



Bigger than civil rights: Rosa Clemente talks Black Lives Matter and what we can do to see this fight through

Every year in January, we reflect on the life of Martin Luther King Jr. We ask questions about the progress we’ve made in civil rights, and what he would say of race relations today.

To writer and activist, **Rosa Clemente**—who will deliver the keynote lecture at the **Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration at University of Puget Sound** on January 20—the current activism and national conversation surrounding police brutality is a massive evolution in social justice, and as a movement, is bigger than civil rights.

During our conversation, Clemente and I talked about activism and the role young people play in the evolving Black Lives Matter Movement.

Talking with Clemente was a privilege for me because as an aspiring journalist I hope to write and report on criminal and social justice issues as she has; but also because as a black person and college student, hearing her perspective on some of the biggest issues today was inspiring and humbling.

“This conversation is about the humanity of black people and that is way beyond civil rights,” Clemente shared with me during our recent interview.

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Clemente, a 2008 Green Party vice-presidential candidate who received her B.A. in African Studies from Albany State University and her M.A. in African/African American Studies from Cornell University, is currently a doctoral student at the W.E.B Dubois Department of Afro-American Studies at UMass Amherst.

An Activist Scholar

Clemente has focused on decades of research on the shared history of American black and brown people, an area that much of mass culture and academia has ignored. This systemic omission has caused a chasm between African Americans and Latino/Latinas, something Clemente as an Afro Latina has worked to push back against. Much of her work focuses on liberation movements within the US. She is currently writing a book about the **Young Lords**, a movement that grew out of late-1960s Chicago and fought for equality and self determination for Puerto Rican communities.



Clemente sees her academic work as an avenue to activism: her primary goal is turning theory into practice.

“I’m an activist scholar. I use my scholarship to engage with social organizations. I see that as a role for students of color. We aren’t here to get degrees,” she explained, “ If you aren’t using your scholarship to better your community, I personally see that as a waste of time especially because we are in these spaces because of activism.”

Since the 1990s Clemente has been organizing and participating in hip-hop activism including the **Malcolm X Grassroots Movement** and through her media consultancy and speakers bureau, **Know Thy Self Productions**.

Know Thy Self has produced three major hip-hop activism tours, with performers including M1 of

dead prez, Fred Hampton Jr., Mystic, and Dave Chappelle.



Black Lives Matter

Clemente sees the current activism and protests surrounding Ferguson and Black Lives Matter as being “the most effective, growing movement we’ve seen in the last 30 years in this country.”

“[The protesters] aren’t looking for reform, they are looking for transformation,” said Clemente, who spent time with the protesters in Ferguson directly after Mike Brown’s death, and **was held at gunpoint by police**.

She described the movement as a “response of young, working class people,” one that is not looking for the typical elite black male leadership that traditionally heads up civil rights movements. Clemente

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explained that though there are many black and Hispanic leaders in this country, they are primarily out of touch with the progressive politics young people are pushing for right now.

“[These leaders] aren’t interested in what’s going on in the hood,” she said, “they aren’t interested in working class issues.”

To Clemente, this movement against police brutality is not about the policy reforms often proposed by this leadership. “Progress does not happen in laws,” she said, “we have laws on the books that are supposed to prevent these things from happening.”

The police actions that spurred this movement are not going to go away with more training for officers, or a shift in how they are prosecuted. Black Lives Matter calls for a complete transformation of the way the police operate in communities of color; what is needed is a deoccupation of police from these neighborhoods.

“We don’t need police on every corner of every black and Latino community. They do not operate this way in white communities. If we have policing it should be like it is in white communities,” Clemente said. “All of these resources in the criminal justice system could be funneled back into a community. That itself would change what the community looks like.”

Developing Leaders

Though she sees Black Lives Matter as powerful and well-equipped, she also encourages young people to take a step back and learn what it takes to make a difference by understanding the role of leadership.

“Leaders aren’t born, they’re developed,” Clemente shared, and she believes that now leadership is being developed in a way that will empower this movement to continue past the points where Occupy failed.

It is a movement where young people must be at the forefront, but also one that, she says, history will look back on as a time when women and queers broke through the barriers of leadership in Black and Latino/Latina movements.”That will be one of the enduring legacies of this movement.” Clemente said.

It is up to the first hip hop generation to support this generation, respect them, and treat them as equals. “My role is to step back and empower young people, and their role is to develop into leaders,” she said.



“It’s about sustainability and consistency,” Clemente said, “Organizing is not a paying job for most people... You do this work every day because you believe in social justice. You don’t have to do something big every day, but you do have to do something every day.”

The Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration at the University of Puget Sound

Hear Rosa Clemente lecture at the University of Puget Sound’s 29th year of honoring King’s legacy. Tuesday, January 20, 7 pm in Schneebeck Concert Hall on the Puget Sound campus. The celebration is free and everyone is welcome, doors open at 6:30 pm.

The Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration is sponsored by the Division of Student Affairs, Associated Students of the University of Puget Sound, and the Office of Diversity and Inclusion at University of Puget Sound.

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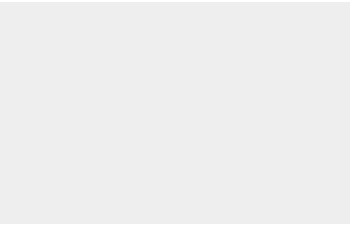
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About the Author



Eva Revear Eva Revear is from Puyallup, but spends most of her time in Tacoma where she studies Communications and Computer Science at the University of Washington Tacoma, and works as Editor in Chief of the university’s newspaper, The Ledger.

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