protests that this amazing monument was erected as a witness. And as excited as I am sure Dr. King would be to see this memorial, I’m certain that he would rather that it was not necessary. I'm sure he would rather see the monument of protest recognizing new generations of young people who aren't afraid to protest when the need arises.

But instead, we have to travel back to a time when we weren't so eager to be mainstreamed. And just like the dinosaur casts we visited in the Smithsonian, maybe one day a whole wing of that museum will be devoted to activist students like those in generations past who once turned the world upside down, insisting that their voices be heard, about American withdrawal from an unjust war and that justice flow like a mighty stream.
Instead of identifying as protesters, we are content to be Facebookers, forgetting that when muscles that were designed for resistance lie dormant, atrophy sets in. It appears that a year after the Martin murder, we are not closer to seeing a generation of activist students than we were before it happened.

If singer/activist Gil Scott-Heron were here to witness the state of student activism, he might say: “this revolution will not be televised or tweeted. It will not go with UGG boots, and it will not go viral.” For all of our sakes, let’s hope we don’t miss it.