

# Black Protests Matter

July 3, 2015



Raven Rakia is a journalist based in New York City. Her work is usually focused on cities, police, and prisons, and she has been published in the *Nation* magazine, VICE, Gothamist, Truth-Out, Medium.com's MATTER, and *The New Inquiry*. You can follow her work at @aintacrow. She was interviewed by email by Amber A'Lee Frost and Saulo Colón. Frost is a writer and musician in Brooklyn, on the National Political Committee of Democratic

Socialists of America, and a contributor to *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy* (2013). Colón is on the editorial board of *New Politics*.

*New Politics: Working as a freelance journalist, you've covered several protests from Bushwick in Brooklyn to Ferguson in recent years. The perception of black protests is often that of spontaneous eruptions, but considering their role as responses to police terror, they're also an effective way for people to agitate against injustice. As formal labor union and electoral channels for political expression erode, do you think protests like these can lead to a new way of doing politics?*

Raven Rakia: Yes, definitely. I think Ferguson showed that [a combination of] disruptive protests, riots, and property destruction is actually incredibly effective when trying to change how your community or government operates. But I often think there's a push for outrage ("why aren't people angry?!") but not a push for political education and strategic conversations on what we want to see and how we can see it. There are freedom schools and militancy trainings popping up in places that haven't seen something like that in a long time. They have mostly been under the media radar—which of course isn't a bad thing. Surveillance education and privacy trainings in black communities would be super-useful right now (or five years ago).

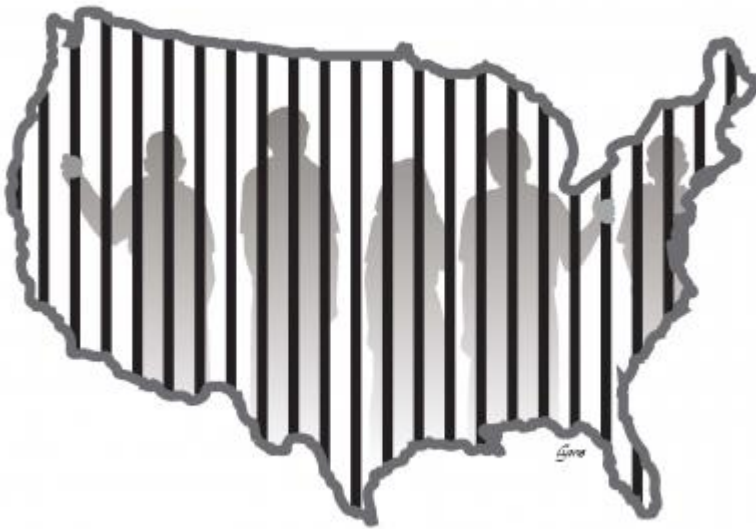
I think the protests we've been seeing lately have an anti-colonial and anti-institutional streak to them, which means they're digging deeper than what electoral politics and unions can. Unions have an interesting history in the black community, but the economic organizing that is playing out right now is incredibly exciting—especially when it intersects with prisons and police. People and groups working in prisons (like the Free Alabama Movement, the Free Mississippi Movement, [those working in] the Texas immigrant prisons, and the IWW in Missouri's prisons) are organizing and pushing for work strikes and doing an inside-outside strategy. I think a lot of people forget this, but oftentimes hunger strikes in prisons are coupled with work strikes as well. The Free Alabama and Free Mississippi movements were founded by people inside prisons in those states and are barely a year old. Five years from now we'll be seeing some very interesting things.

*NP: You have said that "broken windows" is a theory and strategy based on racial fears and white supremacy. You have also written about the military origins of stop-and-frisk as targeting insurgents, first used in 1960s riots in black communities. Others have also written about how police and prisons are not about crime but about control. What is it that you think is being feared and being controlled?*

RR: From the beginning, there has been a need to control the black population, first in order to keep them as the slave class—and afterwards as the black underclass. In order to keep any underclass from threatening the elite's wealth or burning the whole thing down, there needs to be some abusive and strict system of control in place. Right now, part of that system of control is policing and prisons.

NP: You make an argument about people as property, using the idea of an “invisible cage” from Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow* (2010). For example you say that parole turns people into state property. We know capitalism was built on the backs and commodification of human labor. Are we regressing to earlier forms of surplus labor control?

RR: I’m not sure if we’re regressing as much as we haven’t really progressed away from them that much. I didn’t live during different periods of social control so I can’t really say if they felt any different, but it seems to be that white supremacy and our capitalist system regurgitate themselves in different ways as soon as one way becomes “unacceptable.”



NP: Can you explain what you mean by “school to prison pipeline” and “debtors prison,” and their role in fueling protests?

RR: There are many different factors of the school to prison pipeline, but in general it’s the process of mass school suspensions for often minor infractions as well as the practice of calling in law enforcement for minor details. It’s also the reality that schools are operating more and more like prisons. And this is in both public schools and charter schools. A lot of people try to critique charter schools for their discipline practices, as they should because they’re often horrible. But public schools around the country, especially those with large black populations, have awful discipline practices. For example, they have policies to always call law enforcement for school conflicts, that’s if they don’t have law enforcement employed at their school on a daily basis dealing with conflict—which many do. Many schools, public and charter alike, have been built and operate now like prisons, which is not an accident: They’re another institution for social control.

Debtors’ prisons are jails and prisons that more explicitly criminalize poverty. All prisons and jails are criminalizing poverty in this country, but debtors’ prisons criminalize people outright who can’t pay for bills or fines by a specific time. In St. Louis, protesters often described their punitive school system and their municipal court system when they talked about why they were out protesting. They saw them as part of a system that feeds off their community.

NP: Can you also discuss the connection you make between gentrification and policing?

RR: New York City Police Commissioner William Bratton is always bragging about property rates and how his broken-windows policing brings up property rates in those neighborhoods. And he's right—because broken-windows policing harasses people until they no longer want to live there or don't want to come outside, and then rich, white people feel more comfortable there, and so property rates go up. So some New York neighborhoods—such as Bushwick, Williamsburg, and Fort Greene—with the highest rent increases in the past ten years are also the places with the highest stop-and-frisk numbers and the highest arrest numbers for petty crimes. It's a two-step approach: One, kick people out economically via rent increases, and two, kick people out through physical and mental abuse via evictions, police, and imprisonment.

*NP: After writing about the tension in recent protests between protesters and “peacekeepers” (usually religious and/or community leaders colluding with the police), what do you think this means for current and future black leadership? Is this a parallel to the political divide between a more limited civil rights view and the more liberatory views of Malcolm X and Black Power movements?*

RR: I actually think most of the peacekeepers were to the right of the civil rights ideology. They didn't want people protesting at all. They wanted everyone to go home—some even said what everyone needs to do is find a good church and start praying. They're the equivalent of the people back in the day who thought protesting Jim Crow wasn't worth it, and everyone should just get on with their lives. Now, within the protesters there were people who held a civil rights view and people who held more of a Black Power ideology. Especially in New York, we see people like the Justice League at least trying to market themselves as a new civil rights movement—whether or not they live up to [Martin Luther King] and [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee]'s organizing—and then there are more grassroots groups in New York taking from Malcolm X, Ella Baker, the [Black Panther Party], and Claudia Jones.

*NP: Could you evaluate the role of organizations like Peoples Justice and Copwatch in developing a movement against police and prisons and discuss how they see the control of certain populations as central to capitalism? What about newer organizations like Black Youth Project and Dream Defenders (after Trayvon Martin) and Hands Up United, Lost Voices, and Freedom Fighters?*

RR: People's Justice uses the strategy of Copwatch. They've trained teams in every borough in how to “copwatch” with the main goals being building a community of resistance and care as well as recording cop interactions to 1) make the cops change how they interact with people and 2) help support people with their court cases. And it works—oftentimes cops can't get away with lying on police reports because there's video evidence, and cases get thrown out because of it. Copwatch is a great strategy and it can be incredibly effective when there's community engagement and organizing happening on the hyperlocal level. A neighborhood where people know their neighbors, where people look out for each other, and where people are often hanging outside and building bonds with each other is a neighborhood where copwatch will be the most effective.

These newer national groups like Black Youth Project and Dream Defenders tend to focus on more issues than just police violence and often have campaigns around labor justice and gun violence. I'm still waiting to see more of their campaigns and how they develop over the years. I personally believe more-local organizations are more effective.

I'm still waiting to hear more about the political ideology and strategy behind Hands Up United, Lost Voices, and Freedom Fighters—and they might be still working through it themselves. But most of these groups have been formed from people living the realities of the black working class in St. Louis, people who found themselves and each other in Ferguson in August and are starting to organize.

*NP: The role of black women activists has historically been central, but is often overlooked. Yet recently black women—often openly queer black women—have played a more publicly recognized leadership role. Why do you think this is?*

RR: The black women who were overlooked were often the most radical and were pushing for a complete overhaul of structure, governance, and society. Many, like Ella Baker, Assata Shakur, and Claudia Jones, were challenging hierarchy and power—not only in mainstream white society but also within black and left movements. I believe this, along with misogyny, is the reason why they are and were overlooked—their proposals not only threatened to take power away from the elite, but also from men within the movement.

Now, we'll see where things go. Black woman who were mothers of police victims have often been pushed to the center but usually in disingenuous and damn-near manipulative ways. This time around seems to be different, women seem to be getting more attention—and definitely so if they're doing the activities that are often in the limelight. I still think movements diminish and even mock labor that is seen as more "femme" or "women"-type labor that occurs behind the scenes, like education or care work within movements, when really that labor is imperative for movements to continue.

My main concern is that there's often a pressure to compromise to the mainstream when you're in the limelight, which can water things down—but there are black women getting attention now who are doing, and have been doing, great things, such as Opal Tometi of Black Lives Matter and Black Alliance for Just Immigration. Another concern of mine is whether or not pushing women into the limelight and praising their work will actually lead to a change in power dynamics within movements. My gut tells me it won't, but we'll see what happens, and acknowledging some of their work is definitely a step in the right direction.

*NP: Would you like to give us a preview of projects you're working on now?*

RR: I'm working on a long-form reported piece about the intersections of environmental racism and prisons that will be out in June. And I've started doing research for projects on public housing, criminalizing truancy, trans people's experience in prison, and Facebook surveillance of "gang activity," among others. I've also been following the reform measures happening at Rikers Island jail in the Bronx and will be writing about that soon.

## **Footnotes**