

2020

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Gillon, Dezi (2020) "Activism, Justice, and the Danger of Silence," *Intersections*: Vol. 2020 : No. 52 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2020/iss52/7>

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Activism, Justice, and the Danger of Silence

In this interview, *Intersections* editor Jason Mahn talks with Augustana College alumna, Dezi Gillon, to learn more about the callings to justice-work among students of color, and how he and other white professors can better support them as they live out those callings.



Jason: I remember vividly the die-in that you and others at Augustana organized as part of the emerging Black Lives Matter movement five years ago. Would you please describe some of your other activism in college and how you started to think about protest and activism in relation to who you are, and who and what you feel called to be?

Dezi: My urge to participate in activism at Augustana came from my desire to be heard and to find community. This was after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, Trayvon Martin's murderer, and my anger and desperation couldn't be ignored. The moment swept me and others into a whirlwind of organizing and disrupting systems of oppression that affected us and those we loved.

The beginning of the BLM movement was a moment that encapsulated feelings of anger and resentment I had towards white people growing up in Chicago and Evanston. I also grew up with two parents who were very active in

their local Black communities. My father was a community organizer and social worker and my mother did outreach work through the church we attended. At the beginning of my junior year, I could feel the support of my family back home and my community at Augustana. I felt as though I needed to do something.

I was fortunate to be surrounded by friends who also felt a call to action. The idea to organize protests at Augustana came after a number of seminars addressing the current events involving the Black Lives Matter movement. I remember walking away from those discussions feeling underwhelmed and frustrated at the lack of attention this matter was getting at our school.

What I loved so much about our community was that it was student led, trauma informed, and centered Black students. Although we reached out to Augustana faculty

Dezi Gillon (they/them) is a teaching artist and healer living on occupied Potawatomi territory—what is known today as Rogers Park, Chicago. In 2016, they graduated from Augustana College (Rock Island, Illinois) with Religion and Sociology majors, having participated in Interfaith Understanding, Black Student Union, AugiEquality, and Micah House, a residential intentional community. They went on to graduate from Union Theological Seminary (New York) with an MDiv in 2019. The conversation here was first published as "Hearing the Call to Action" at vocationmatters.org, the blogsite of the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE).

and staff for advising, we also had the guidance of writers and activists such as Angela Davis, Alicia Garza, bell hooks, James Baldwin, and so many more. We led various demonstrations on campus as well as a die-in. We also worked with the local Black Lives Matter chapter in the Quad Cities where we participated in a few local protests.

Jason: You talk about the “call to action” of you and your friends as emerging from places of disappointment, anger, and resentment. But you also speak of positive influencers and mentors, including your parents’ engagement with Black communities and famous Black writers who inspired you to act. Thinking back on those college years now, did your call to activism feel more like filling a void and emerging out of pain or following those who gave you hope and courage?

Dezi: While there was and is deep pain, for the most part my call to action came from a passionate desire to feel more connected to my community of fellow Black and Brown students. I love us, and I wanted to fight for us—for our love and existence, as well as for our representation at Augustana. I was also very grateful for fellow white students who joined our organizing and care work. I felt inspired by folks in my community and people I was meeting in Chicago and following on social media. There was no time to be silent or to cater to requests to be more gentle with white professors and students. Even though there was pain, we were determined to fight for one another in community.

Jason: Did the calling you felt to fight for and support a community of Black and other students of color carry over into your life and work since graduating from college?

Dezi: Yes! That time in undergrad has had such a significant impact on my life. After finishing my bachelor’s degree I decided to go to Union Theological Seminary in New York City. There I participated in organizing for undocumented folks who were seeking asylum in church and in school as well as accompaniment in court proceedings.

During my time in NYC, I also deepened my exploration into spirituality and Blackness. There was such a diversity of Black experiences in that city. I started becoming closer to my West African roots in my spiritual

practices. I started grappling with very complex questions regarding my Christian identity.

While doing social justice education and programming with the Sadie Nash Leadership Project, I also discovered that work with youth and environmental justice were large parts of my vocation. This work and so much more brought me to do the restorative justice work I do now. As I am now settling back into Chicago, I want to continue to learn more about transformative justice and youth work. Using art and transformative practices and following the leadership of youth, I want to invest myself in justice for the communities that I am a part of.

Jason: You mention how art, spirituality, and activism all compose parts of your identity and calling. Can you give us a sense of how those three go together—especially for the younger communities in which you are a part?

Dezi: I actually found these fit together quite easily for me. I have always been an artist. Sometimes I am a very active artist and other times my creativity seems blocked. Creating art and being fascinated by the art around me has informed my calling for justice and my connection to the spirit.

“Tying together art, spirituality, and activism was second nature to me.”

When I moved to NYC and started school at Union Theological Seminary, I had access to so much art and spiritual faith practices. These were woven together so tightly that at times I couldn’t tell them apart. Being around other artists, especially artists whose work tied directly to their spiritual life, helped me unravel the cultural aesthetics of Black Christianity and Black American lived experiences. I became fascinated with the arts and spiritual life.

I began to prioritize art and garden-based learning in my facilitation style as well as in my academic and personal life. Art became a portal into understanding and storytelling and I wanted to incorporate that into the way I taught. I also want folks to think more critically about the land and their relationship to it and to the people in their local community. Tying together art, spirituality, and

activism was second nature to me. Any limitations did not come from me, but from the boxes that other people put me in. I wanted to break out of those boxes and into something that documented the lives of my community.

Jason: What advice would you give to Black students studying at predominantly white institutions? How about to white teachers like me who are trying to learn how to better support students as they fight for change in an unjust world?

Dezi: Whew, these are big questions! The advice I would give to current Black students at PWIs is to try to find your people. Find people who support all of you—not just some of you. I am so grateful for the leadership of Black students and the space they take up on college campuses. Don't let white people and non-black POC put you into boxes that stifle your strengths. And if you feel like you are doing work you should be getting paid for, chances are you are. Know your worth and demand your seat at the table.

“By staying silent you actually speak volumes.”

When I think about the advice I'd give to teachers, I think of the Maya Angelou quote, “I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” You have the power to shape the way Black folks feel on your campus. I experienced not only the silence of my fellow students, but also of my professors. I remember the silence being frustrating and cruel. At times, the silence was almost louder than words of solidarity. There is no neutral ground. By staying silent you actually speak volumes. You are a resource to students, and should use the power that you have to open doors for students and support students when they need you. Do not become another barrier to voices who are learning to speak out.