

Do Black *and* Brown Lives Matter? Thinking Mexican and African American Race Relations in Los Angeles with Stuart Hall

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During the first Democratic presidential debate last October, an African American boy posed a politically charged question to US Senator Bernie Sanders: “Do *black* lives matter, or do *all* lives matter?” To the untrained ear, the dilemma sounds false. Aren’t black lives a subset of all lives, so that affirming all lives automatically affirms black lives, too? But more is at stake in the phrase “All Lives Matter” than logic. The platitude is in fact white America’s color-blind retort to “Black Lives Matter.” This political slogan, and its eponymous social movement, emerged in the summer of 2013, after George Zimmerman was acquitted of the murder of African American teenager Trayvon Martin. Sanders’s affirmation that *black* lives matter was the right answer, for it echoed the movement’s insistence that black Americans are specifically and disproportionately subjected to violence and murder. Sanders refused the false universality that allows whites to ignore the persistence of white supremacy in the United States.

In this talk, I want to ask a follow-up question: Do black *and* brown lives matter? While the phrase “All Lives Matter” conceals racism by substituting the abstractly universal *all* for the specifically *black*, this question wonders about the effects of the conjunction *and*. Does the combination of African American and Latino political struggles also obscure racial specificity? Or can *and* function as what Stuart Hall called articulation? These questions have major practical consequences in the United States, for what is at stake in them are the possible futures that may open up after whites lose their demographic majority and political mass base in the middle of this century.