

# “Black Lives Matter” Constructing a New Civil Rights and Black Freedom Movement

July 14, 2015



Raising the slogan of “Black Lives Matter,” protests have erupted across the United States. Behind this slogan is a proliferation of new organizations and networks composed of engaged millennial activists of color. On one level, it might appear that what is being constructed is an effort to address the lack of civil rights protections for African Americans. Yet, in the articulations of goals and objectives, it also seems that this is another wave in a long struggle for black freedom. In identifying the politics and potential of these formations, one can detect elements of both a civil rights and a black freedom movement.

Many of these formations have utilized social media to mobilize large numbers of young people, primarily in protest against police killings of blacks. While social media facilitate quick, intense, and extensive protests, such tools contribute to the often transitory nature of these events, as with the Occupy demonstrations.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, these organizations and networks are committed to eradicating racial injustices around a wide variety of issues. As Darsheel Kaur, a community organizer with the Ohio Student Association, contends:

It’s more than just police brutality. It’s about systems in place that continue to devalue the lives of black and brown people in different aspects, including the prison industrial complex, economic and food systems, the housing market, voting rights. The energy that came together as this movement is a collective energy that has been building up through frustration about these many issues.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, the most visible protests that galvanized the civil rights agenda of the movement can be traced to a number of incidents of police and vigilante murder of young African Americans. Some view the killing of 19-year-old Oscar Grant in Oakland, California, by a transit cop on January 1, 2009, as a signal event. As Grant lay pinned on the ground, the white officer deliberately shot him in the back. Caught on cellphones and quickly going viral, the killing inspired angry and militant demonstrations that also became a national story. While the transit officer was indicted and found guilty of involuntary manslaughter, his lawyer convinced the jury, which included no African Americans, that the cop had mistakenly pulled out his gun instead of a Taser. He was released after serving only 20 months. (The story of Oscar Grant was later made into a brilliant and gripping film, *Fruitvale Station*.)

More of a catalyst to this national network was the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman, who was eventually acquitted of manslaughter charges. As noted by Dante Barry, a digital organizer with the Center for Media Justice and director of Million Hoodies Movement for Justice,

Our organization, Million Hoodies, was founded in large part due to the failure of the media to adequately report on the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012. It took a full month before it became national news. Local media didn’t want to report it, and context around the details concerning Trayvon’s death weren’t highlighted. Million Hoodies used social media to mobilize, amplify, and empower folks to take action.<sup>3</sup>

Another organization established in the immediate aftermath of the acquittal of George Zimmerman was #BlackLivesMatter. According to Alicia Garza, a Bay Area queer activist of color and special projects director for the National Domestic Workers Alliance,

#BlackLivesMatter is a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes. It goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black, and buy Black, keeping straight [cisgender] Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans, and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all. #BlackLivesMatter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black undocumented folks, folks with records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, Garza's vision of the transformative role that her organization and others play is profoundly revolutionary. "When we are able to end hyper-criminalization and sexualization of Black people and end the poverty, control, and surveillance of Black people, every single person in this world has a better shot at getting and staying free," she says.<sup>5</sup>

Garza, along with the other young organizers of color, recognizes that the movement they are trying to build is one that can learn from the past social movements while adopting new strategies that conform to current-day insights, especially those that emphasize intersectionality, or the interpenetration of race, gender, and class. As noted by Darsheel Kaur, "Intersectional organizing means creating spaces where we can bring all of our identities into the space."<sup>6</sup> Within that intersectional space, the emphasis is on participatory democracy and group-centered leadership along the lines of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from the 1960s.

Certainly, one of the formative influences on these new millennial generation organizations and their group-centered leadership was Ella Baker, a key mentor to SNCC. A former organizer for the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Baker helped establish SNCC in 1960 in the aftermath of the waves of sit-ins that mobilized mostly African-American students in the South. Having worked for SCLC with its male-dominated, hierarchical structure, Baker wanted to break "with the largely middle-class male-centered leadership of existing civil rights organizations, in order to strip away the class-based and gender-based notion of who should and could give leadership to the movement and black community."<sup>7</sup>

Just as SNCC often came into conflict with the older generation of civil rights leaders and organizations, so some of the millennials of the new movement have confronted elements of the civil rights establishment. During Rev. Al Sharpton's National Action Network's march in Washington DC on December 13, 2014, to protest police killings of black youth, several organizers from Ferguson, angry at the exclusion of young people like themselves from speaking, charged the stage. When they tried to speak, the microphones were turned off even as others in the crowd held signs saying, "We, the youth, did not elect Al Sharpton our Spokesperson." Other Ferguson organizers who didn't attend the march also took umbrage at Sharpton's generational and class exclusiveness. "It was people like me who came out to march in Ferguson," asserted Tory Russell, organizer of the St. Louis-area group *Hands Up United*. "I didn't see no suits, I didn't see no NAACP or National Action Network. It was people like me—poor black people—out there."<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, just as President Kennedy tried to cool down and co-opt the young activists of SNCC during the Freedom Rides of 1961 by meeting with a few of them, so President Obama gathered a group of post-Ferguson activists at the White House in December 2014. According to Ashley Yates of *Millennial Activists United*, Obama seemed genuinely concerned about the issues raised at the meeting. On the other hand, Yates noted, other administration officials "seemed like they were trying to quell the streets," even as they touted some reformist measures like funding body cameras

for police departments. Yet, Yates recognizes the efficacy of her group's own protests, from die-ins to targeted civil disobedience, as well as the historical connections with the past civil rights movement. She concluded, "The day we met with the president was December 1—it was the 59<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rosa Parks not getting up from her seat. We definitely realize that we're standing on the shoulders of the people who came before us."<sup>9</sup>

But will the die-ins and other protest activities of this new movement have the efficacy of the older movement? Do the new movement centers of the virtual world from #BlackLivesMatter to the Million Hoodies Movement have the same staying power as those Southern movement centers from the long civil rights movement, such as the Highland Folk School in Tennessee or Tougaloo College in Mississippi? If the new movement, as Dante Barry argues, "is about transforming power structures," what are the strategic levers that they will use to implement that transformation?<sup>10</sup>

### **'Resistance Matters'**

Perhaps it is enough that these young activists of color have cast a brilliant light on the racial inequities of the criminal justice system. Hence, from Charles Blow's perspective, "In the same way that Occupy Wall Street forever elevated that concept of income inequality, the Black Lives Matter protestors have elevated the idea of inequity in policing as it relates to minority communities."<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the goals of this new movement, like those of Occupy, which seem so inchoate, are so far-reaching and multifaceted that a single issue, like racist police brutality, is too narrow a focus, albeit a compelling and immediate one. Indeed, it may be that a more sweeping focus on what critics like Michelle Alexander, Heather Thompson, and Marie Gottschalk, among others, call the "carceral state" is essential to the advocacy of transformative politics. As a system of punitive power that incarcerates millions of people of color and the poor, marginalizing them, their families, and communities, the carceral state results in what Gottschalk refers to as "civil death."<sup>12</sup> Hence, the absolute need for restorative justice for people of color, especially those in the African-American community who have been disproportionately punished by the carceral state.

While police brutality has not been limited to the African-American community, it remains a visible thread of deeply woven structures underlying racial injustice. As made very clear in the Department of Justice (DOJ) report on Ferguson policing and the court system, African Americans in that community were singled-out for a wide variety of punitive policies, from police and police-dog attacks to endless and expensive court citations. The DOJ report cites instance after instance of the violation of First, Fourth, and Fourteenth Amendment rights of the black citizens of Ferguson, reflective of clear patterns of racial bias.

While the DOJ report supports arguments for a civil rights agenda, it also underscores the fact that without massive demonstrations following the murder of Michael Brown and the failure to indict Darren Wilson, such a report may not have even been issued, especially in light of many other examples of lethal police action against African Americans and Latinos. Given the report's focus on the denial of constitutional protections for the African American citizens of Ferguson, it is instructive that the DOJ has never bothered to investigate or condemn violations of rights, especially the Fourth Amendment right against unwarranted searches, of the millions of blacks and Latinos subjected to "stop-and-frisk" policies in New York City. Although struck down in court and abandoned by Mayor DeBlasio, the erratic role of the federal government and the Obama administration in dealing with racial justice issues highlights the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement.

As Robin Kelley has argued regarding these movements led by African-American organizers in Ferguson and around the country:

They remind us not only that Black lives matter—that should be self-evident—but that resistance

matters. It matters because we are still grappling with the consequences of settler colonialism, racial capitalism, and patriarchy. ... The young people of Ferguson continue to struggle with ferocity, not just to get justice for Mike Brown or to end police misconduct, but to dismantle racism once and for all.<sup>13</sup>

Understanding of the necessity of such a black-led movement now, Alicia Garza connects this movement to the black freedom and liberation movements of the past. "It is appropriate and necessary to have strategy and action centered around Blackness," Garza contends,

without other non-Black communities of color, or White folks for that matter, needing to find a place and a way to center themselves within it. It is appropriate and necessary for us to acknowledge the critical role that Black lives and struggles for Black liberation have played in inspiring and anchoring, through practice and theory, social movements for the liberation of all people. The women's movement, the Chicano liberation movement, queer movements, and many more have adopted strategies, tactics, and theory of the Black liberation movement. And if we are committed to a world where all lives matter, we are called to support the very movement that inspired and activated so many more. That means supporting and acknowledging Black lives.<sup>14</sup>

### **Ideological and Structural Impediments**

Foregrounding the significance of black lives in this historical moment still faces obvious difficulties and resistance. Among those resisting the slogan of "Black Lives Matter" are those whites who counter that "All Lives Matter," assuming that African Americans, in a supposedly post-racial America, are no longer in need of specifically targeted policies that confront the persistence of racial injustices. As pointed out by Judith Butler, those who assert "All Lives Matter"

misunderstand the problem, but not because their message is untrue. It is true that all lives matter, but it is equally true that not all lives are understood to matter, which is precisely why it is important to name the lives that have not mattered and are struggling to matter in a way they deserve.<sup>15</sup>

Another major impediment, not just ideological but structural, that these young activists confront is the role of neoliberalism in the economic and political policies of the state. Whereas the 1960s civil rights movement achieved its political victories in an era of an expanding welfare state and democratic rights, that state and those rights have been massively eroded by neoliberalism and its penchant for privatization and corporate, rather than government, solutions. Added to this are the attacks on the public sector and its unions, which have been sites for the advancement of African Americans and women. Furthermore, as noted by critics of the carceral state, it was not a coincidence that mass imprisonment really emerged with a vengeance in the 1970s as a way to punish those radical challenges by blacks and others to the dominant power structure. Just as neoliberalism was gaining ascendancy in the 1980s, so the carceral state further embedded its insidious punitive policies.

Certainly, seeking fundamental racial justice in this era requires both a new civil rights and black a freedom movement. On the other hand, as Malcolm X argued in the 1960s, demanding civil rights may be too constraining when the larger issue of needing fundamental human, economic, and political rights seems even more necessary now. That necessity reflects a late stage of capitalism in the United States that may be consigning the majority of African Americans to a permanent marginalization, treating them no longer as viable producers or consumers, but rather as surplus humanity. The insistence, then, that "Black Lives Matter" becomes compelling not only as a necessary transformative social movement but also as an essential struggle for survival, a survival that is only meaningful if it is rooted in freedom.

It was that insistence on “Freedom Now” that the civil rights movement of the 1960s drove into the national conscience and agenda, albeit in the midst of myriad contradictions. One of the most profound discussions of the contradictions of achieving freedom is James Baldwin’s masterful essay, *The Fire Next Time*. Written during the civil rights movement with its critical challenge to white supremacy, Baldwin also ruminates on the national myths that sustain not only white supremacy but also an illusory sense of innocence among the white citizenry of the country, an innocence still embraced by large segments of the white community. Baldwin, however, believes, along with Sam Cooke, that a “change is gonna come.” For Baldwin, the change we seek is not a “change ... on the surface but in the depths.” That change, nonetheless, “becomes impossible if one supposes things to be constant that are not.”<sup>16</sup>

During the arduous and lengthy struggle for civil rights in that time, the hard work of overcoming racial oppression in the economic, political, and personal spheres required many sacrifices while encountering numerous setbacks. An example of those minor setbacks was the acquittal by an Oxford, Mississippi, federal jury in December 1963 of five defendants responsible for jailhouse beatings of civil rights activists. One of those activists, Lawrence Guyot, denounced the fraudulent verdict. Ella Baker counseled Guyot to “look beyond this foolishness. Don’t let it stop you.”<sup>17</sup>

Whether the new civil rights and black freedom movement can “look beyond the foolishness” of the present era with its relentless racial injustices and engage in a campaign of continual resistance is open to question. However, it is a testament to the courage and tenacity on the young activists that they have awakened their fellow citizens to the need to address long-standing grievances around the criminal justice system with its perpetuation of racial profiling and biases. To carry the struggle forward will require the sort of persistence that Ella Baker and so many others in the older civil rights and black freedom movement embodied.

## Footnotes

1. On the transitory nature of new social media, see R. Kelley Garrett, “Protest in an Information Society,” *Information, Communication, & Society* (Vol. 9, No. 2, April 2006), 202-24. On the development of these new organizations and networks, see Gene Demby, “The Birth of a New Civil Rights Movement,” *Politico*, Dec. 31, 2014.
2. Marcia Chatelain, “Black Lives Matter: An Online Roundtable with Alicia Garza, Dante Barry, and Darsheel Kaur,” *Dissent*, Jan. 19, 2015.
3. Chatelain.
4. Alicia Garza, “A History of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” *The Feminist Wire*, Oct. 7, 2014.
5. Garza.
6. Chatelain.
7. Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2003), 259, 238, 245. For the most inclusive and insightful study of SNCC, see Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC’s Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007).
8. Demby.
9. Demby.
10. Chatelain. On movement centers as key resources for the long civil rights movement, see Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (Free Press, 1984).
11. Charles M. Blow, “Beyond ‘Black Lives Matter,’” *International New York Times*, Feb. 9, 2015.
12. Marie Gottschalk, *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics* (Princeton U.P., 2014).
13. Robin D. G. Kelley, “Why We Won’t Wait,” *CounterPunch*, Nov. 25, 2014.
14. Garza.
15. George Yancy and Judith Butler, “What’s Wrong with ‘All Lives Matter,’” *New York Times*, Jan.

12, 2015.

16. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (Dell, 1963), 124-25.

17. Cited in Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1965* (Touchstone, 1999), 193.