

Through the Fire and All the Smoke: Abolition, Anti-Capitalism, and Intersectionality
in the Era of Black Lives Matter

By

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Abstract

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This dissertation is a historical analysis of Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the movement for Black lives (MBL) in Los Angeles from 2013 to 2021. It is also a theoretical consideration of the prospects and complications of *racial justice activism* in the 21st century. It interrogates the political philosophies and organizational strategies of BLM/MBL. This study explores how the intervention of *intersectional*, *intergenerational*, and decentralized leadership forms have disrupted heteropatriarchal traditions in the Black freedom struggle. It evaluates the significance and utility of *Marxism* in addressing issues of economic crisis and *state-sanctioned violence* from the 2008 Great Recession to the COVID-19 pandemic. It also evaluates how BLM/MBL has interfaced with *labor organizing* and other racial justice developments like the #StopAsianHate, #AbolishICE, and Indigenous Sovereignty movements. Lastly, it examines the vital role of *youth* and *student activism* in college campuses and community-based non-profit organizations in both initiating BLM/MBL and in sustaining its mobilization.

KEY WORDS: Black Lives Matter, racial justice activism, abolition, anti-capitalism, intersectionality, Marxism, state-sanctioned violence, labor organizing, youth activism

Dedication

For Aaleyah, Nyarah, and for Deonna

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Introduction

The Infinity Year Anniversary of Black Lives Matter

In 2020, the respiratory illness known as the COVID-19 virus rapidly engulfed the world and held humanity at the mercy of its relentless expansion. With over a thousand deaths accrued within only a few weeks of the outbreak, the world braced itself for the worst. By the month of March, the World Health Organization would officially declare that a global pandemic had struck. Within a year, the virus would infect nearly 200 million people and it would claim over four million lives worldwide. It incurred unprecedented economic and social disruptions, creating immense challenges to public health and to labor and production systems that will persist long after the height of its impact. Lawmakers and government officials issued executive orders for people to stay in their homes and for non-essential businesses to close indefinitely in the hope of slowing the spread of infection. International travel was almost completely shut down. Overwhelmed by the tightening grip of fear and uncertainty, everyone now had to contemplate their personal and collective fates in relative isolation.

The virus continued to sprawl and spread, none could escape the reach of its impact. Those who survived symptomatic infections suffered grueling bouts of fever and chills, frailness, and shortness of breath. Those who were fortunate to evade infection were still subjected to the devastation imposed by lockdown orders. On the one hand, they prevented contact visits with loved ones or created complications at the workplace, but on the other hand, they resulted in the loss of employment or the closure of businesses, often leading to the inability to pay rent or mortgage. Sadly, many were left mourning the deaths of loved ones who were either taken directly by the virus or as a result of the economic crisis incurred by the pandemic. Everyone was affected in some way, but not all were equally burdened. As was the case with previous calamities in the 21st century, from Hurricane Katrina in 2004 to the Great Recession in 2008, Black lives were particularly victimized by the exacerbation of the inequities wrought by institutional racism.

Considering how Black communities in the U.S. suffered higher rates of unemployment, homelessness, poverty, and susceptibility to chronic illnesses relative to other groups prior to the pandemic, these circumstances only worsened. With organizations like the UN initially endorsing the slogan “We’re all in this together... The virus threatens everyone,”¹ and with some government officials expressing “This virus is the great equalizer,”² the issue of systemic racism became obscured in the face of an “All Lives Matter” sentiment that failed to recognize that not all lives were equally threatened. Such narratives effaced the structural disparities that leave certain communities far more vulnerable to the threat than others, thereby also impeding the development of effective equity-based crisis management strategies. Those privileged with prosperity are able to enjoy access to quality resources, education, healthcare, adequate housing space, an abundance of food and the peace of mind in having the financial security to simply

¹ António Guterres, “We are all in this Together: Human Rights and COVID-19 Response and Recovery,” *United Nations*, April 23, 2020. <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/we-are-all-together-human-rights-and-covid-19-response-and>.

² Andrew Cuomo (@NYGovCuomo), *Twitter* Post, March 21, 2020, 9:13am. <https://twitter.com/NYGovCuomo/status/1245021319646904320>.

wait it out until herd immunity is achieved, albeit that they also had to take protective measures. Those oppressed under poverty suffered relative inaccessibility to adequate educational, medical, and housing resources and they were enormously stressed by the precariousness of financial instability. The implications of the lockdown orders varied across socioeconomic standings. While some households were able to enjoy more time for leisure activities, like trying new baking recipes and spending warm quality time with their families, other households were forced to scramble to keep up with their monthly bills.

But one thing remained constant: the issue of state-sanctioned violence persisted in endangering Black lives at rates commensurate with pre-pandemic numbers. The ACLU reported that the pandemic rates of fatal shootings by law enforcement were on par with the rates of years past with 511 fatal shootings in the first six months of 2020 compared to 484 in the same period in 2019; 550 in 2018; 493 in 2017; 498 in 2016; and 464 in 2015.³ Their report found that between 2015 and 2020, Black people represented 23.9% of those killed by police despite being only 12.5% of the U.S. population. "We want to express alarm that even when the nation was on lockdown during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic... that didn't stop police fatally shooting people at the same rate," stated Udi Ofer, the director of ACLU's Justice Division.⁴ Black people were therefore faced with the dual anti-Black hazards of the coronavirus pandemic on one hand and the persisting police violence epidemic on the other. However, it became more evident that neither neoliberalism nor police institutions are capable of keeping the public "safe" from the hazards of the ongoing crises. The narratives that had once popularly legitimized notions of "probable cause" in policing practices were beginning to crumble along with the farce of economic security under neoliberalism.

In the past, the condemnation of the likes of George Zimmerman, Darren Wilson, and other police and vigilante shooters as reprehensible killers was often contested by the character assassinations of their Black victims, thereby shifting the blame of the killings on the presumed deviance of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, etc. and validating the legitimacy of policing and judicial institutions. However, the insecurities of the pandemic had shaken the public's confidence in U.S. institutions in general as the government's poor response to the pandemic resulted in a higher death rate per capita than many other countries.⁵

In the lonesome silos of isolation under quarantine, the world remained connected through a myriad of digital devices, social media outlets, and zoom calls. As U.S. Americans compulsively scrolled through the news and checked for updates on the state of the pandemic in hopes of seeing a light at the end of the tunnel, they also became increasingly privy to how their government had tragically failed to properly manage its relief efforts and how certain institutions like policing continued to divert public funds away from other more vital crisis management resources. In the harrowing quiet of the desolation of COVID simmered an embittered frustration with the state of the world and of the country. The news of police killings of unarmed Black victims would further stoke the flames of indignation. In February 2020, an unarmed 25-year-old

³ ACLU Research Report, "The Other Epidemic: Fatal Police Shootings in the Time of COVID-19," *ACLU*, (2020). <https://www.aclu.org/report/other-epidemic-fatal-police-shootings-time-covid-19?redirect=policeshootingsreport>.

⁴ Erik Ortiz, "Coronavirus pandemic didn't curb fatal police shootings," *NBC News*, August 19, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/coronavirus-pandemic-didn-t-curb-fatal-police-shootings-aclu-report-n1236894>.

⁵ Tanya Lewis, "How the U.S. Pandemic Response Went Wrong – and What Went Right – during a Year of COVID," *Scientific American*, March 11, 2021. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-the-u-s-pandemic-response-went-wrong-and-what-went-right-during-a-year-of-covid/>.

Black man named Ahmaud Arbery was pursued and fatally shot by two white gunmen in Brunswick, Georgia. In May 2020, another unarmed Black man named George Floyd was killed by a white Minneapolis police officer named Derek Chauvin. Video footage captured by Darnella Frazier showed Chauvin callously kneeling and applying suffocating pressure on Floyd's neck for several minutes as Floyd continuously pleaded for him to stop and can be heard saying "Please, please, please I can't breathe."⁶ When the video went viral, the country erupted into what would be the most intense and widespread period of social upheaval yet seen in the U.S. in the 21st century. The fear and uncertainty that had initially gripped the nation at the onset of the pandemic unleashed a scalding outburst of indignation. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement would see the full force of its impact in a series of ongoing protests across the country. Thousands took to the streets demanding for police departments in their cities to be defunded as part of a broader divest/invest strategy to reappropriate public funds for community care services.

The more decisive call for the *abolition* of policing as well as prisons in the U.S. grew louder and more resolute. Compounded with news of the fatal shooting of a Black woman medical worker named Breonna Taylor in a botched raid of her apartment in which Louisville police officers targeted the wrong suspect,⁷ as well as the dissemination of footage showing police in riot gear abusing peaceful protesters, the marches and insurrections⁸ were fueled for weeks on end throughout that summer of 2020. In Minneapolis, protesters burned down the Third Precinct building, pressuring the city council to disband the police department. In Portland, insurrectionists would also set fire to the police union headquarters.⁹ In Seattle, the police department was forced to vacate the East Precinct as protesters established the area as the "Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone" or CHAZ, changing the sign of the boarded-up building to read "Seattle People Department."¹⁰ Dozens of cities looked to make immediate cuts to their police budgets and government officials and corporations alike were pressured to offer statements of solidarity with BLM's call for divestment. Even GOP figures such as former president George W. Bush were compelled to gesture support for BLM and Senator Mitt Romney was seen joining protesters in a march in Washington DC. Analysts estimated that up to 26 million people, approximately 8% of the U.S. population, participated in the protests in those weeks, prompting the *New York Times* to describe BLM as the largest movement in U.S. history.¹¹

While the marginal defunding of police budgets and symbolic support from corporations fell short of its abolitionist strivings, BLM has come a long way from its seemingly

⁶ Audra D.S. Burch and John Eligon, "Bystander Videos of George Floyd and Others are Policing the Police," *New York Times*, May 26, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/us/george-floyd-minneapolis-police.html>.

⁷ Richard A. Oppel Jr., Derrick Bryson Taylor, and Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, "What to Know About Breonna Taylor's Death," *New York Times*, April 26, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/breonna-taylor-police.html>.

⁸ It is important to note that most marchers were committed to non-violent participation while others were intent on incurring property damage, hence the distinction between marchers and insurrectionists.

⁹ Katie Shephard, "You can't control people's anger: Portland protesters set fire to police union headquarters as tensions rise again," *The Washington Post: Democracy Dies in Darkness*, August 9, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/08/09/portland-police-union-fire/>.

¹⁰ Daniella Silva and Matteo Moschella, "Seattle protesters set up 'autonomous zone' after police evacuate precinct," *NBC News*, June 11, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/seattle-protesters-set-autonomous-zone-after-police-evacuate-precinct-n1230151>.

¹¹ Larry Buchanan, Quoc Trung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History," *The New York Times*, July 3, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>.

overambitious beginnings. By its seventh year anniversary in 2020, BLM had reached the highest peak of its influence. Much had transpired since the movement was first mobilized and since the hashtag first went viral. As BLM reached new heights of popularity, the glare of the spotlight intensified with a more thorough scrutiny of its organizational workings. But as the organization known as the BLM Global Network Foundation garnered nearly a hundred million dollars in donations in 2020, how its funds were being spent and how local chapters and families of slain victims of anti-Black killings were being supported came under scrutiny. Controversy and an array of tactical challenges have plagued the movement over the years and it suffered the most intense barrage of criticisms in the aftermath of the summer of 2020. Yet, the core objectives for the movement-at-large to critique and dismantle policing institutions in the U.S. have remained intact from the very beginning and its indelible impact has ignited the explosion of populist uprising over the past decade, invigorating and uplifting resistance efforts advancing economic and labor justice; gender, queer and trans justice; immigration and international justice; and educational and environmental justice. That certain movement leaders may have either willfully or unintentionally made flawed decisions along the way demands a serious evaluation of how organizations can uphold better accountability practices, but it does not take away or invalidate what BLM-at-large has accomplished.

This dissertation is a historical and theoretical analysis of three major objectives that the ongoing movement for Black lives has relentlessly pursued: (1) the abolishment of oppressive policing and prison institutions in the United States that incur harm and terror in Black communities, (2) the divestment from exploitative corporate and banking institutions that incur economic precarity for Black families, and (3) the vigilant critique of heteropatriarchal ideas and tendencies both within movement building spaces and throughout larger society that inhibit the creation of more comprehensive Black liberation realities. These abolitionist, anti-capitalist, and intersectional strivings have defined the era of Black Lives Matter activism. Drawing on my experiences as an original member and core organizer of the very first BLM demonstration, I will begin an assessment of BLM at the dawn of the movement when an odd collection of personalities formed the group known as Justice for Trayvon Los Angeles (J4TMLA).

From Justice for Trayvon to Black Lives Matter

“As Black Lives Matter turned 8-years-old this week, I reflect on how the theft of Trayvon’s life reignited a movement that has changed the world. When your child is stolen from you, it disrupts the natural order of things. A mother is not supposed to outlive her son. Trayvon’s spirit compelled me to fight, and I needed the world to fight alongside me. That’s what Black Lives Matter did – BLM took to the streets, raised my son’s name and demanded justice in his honor.”¹²

— Sybrina Fulton

¹² Sybrina Fulton, “Trayvon Martin’s mother: As BLM turns 8, I reflect on loss of my son, families of movement,” *USA Today*, July 15, 2021. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/policing/2021/07/15/trayvon-martin-mother-black-lives-matter/7962614002/>.

On the evening of July 13, 2013, the highly anticipated verdict of the widely followed criminal prosecution of George Zimmerman on the charge of second-degree murder for the fatal shooting of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was announced. The details of the incident suggested that Zimmerman, a self-appointed neighborhood watch vigilante, had racially profiled young Trayvon (an unarmed Black teenager), pursued, confronted, and shot him despite being instructed to remain in his vehicle by a police dispatch. After sixteen hours of deliberation, the six-person jury rendered a not guilty verdict on all counts. Indignant observers readily understood the handling of the proceedings as a blatant devaluation and disregard for Black life. It was a painfully jarring reminder of just how complicit the state continues to be with the infliction of violence upon Black bodies. That night, a series of protests and rallies were ignited immediately after the verdict was announced.

At that moment, I was at a graduation party in a large hall at a country club on the outskirts of Stockton, CA. The celebrant was my dear friend Funmilola Fagbamila, a Nigerian-American woman who, in the years that followed, became a prolific playwright and scholar. She would tour across the U.S. and internationally in England, France, Brazil, and the Netherlands to perform her stage play “The Intersection: Woke Black Folk.” Her writings and social commentary have been featured in publications and platforms like TNT, Netflix, and NPR. We had just graduated with our bachelor’s degrees from Cal State LA, and her family threw her a huge party with an attendance comparable to a wedding reception. Jelani Hendrix, another close friend and fellow graduate of ours was sitting with me at the same table. He was a Fresno-born activist who, in the years to come, became a prominent political leader in Los Angeles. He is the current assistant to the president of SEIU Local 2015, the largest labor union in California, and he was elected president of the Black Los Angeles Young Democrats in 2021. I would like to think that Jelani and I did our best to stay calm throughout the celebration without being too conspicuous of just how angry we were actually feeling inside upon hearing the news of the verdict. We didn’t want to spoil Funmilola’s time to be lighthearted, so we refrained from discussing the news until the party was over. When we told her what happened the next morning, the three of us immediately packed our things, squeezed into my 2008 Honda Civic, and headed straight for Los Angeles where we knew that our other friends had begun to mobilize. Thousands of protesters had already flooded Leimert Park, the Black cultural epicenter of LA. Upon arriving, my classmates and I would take to the streets looking to participate and contribute to whatever organizing efforts were already being initiated. None of us had any intentions of taking on a leadership role in the protests, we just wanted to be present and be in community with everyone. When we recognized that the street protests were largely unorganized and comprised of a varied cluster of groups competing for leadership amidst the disarray of thousands of indignant local residents, we combed the crowd to identify other like-minded activists with whom we might collaborate.

As student activist members of a group called the Pan-African Student Collective (PASC), we had been extensively engaged in on-campus organizing efforts at Cal State LA in the years leading up to the Trayvon Martin protests. These activities included mobilizing massive campus protests; organizing student strikes; engaging student government and other policy making entities on campus; and hosting political education sessions. By the time the protests erupted in the summer of 2013, we were in the rhythm of constantly organizing and we were prepared to employ those skills if we were called to do so. Hence, on the morning of the third day of protests, a few of us looked to regroup and hold a small meeting at the Cross Cultural

Center at our old stomping grounds at Cal State LA to debrief and develop an internal plan of action. We had many things that we needed to sort through, starting with the effort to locate one of our classmates, Jillian Bell, who had been arrested while protesting the previous day and was still being detained. Our classmate Sharlia Gulley – who had single-handedly led hundreds of marchers on an eight mile trek from Leimert Park all the way to Hollywood the previous day – led us in crafting a strategy that we might present to other protesters. We decided that we would continue what she had initiated in shifting the focus of the protests away from South Central and into the more affluent, white-centered parts of the city where we felt that our voices of dissent would have the most impact. After the meeting, we made our way back to Leimert Park where we were invited to speak at a rally hosted by Naji Ali, an organizer with the LA chapter of the National Action Network (NAN).

After some time at the rally however, it became clear to us that the event was little more than an opportunistic self-promoting bid for aspiring leaders to increase their visibility among the throngs of protesters. We continued exchanging contact information with others who were not buying into their self-aggrandized posturing. At around 9pm, I received a text message from one of our mentors with instructions for us to rendezvous at a location called St. Elmo's Village in Mid-City LA where other groups were looking to hold a meeting. The message was sent by Professor Melina Abdullah, then the Chair of the Department of Pan African Studies and of the California Faculty Association (CFA)¹³ at Cal State LA. Affectionately called "Mama" Melina by many of her students and mentees, she had served as our primary inspiration for our involvement in campus and community activism throughout our undergraduate years. Trusting our mentor's guidance, we departed from Leimert Park – where the preachers and self-promoting talking heads were still trying to outbid each other for the mantle of leadership among the crowds – and we made our way to Mid-City. As we approached the St. Elmo's Village premises walking up the sidewalk, we were presented with the unassuming exterior of a typical residential street. Upon entering the threshold, however, we found ourselves immersed in a vibrant courtyard decorated with a diverse array of art, sculptures and other ornaments along the walls of the cozy cabin-like housing units. There were also diverse clusters of plants, lush garden beds, trees, and cacti flanking a dazzling walkway splashed with a hue of various colors and patterns covering the entire grounds. It was a strange spectacle with a charming and quaint effect that had us feeling as if we had been transported into another dimension away from the tumult of social upheaval. Even in the dark of night, the vibrance of St. Elmo's Village could be felt under the luminous glow of the moon.

The meeting was held in a long rectangular cabin in the interior of the premises furthest away from the sidewalk. Almost 50 attendees squeezed into the common space, and we were welcomed by a woman named Patrisse Cullors, the founder of the grassroots organization called Dignity and Power Now (DPN). As she facilitated introductions, there were a number of apparent distinctions between those in attendance and the gaggle of speakers that we had just left at Leimert Park. Whereas the various leadership figures at the park were all middle-aged men, the attendees at St. Elmo's were mostly in their early-to-mid 20s, some of them queer identifying, some of them trans identifying, and most of them Black women. We spent much of that gathering holding space for everyone to express how they were feeling, how they were understanding the significance of the movement, and then breaking off into smaller groups for intimate discussions. Some of the PASC members were growing restless and impatient with the

¹³ CFA is a labor union and collective bargaining agent representing lecturers, professors, counselors, librarians, and coaches throughout the 23 campuses of the California State University system.

process. Gulley – who had been tirelessly mobilizing for two consecutive days and three consecutive nights – had grown weary of the sentimentalism and group therapy sessions. “It’s very important to heal, but we need to move *now* [and] with urgency” she insisted.¹⁴ Nonetheless, we respected the proceedings and patiently waited until the end of the meeting to present the plan of action that we had formulated earlier that morning.

The discussions held throughout the course of that evening showed that not everyone would be receptive to or be in alignment with what we were trying to do. Some of them were just looking for a place to vent and to be in company with others to share their feelings of grief. Others were looking for a tangible set of “next steps” to pursue beyond the raw expressions of rage and sorrow. Jelani Hendrix set the tone on behalf of the PASC contingency by delineating the desire to express how we were feeling about the verdict from the intent to organize a plan of action to address it. “Everyone is on different levels in terms of awareness, so we have to do what’s going to appeal to the masses,” he stated. “What that is, that’s why we’re here. To find that out.”¹⁵ In this way, Hendrix established that although the PASC had a working concept of a plan of action, we wanted to call everyone else in through a group-centered leadership approach to garner not only their consent, but their collaboration in developing the plan together. This is in sharp contrast to the Leimert Park speakers who were fishing for followers to adhere to their pre-packaged political programs rather than inviting everyone to share leadership in building a program through horizontal collaboration. “What is our vision? Many of the people here, if I had to guess, are probably visionaries right? We need to figure out what is our goal and what we want to see. We need to keep thinking about that so that we can manifest that,” urged Hendrix. “I think that was one of the problems earlier at Leimert Park – you had all these people; all this emotion, all this rage – but we don’t have a proper mechanism in order to put that in the right direction.”¹⁶ He then encouraged the attendees to each draw on their unique strengths and talents – whether they be scholars, artists, strategists, or tech specialists – and to use them in their contribution to the development of our action.

Funmilola Fagbamila then guided the group in developing a shared understanding of what was practical and achievable within the timeframe and with the available resources. She then proceeded to introduce the concept of moving the focus of the action away from South Central and into disrupting business-as-usual at the heart of Beverly Hills, specifically at the intersection of Wilshire Blvd and Rodeo Drive. Because of the urgency with which the PASC felt that the action needed to be executed, we suggested the group commit to mobilizing on July 17, less than two days later. “If folks are ready to actually do this action, we need a list of demands to reflect whatever our overall goal is.”¹⁷ Fagbamila further stressed that this would require a concentrated effort with less than 48 hours to plan before execution. “This means mass outreach tonight, all day tomorrow, and [then] action and movement by Wednesday.” The magnitude of such a task was very familiar to the PASC members who, on several occasions, successfully mobilized massive protests at Cal State LA within a limited timeframe. Funmilola sought to inspire confidence among the other attendees in affirming that with a focused determination, their vision could succeed. Her presentation was met with mixed reactions ranging from doubtful hesitation to gleaming enthusiasm. A few attendees were looking at us like we were out of our minds. Others acknowledged that we had come to a point at which such

¹⁴ Field Notes, St. Elmo’s Village Meeting, Video Clip, July 15, 2013.

¹⁵ Field Notes, St. Elmo’s Village Meeting, Video Clip, July 15, 2013.

¹⁶ Field Notes, St. Elmo’s Village Meeting, Video Clip, July 15, 2013.

¹⁷ Field Notes, St. Elmo’s Village Meeting, Video Clip, July 15, 2013.

measures were now necessary. A man named Tshombe Tshanti commented “Trayvon wasn’t the first, he won’t be the last, but he’s the muthafucking *one*.” It was at that moment that we formed the group originally known as Justice for Trayvon Martin, Los Angeles or #J4TMLA – “a coalition of multi-racial, inter-generational individuals and organizations who are calling out anti-Black racism and affirming that Black lives matter.”¹⁸

The next morning, less than half of the attendants from the previous night returned to St. Elmo’s, but a few more of our PASC members joined the group to comprise about 30 organizers committed to executing our vision. Protests would ensue in Leimert and Downtown LA, but we bunkered down in that cabin all day and all night to fully develop our plan of action: to fine tune our ideological framing, craft a list of demands, and do outreach; to contact the media, engage in phone banking, and blast our call to action throughout social media. Cullors explained to us that her friend Alicia Garza, who was an Oakland-based organizer active with organizations like People United for a Better Life in Oakland (PUEBLO), People Organized to win Employment Rights (POWER), and the National Domestic Workers Alliance, had crafted the phrase “Black Lives Matter” on a Facebook post on the day of Zimmerman’s acquittal four days ago. She suggested that we adopt the slogan both as a hashtag and as a central theme of our action. At that moment, I embarrassingly admitted to the team that I had absolutely no idea what the function of a hashtag was. Gratefully, another organizer named Kevin Cosney shared that he too was puzzled by why people were posting words or phrases with the crosshatch “#” symbol. After laughing at the both of us, the group explained that it helped to promote a post on a trending topic.¹⁹ Hence, posting #BlackLiveMatter on that day was literally the very first time that I ever used a hashtag. I doubt that any of us at that time, other than Cullors, anticipated that the slogan would immediately go viral and then proceed to define a decade of digital activism and street protests. In embracing the slogan, we were able to contextualize the killing of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of Zimmerman within the understanding that neither were isolated incidents and that both were enabled by the prevailing ethos of anti-Black racism that is embedded within policing, media, and judicial institutions in the U.S. We therefore undergirded our call to action on highlighting the prevalence of state sanctioned murder in the U.S. and how what had happened to Trayvon Martin was inextricably linked to the local concerns of Black and Brown LA residents who are routinely terrorized and brutalized by the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and the LA County Sheriffs Department and subjected to harsher sentencing by the court system.

*Justice for Trayvon Los Angeles Demands:*²⁰

1. Federal Charges against [George] Zimmerman: The Department of Justice must file civil rights charges against Mr. Zimmerman.

¹⁸ @J4TMLA, *Twitter* account description, 2013. <https://twitter.com/j4tmla?lang=en>.

¹⁹ Monica Anderson, “The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter emerges: Social activism on Twitter,” *Pew Research Center*, August 15, 2016. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/08/15/the-hashtag-blacklivesmatter-emerges-social-activism-on-twitter/>.

²⁰ J4TMLA Poster, 2013.

2. Pardon Marissa Alexander: Ms. Alexander comes from the same state as Zimmerman, she did not hurt anyone, she was protecting herself against someone who abused her, she was traumatized, she stood her ground the law wasn't afforded to her.
3. No More New Jail and Prison Construction: Jails and prisons draw critical funds away from poor, working class communities of color. The business of prisons generates the need to criminalize Black & Brown bodies.
4. End Gang Injunctions & Database²¹: The rationalization of gang injunctions follows the same rational[e] of racial profile that allowed for Trayvon Martin to be hunted and murdered.²²
5. Community Control Over all Law Enforcement with [an] Elected Civilian Review Board: The families of people with stolen lives by law enforcement should have their cases re-opened, reinvestigated and given reparations. These are our tax dollars, our community; we should have a say of what safety looks like.

On the morning of July 17, 2013, we congregated at the rendezvous point at La Cienega Park in Beverly Hills, CA. Instead of starting at Leimert Park, as had been the case in the previous four days, we figured that it would be more advantageous for us to avoid the northward trek from South Central in which LAPD would likely intercept us and obstruct our path near the Santa Monica freeway as they had done in the previous days. Since our objective was to disrupt business-as-usual at the heart of the city's wealthiest districts, we thought that we would try to call on the community to start the march closer to the target area. We believed that if the protests remained confined to Black and Brown neighborhoods in South Central, our message would largely fall on deaf ears or be misconstrued as a repetition of the perceived chaos of the 1992 LA uprisings. We felt that the protests needed to be brought to areas like Beverly Hills where the community profiting from the expropriation of Black labor needed to be confronted with the issue of wanton Black death. Other grassroots organizations like the Answer LA Coalition, the Youth Justice Coalition (YJC), and Kabataang Makabayan (KmB) or Pro-People Youth would join us in amassing around 300 protesters. Tekoah "TK" Brown led us with the chants "Too Black, too strong! Too Brown, too strong!" and we rallied around a circle of drummers led by Jas Wade as we set off northwards up La Cienega Ave.

When we turned left on Wilshire Blvd, we covered the width of the street moving west towards the shopping district. A Beverly Hills Police motorcade of about a dozen officers met us and drove slowly alongside the marchers, but they did not try to disperse us or obstruct our path.

²¹ Melanie Ochoa, "LAPD Gang Injunctions Gave Cops License to Harass and Control Black and Latino Residents," *ACLU*, March 23, 2018. <https://www.aclu.org/blog/criminal-law-reform/reforming-police/lapd-gang-injunctions-gave-cops-license-harass-and-control>.

²² Youth Justice Coalition activists asserted the need to emphasize how the racial profiling and killing of Trayvon is akin to the racial profiling and harassment tactics implemented by law enforcement officers in LA County to criminalize Black and Brown men. This is often done in the form of gang injunctions through which Black and Brown men are subjected to pre-emptive searches and being legally restricted from being seen in their own neighborhoods based on little to no evidence at all such as their attire, namely the color of their clothing which perceptively associates them with particular gangs. Meanwhile, active neo-Nazi, Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups in LA are entirely overlooked in the gang injunction and database system.

Part of our strategy included avoiding confrontation with LAPD, whose officers were primed to meet us with brute force. Beverly Hills had a separate police department whose officers have hardly ever had to deploy a “riot control” unit in the area. We hoped to disorient them, but we were nonetheless committed to nonviolence so that our message would resonate as clearly as possible without being overshadowed by reports of property damage. We continued on with Tekoah Brown heartily galvanizing the crowd and leading us in the chant “We believe... We believe that... We believe that we will win!” As we boldly strode along the posh street, we increasingly gained confidence as on-lookers began to join us and as drivers honked their horns in solidarity. After an hour of marching, we stopped at the Beverly Drive intersection in front of the Chase Bank to rally and review our list of demands. We then converged on the Rodeo Drive stair steps, bluntly disrupting the lavish scenery of bourgeois self-indulgence. The marches displayed large signs bearing the hashtags #J4TMLA and #BlackLivesMatter. We raised our fists in the tradition of the Black Power salute when Patrisse Cullors boldly stated “We’re not pleading anymore. We’re not begging anymore. Our brothers, our sisters cannot continue to die at the hands of *white racism!*”²³

The BLM Herstory and the Global Network Foundation

*“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 cis 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. Black Lives Matter 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. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement”*²⁴

— Alicia Garza

The Beverly Hills protest on July 17, 2013 was the very first Black Lives Matter action and it marked the birth of a movement that would captivate the world in the years to come. In the weeks that followed, the original organizers continued to meet at St. Elmo’s Village, conduct teach-ins at Leimert Park, support other actions and express solidarity with other grassroots efforts. J4TMLA was by no means the first group of its time to call for police accountability nor was it the first to deploy an organized street protest. What J4TMLA represented was a shift in consciousness and normative praxis towards an intergenerational, intersectional, and interdisciplinary approach to organized resistance to white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism. It was a shift away from the male- and hetero-centered leadership frameworks embodied by the traditional Civil Rights groups and the traditional Black nationalist groups who

²³ Field notes, BLM Beverly Hills Protest, Video Clip, July 17, 2013.

²⁴ Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014. <https://thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>.

were quarrelling and shouting over one another at Leimert Park in the first few days of the protests. J4TMLA was distinguished in that it was comprised predominantly of Black women, Black queer and trans identifying leaders and it was also predominantly youth-led. Its members drew inspiration and guidance from past iterations of the Black freedom struggle, but they also diverged from certain aspects of those frameworks to stress the vital contributions and perspectives of Black women, Black queer and trans identifying people who have been historically neglected or internally oppressed in past movements. These are the aspects of movement building that distinguishes BLM from its predecessors. In October 2014, Alicia Garza published an article entitled “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement” to clarify the pro-feminist, pro-queer and pro-trans meanings of the hashtag that she and Cullors had developed, and to resist various attempts to co-opt and misconstrue the slogan as yet another patriarchal and male-centered expression in the wake of the Ferguson uprisings. She would proceed to establish herself, Cullors and their friend Opal Tometi as the BLM co-founders in the making of the organization known as the Black Lives Matter Global Network (BLMGN).

Tometi would design the BLMGN website and select the black and yellow color scheme for the organization. In the mission statement, she inscribed “Black queer lives matter, black immigrants matter, black disabled folks matter...” as an affirmation of the intersectional emphasis of their meaning behind the slogan.²⁵ In adherence to Ella Baker’s admonitions against centralized leadership, the co-founders promoted the collective, group-centered alternative. Baker was a prolific civil rights organizer in the 1960s whose remarkable contributions in helping to build organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC), for which she organized the founding conference, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), for which she served as Executive Secretary, are largely overlooked and overshadowed by the lionization of male leaders like Dr. King and Kwame Ture. Barbara Ransby recalls how Baker considered “the top-down, male-centered, charismatic model of leadership a political dead end. It disempowers ordinary people, especially women and low-income and working-class people because it told them that they need a savior.”²⁶ In this way, BLM era activists have sought to focus their liberation discourse on the comprehensive restoration of dignity in Black communities that accounts for a wider plurality of positionalities than that of past movements. What is perhaps most compelling and unique about BLM is its embrace of a diverse arsenal of strategic approaches to bettering Black lives in the U.S. Whereas 20th-century movements tended to uphold staunch programmatic convictions that seldom allow for collaboration among diverse political and positional perspectives, even to the point of blatant condemnation, BLM is distinguished by its proponents’ commitment to “partner with, not compete with nor undermine, other Black-led efforts to build power.”

However, this is not at all to say that there have not been internal disputes nor that this ideal for horizontal collaboration has not been riddled with complications and contradictions in practice. It would be remiss to suggest that the past decade has been a serene and harmoniously agreeable march towards freedom amongst intellectuals and organizers. As much as activists have been in contention with systems of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and neoliberalism, they may perhaps have been in just as much contention among one another in the arduous but

²⁵ Ellen E. Jones, “Opal Tometi, co-founder of Black Lives Matter: ‘I do this because we deserve to live,’” *The Guardian*, September 24, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/sep/24/opal-tometi-co-founder-of-black-lives-matter-i-do-this-because-we-deserve-to-live>.

²⁶ Barbara Ransby, “Black Lives Matter Is Democracy in Action,” *The New York Times*, October 21, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/21/opinion/sunday/black-lives-matter-leadership.html>.

necessary ongoing process of refining a counter-hegemonic discourse that can translate into political and economic programs and policy platforms. One of the major points of contention among organizers is in fact the lack of programmatic clarity of BLMGN. For instance, over the years, there would be tremendous ambiguity around how many chapters were officially recognized by the Global Network. At no point did the organization ever publicly clarify what the qualifications and application processes were for inclusion into the Network nor did it ever specify which organizations were in fact considered “official.”

In 2020, different sources where the co-founders were interviewed estimated the number of existing North American chapters at somewhere between 12 and 16, but no clarification on chapters outside of the U.S. and Canada.²⁷ Moreover, its leadership structure was also not clearly defined. The roles of the co-founders in the operation of BLMGN was never made thoroughly transparent. Each of them would describe BLM as a “leaderful” movement, but without elaborating on exactly what that meant in terms of the structure of the organization. Only in 2020 was it announced that Patrisse Cullors had become its Executive Director, but it was not made clear what the appointment process was nor if there were competing candidates, leading many to perceive that she had appointed herself to the position. Garza, Cullors, and Tometi would prominently be featured as the ideological architects of BLM on television and radio, and in books and magazines, but their specific roles in the organization, if any, were not explicitly shared. All three co-founders have, on separate occasions, formally departed from the operations of the Global Network, although they continue to represent themselves as BLM co-founders. With BLMGN shrouded in ambiguity, one aspect of its operation that was resoundingly clear was its affiliation with its Los Angeles chapter.

J4TMLA would go on to become the organization known as Black Lives Matter, Los Angeles (BLMLA) – the first and most prominent BLM chapter within the Global Network. Professor Melina Abdullah has relentlessly served as the lead organizer for BLMLA throughout its eight years of mobilization. She would lead the organization through a series of protracted campaign efforts such as a seven-day encampment outside of LAPD headquarters in the name of Ezell Ford²⁸ and a 54-day encampment to “decolonize” City Hall in the name of Redell Jones²⁹ in 2015.³⁰ For three years between October 2017 and November 2020, Abdullah consistently led weekly protests in front of the Hall of Justice in Downtown LA to oust former District Attorney Jackie Lacey, who refused to prosecute any officers in over 600 officer-involved civilian deaths during her time in office.³¹ These efforts came at great personal expense to Abdullah, who would constantly be arrested and faced with eight criminal misdemeanor charges over the course of her activist journey. In 2021, she was appointed as Co-Director of BLM Grassroots – a division of BLMGN that oversees chapter management. For various reasons, none of her former students, the original members of the PASC, have continued on as active members of the current BLM organization. Some have departed on acrimonious terms due to irreconcilable disagreements with the Global Network over the years. Some felt that their contributions in building the movement

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ford was a 25-year-old Black man who was killed by LAPD in 2014.

²⁹ Jones was a 30-year-old Black woman killed by LAPD in 2015.

³⁰ Jason McGahan, “The People v. Melina Abdullah,” *The LAnd, Vol.1, No.1*, (2019).

³¹ Stephanie Elam and Jason Kravarik, “Black Lives Matter’s surprising target: Los Angeles County’s first Black district attorney,” *CNN*, July 15, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/10/us/jackie-lacey-la-da-black-lives-matter/index.html>.

were effaced by hegemonic narratives and that the sacrifice of their involvement too heavily outweighed the benefits of continuing. Others have remained supportive of the organization to varying degrees while continuing their advocacy efforts with other organizations. Nevertheless, their indelible impact in developing the early framework for the movement at-large continues to resonate. After eight years since the first action, much of the ideological framing and strategies that were developed and implemented within the less-than-48 hour process to deploy J4TMLA have been preserved and continued in various BLM campaigns, initiatives, and policy platforms in the years to come.

The Movement for Black Lives

It must be clarified, however, that while J4TMLA was the very first group to mobilize under the “Black Lives Matter” banner, its efforts were part of a wider web of spontaneous uprisings concurrently sprouting all across the nation. This includes the youth-led efforts of the Florida-based Dream Defenders and the Black Youth Project 100 (BYP 100). The former emerged a year prior to J4TMLA, in the immediate wake of the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012. The latter was formed concurrently with J4TMLA, in the immediate wake of the Zimmerman verdict of 2013. These uprisings were actually sparked by the Oakland protests in 2010 in response to the execution-style killing of 22-year-old Oscar Grant at the hands of Bay Area Rapid Transit police officers. Therefore, all adjacent organizing developments have popularly been amalgamated under the broad catch-all category of “BLM.” BLMGN is but one of many outgrowths of these developments. It is the most prominent organization because it was formed by the architects of the BLM hashtag. In the 21st century, social media has been vital in shaping the popular discourse on race justice activism with the rapid exchange and dissemination of political advocacy and propaganda. Garza, Cullors, and Tometi were among the most efficient at leveraging the internet and streamlining their organizing efforts with social media networks in the making of the BLM movement, but this could not have been successful without the mass participation of thousands of activists across the country and around the world who would uplift their slogan.

In December of 2014, a coalition of over 50 Black-led organizations across the country – including BLMGN, the National Conference of Black lawyers, the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights – would form the organizing body known as the Movement for Black Lives (MBL) under the notion that “we can achieve more together than we can separately.”³² MBL has also sought to uphold Ella Baker’s model of decentralized leadership, but with seemingly less contention and controversy than BLMGN. Ransby observed that “[MBL] is distinctive because it defers to the local wisdom of its members and affiliates, rather than trying to dictate from above. In fact, the local organizers have insisted upon it. This democratic inflection will pay off if they persevere.”³³ These efforts have actively resisted perceptions that the BLM movement at-large is entirely bereft of a long term political strategy beyond reactionary street protests.

In August 2015, MBL held a well attended Black Lives Matter Conference at Cleveland State University. The participants of this three-day convening sought to foster national cohesion among activists. Carol Carter Walker, an organizer with Black Lives Unitarian Universalism

³² About, Movement for Black Lives Website. <https://m4bl.org/about-us/>.

³³ Barbara Ransby, “Black Lives Matter Is Democracy In Action...”

(BLUU), recalls that the organizers initially expected 200 attendees, but she estimates that about 1,200 showed up. “Busloads came from Oakland, New Orleans, Chicago, New York, and Washington, DC. Many arrived without firm housing reservations, knowing the importance of being there and trusting that they’d find housing.”³⁴ In August 2016, MBL launched a policy platform called the “Vision 4 Black Lives,” which emphasizes six core points on criminal justice, reparations, investment and divestment, economic justice, community control, and political power.³⁵ In 2020, they launched a “Rapid Response” platform in the wake of the pandemic, adding two core points of emphasis around respecting protesters and COVID-19.³⁶

The Vitality and Hazards of Organizations

What the formative stages of BLM represented was the movement at work in its purest form, before the Global Network became mired in controversy. The J4TMLA organizers were driven to action during a time when getting involved in activism offered no personal rewards. There was little notoriety to be gained; no celebrity status to be sought; no book deals, no CNN interviews, no magazine features, nor massive social media followings to be attained; there was no financial profit that came with the sacrifice of time and energy; and there was not even immediate praise or recognition to be received from the general public. On the other hand, there were immense risks and there was everything to lose in becoming deeply involved in the movement. The risks included getting arrested, losing your employment, jeopardizing your immigration status, harassment from political opponents, and even death threats. The losses included damages to your reputation and sacrificing immense amounts of time away from family, leading to strained relationships, break-ups, and divorce. From a material standpoint, there was nothing substantial to be gained and there was everything to lose in 2013. The only personal reward to be gained was the fulfillment of advancing the liberation struggle and knowing that you were fighting for the collective betterment of your community. During the J4TMLA phase, there were no hierarchies among organizers, no distinctions in membership status, and no one person’s contributions or ideas held more weight than another’s so long as everyone involved was equally invested in putting in the work. It was a true manifestation of group-centered leadership at work. J4TMLA had no dedicated sources of funding and therefore no budget to work from or be transparent about. Members pooled their resources of art supplies to make signs; printing resources to make banners and posters; bullhorns, loudspeakers, and sound systems; make-shift drums made of plastic buckets; and water bottles and snacks. Unfortunately, this harmonious form of movement engagement could not be sustained long term.

Through the Woes of Advanced Movement Building

Over time, some individuals were either better positioned or more committed in their ability to sustain the work than others. This resulted in some being able to receive greater

³⁴ Carol Carter Walker, “The Movement for Black Lives Convening in Cleveland – A Transformative Experience,” August 31, 2015. <https://sidewithlove.org/ourstories/a-transformative-experience>.

³⁵ M4BL 2016 Policy Platform, M4BL Website. <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/>.

³⁶ Ibid.

recognition, celebrity, and profitable opportunities for their activism, but only after years and years of relentless sacrifice with no guarantee that these rewards would ever come. The differentiation of membership status was necessitated by the reality that some organizers were more focused, more available, or more willing to sacrifice to be consistent in doing the work than others. Leadership and decision-making became more and more centralized within BLMGN and the weight of responsibility and accountability for the movement became more and more concentrated in a few, particularly the BLM co-founders, rather than the collective many.³⁷ As the disparities in who received more recognition and who wielded more decision-making power in steering the direction of the movement widened, resentment and bitterness would take hold among those who started to feel as though their labor in the movement was being exploited to boost the personal celebrity and financial prosperity of a select few. Of course these challenges are not unique to BLM. The very same issues plagued both the Civil Rights and Black Power organizations of the past and they also plagued the Black nationalist organizations that preceded them. Resentment towards Malcolm X developed within the Nation of Islam (NOI) as he grew in popularity. Resentment towards Kwame Ture, formerly known as Stokely Carmichael, developed within SNCC as he grew in popularity, with some members sarcastically referring to him as Stokely “Star”-michael. What these developments in the BLM movement signify is a perennial danger of movement development that its organizers have yet to reconcile. The difference, however, between BLM and the movements of the past is that BLM was originally conceived and predicated on the ethos of group-centered leadership and transparency whereas the organizations of past movements were inherently and openly hierarchical and vanguardist. It was from this milieu of resentment and distrust that both internal and external criticisms of the organizational structure of the BLM Global Network arose.

Back to the Basic Forms of Movement Building

BLM is faced with the conundrum of striving to uphold an idyllic group-centered leadership structure while precarious realities repress its ability to sustain the collective participation seen in the J4TMLA phase, thereby forcing the Global Network to centralize its operations in the hands of a concentrated few as a means of survival. This is not to absolve the Global Network of its alleged mistakes and shortcomings nor is it necessarily to endorse a continued investment in the Global Network, but to thoroughly recognize the general landscape in which its leaders have had to operate. At the eight year anniversary of the birth of BLM – its “infinity year”³⁸ anniversary – Melina Abdullah looked to host the celebration back at St. Elmo’s Village. All of the newly appointed staff for the BLM Grassroots division were in attendance, but only she and I and our children were present from the original J4TMLA team. As the BLM Grassroots team members made their introductions, it was clear that the Global Network is making efforts towards strengthening and expanding their programs with the robust funding that they received in the wake of the 2020 uprisings. What has also been made clear in the overall advocacy efforts throughout the pandemic is that the Global Network does not bear the weight of carrying the movement for Black Lives alone. As tens of thousands of U.S. Americans looked to participate in the BLM movement, the same initial spirit of resistance that fueled the original

³⁷ Maya King, “Black Lives Matter power grab sets off internal revolt,” *Politico*, December 10, 2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/12/10/black-lives-matter-organization-biden-444097>.

³⁸ As described by Professor Abdullah during the anniversary gathering.

J4TMLA team was reignited in organizing spaces across the country, bringing new prospects and possibilities for the movement at-large to expand beyond the Global Network.

A Word on Abolition

In crafting the five demands outlined by the early J4TMLA efforts, one of the points of contention that arose was the possible contradiction between the first demand, to bring federal charges against George Zimmerman for the killing of Trayvon Martin, and the third demand, to end the construction of new jails and prisons. At that time, we deliberated that there was no contradiction in demanding the arrest of vigilantes like Zimmerman as well as law enforcement officers who have committed similar acts of violence and in demanding the end of constructing *new* prisons. In the years that followed, the demands to prosecute vigilantes like Gregory and Travis McMichael and William Brian (the killers of Ahmaud Arbery) and police officers like Darren Wilson and Derek Chauvin have been a standard call to action by BLM activists and protesters. The instances in which the judicial system did not prosecute these killers have been apprehended as a failure on the part of the criminal legal system. The instances in which the killers were charged and convicted have been popularly regarded as marginal victories – as testaments to the power mass protests.

Organizer Miriam Kaba has argued that these notions are not consistent with a truly *abolitionist* stance on criminalization and incarceration. She emphasizes the need for activists to divorce conventional definitions of justice that are steeped in discipline, punishment, and surveillance practices from the abolitionist understanding that the institutions that cultivate these practices have inherited the logics and repertoires of racial violence and exploitation that were engendered through colonialism, slavery, and racial capitalism. That white perpetrators of racial violence are sometimes subjected to these forms of punishment does not negate the reality that the primary targets of these practices in the U.S. continue to be Black and Brown people.³⁹ She argues that while the criminal convictions of killers and abusers might bring feelings of reassurance and progress in the reformation of the criminal legal system, it can never bring actual safety and empowerment to those communities that are constantly victimized by the very same system.

The [Prison Industrial Complex], the courts, the state – none of these will ever be a source of true justice. On rare occasions, they may eat one of their own: a killer cop, a rich and powerful white male abuser, a perpetrator of immense financial harm. But more often, the harms committed by each of these groups (cops, abusers, corporations) are excused behaviors, many of which are legal and routine features of our system. It's not wrong to feel what you feel – relief, or even happiness – when the system snaps up the powerful, but the only way to achieve real justice is to build it ourselves, outside of the system.

In a collection of essays entitled *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (2021), Kaba and Tamara K. Nopper emphasize that “abolitionism is not mediated by emotional responses;”⁴⁰ that calling for or celebrating the conviction of any

³⁹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, New York, London: The New Press (2010).

⁴⁰ Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, edited by Tamara K. Nopper, (Haymarket Books, 2021), 133.

person, no matter how abhorrent their atrocities may have been is not abolitionist. She encourages the notion of a collective re-imagining of our responses to the infliction of harm in shifting away from punishment frameworks and moving towards restorative and transformative ones. She argues that the state instills a binaristic understanding of accountability that is limited to the options of incurring pain and suffering to the perpetrator or doing nothing at all.

This call for abolition has arisen from the growing consciousness that the existing institutions and systems of policing and incarceration cannot in fact be reformed; that the realization of justice for the victims of police and carceral violence demands a comprehensive dismantlement of them and the creation of new modalities of accountability. Since the late 1970s, Angela Y. Davis has dedicated much of her writing towards the development of what she calls *abolition democracy* – “the democracy that is possible if we continue with the great abolition movements in American history, those that opposed slavery, lynching, and segregation.”⁴¹ Her body of work presents an immersive critique of the prison industrial complex and the military industrial complex.

BLM and MBL are work-in-progress abolitionist projects grounded in the experiential and data-informed awareness that policing and prison institutions are not only ineffective in addressing harm, but are themselves more harmful than helpful to Black, Brown, immigrant, and poor communities. They are a “work-in-progress” because there has been some degree of ambivalence among activists on the matter. Many certainly identify with the notion of being abolitionists but many continue to grapple with it. Some are in agreement with Kaba’s premise and others have expressed that the arrest and conviction of vigilante and police murderers of Black people is a tenuous solution during the incubation of alternative systems of accountability before the eventual dismantlement of all systems of criminalization and incarceration. What is not in dispute is the endeavor to reimagine, develop and create alternatives to community safety. Organizers and writers like Kaba and Nopper stress that abolition is just as much about envisioning, creating, and building more effective and more efficient alternatives to better ensure community safety as it is about dismantling the existing oppressive institutions.⁴²

Writer Positionality

As one of the PASC alumni from Cal State LA who became a core organizer with J4TMLA and as a co-conspirator with the ongoing movement for Black lives, my analysis of the subject matter will unavoidably be informed by my first-hand experiences as a scholar-activist committed to the advancement of racial justice. As a full-time community-based organizer with the Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI), I am engaged in the development of educational equity programs in schools predominated by Black and Brown students and in the advancement of various advocacy campaigns aimed at decriminalizing and de-carcerating Black and Brown youth throughout Los Angeles County. As a first-generation immigrant in the U.S. and as a formerly incarcerated person in a juvenile detention facility, I have a vested interest in the improvement of conditions for immigrants of color and for youth of color who come into contact with law enforcement. That being said, this dissertation does not represent the views of SJLI. With regards to BLM specifically, I do not, in any way, represent the views of BLMGN nor

⁴¹ Angela Y. Davis and Eduardo Mendieta, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture*, New York: Seven Stories Press (2005), 14.

⁴² Mariame Kaba, *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us*, 3-5.

BLMLA. While J4TMLA was the immediate predecessor of BLMLA, the former was a multi-racial group and the latter is an exclusively Black-led organization. As a Filipino-identifying accomplice to the movement, I hold no official membership in any current BLMGN-affiliated organization, despite being a founding member of J4TMLA. BLMLA does have auxiliary non-Black organizing partners such as White People for Black Lives (WP4BL) and Third World Power, but I am not a member of any of those groups either.

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation is a historical analysis and a theoretical consideration of the prospects and possibilities of Black Lives Matter and the movement for Black lives with a particular focus on community organizing and political activism in Los Angeles. It is also an evaluation of how BLM has interfaced with other major social movements in the 21st century and it weighs both the benefits and the hazards of organizational development in building and sustaining the movement for Black lives. On one hand, organizations have been vital in establishing structure, direction, and fostering continuity for the movement. On the other hand, organizations have also constricted the movement through the centralization of leadership, thereby stifling its spontaneous growth and fluidity. Because the movement has included abolitionist, anti-capitalist, and intersectional objectives, this dissertation will explore the scope of these ambitions as well as the strategies that have been implemented in pursuit of them.

Chapter 1 explores the concept of *Black Populism* and its vital role in augmenting participation and raising consciousness in resisting white supremacist hegemony. Through a decade of various populist uprisings, BLM has emerged as the most explosive and persistent in pervading the national discourse on racial politics in the U.S. This chapter also offers the concepts of Black political ecosystems and the Black populist biome as frameworks for understanding the complexities and conflicts of ideologies and strategies and the plurality of organizations that populate the terrain of the Black freedom struggle.

Chapter 2 elucidates the complex relationship between Marxist ideology and the Black freedom struggle in the 21st century. It critiques class reductionist frameworks and it reconsiders the uses and limitations of Marxism in race justice activism. It also explores the continued relevance and rekindling of enthusiasm for alternative anti-capitalist frameworks with the rising popularity of “Democratic Socialism” during Bernie Sanders’ 2016 and 2020 campaign runs. This chapter applies analyses of racial capital in contextualizing the need for race justice movements to be grounded in an understanding of how racism and capitalism are mutually constituted.

Chapter 3 explores the concept of *Black Proletarian Democracy* and the avenues by which it can be developed within the landscape of labor union movements. Unions have been the primary vehicles through which many of the Black women activists in the BLM movement developed and honed their organizing skills. This chapter revisits the Marxist imperative to shift the capitalist paradigm into a collective ownership paradigm. Moreover, it emphasizes the vitality of Black leadership and positionality, particularly of Black women workers, in building a labor rights movement capable of bringing about that shift.

Chapter 4 explores the concept of international solidarity and the relationships between the Movement for Black Lives and the liberation struggles of Indigenous, Latinx, Asian-

American, and African migrant communities. It critiques race-reductionist frameworks and it reconsiders the uses and limitations of nationalist or nativist analyses of class struggle. It weighs the conceptual differences between the capitalist modernization view of community development and the socialist dependency view. This chapter revisits the revolutionary vision of the late Malcolm X for global African, Asian, and Latin American unity.

Chapter 5 introduces the *Youth Theory of Radical Perpetuity* which argues for the centrality of youth leadership development in building and sustaining movements grounded in radical praxis. J4TMLA was forged at the intersecting developments of the Pan-African Studies department at Cal State LA and of various non-profit organizations like Dignity and Power Now, demonstrating the significance of Ethnic Studies departments and community-based non-profit organizations in producing the leadership forces that drive social movements

Chapter 1

Between and Beyond Civil Rights and Black Power

What is the political identity of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement? Since its inception, BLM has stubbornly resisted easy categorical placement among the pantheon of Black liberation traditions. While it certainly draws influence from various intellectual and activist streams that preceded it, today's movement doesn't quite wholly or precisely align with any of them in terms of its seemingly disjointed ideological and strategic profile. Initially, one might observe BLM's mass marches, tactics of disruption and civil disobedience, and efforts to impact policy change, and be tempted to simply regard it as a continuation of the Civil Rights movement and the legacies of Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. But then it would be insincere of us to reduce and frame the movement as an integrationist project or as an entirely non-violent one. Alternatively, one might observe BLM's evocation of critical race consciousness, its celebration of Black cultures, its cultivation of Black centered and Black exclusive spaces, and its unapologetic and confrontational posturing, and be tempted to simply regard it as a continuation of the Black Power movement, the Black radical tradition, and the legacies of Angela Y. Davis, the Black Panther Party, and Malcolm X. However, it would be insincere to reduce and frame the movement as a nationalist, revolutionary, or an international Marxist project. If BLM activists do not collectively meet the criteria for any of these then what is their political identity? How are we to understand their political posture in relation to their predecessors, their allies, and their political opponents? It would seem that any attempt to gracefully classify BLM along any conventional continuum of political thought will be met with the same uncertainty at every turn. BLM does not seem to comply with cozily fitting into any of these paradigms.

Does this mean that Black Lives Matter is undecided on its imperatives? Is it internally conflicted on what it stands for? While tactical and ideological disagreements certainly arise, as they do in any organizing space, BLM organizers know what their broad objectives are. They are concretely resolved to realize at least one goal in particular – to urgently and emphatically preserve and protect *all* Black lives by every and all means necessary; through a diverse arsenal of tactics that include, but are not limited to, direct actions, street protests, boycotts, voting, promoting and supporting Black businesses, and even promoting self-care and healing practices. In this sense, there is little ambiguity about the ends of its efforts, even if it hasn't anchored itself too heavily on any one particular means of getting there. BLM envisions a comprehensive liberation project that accounts for the experiences and needs of Black women, Black queer and trans identifying people, diversely-abled Black people, system impacted⁴³ Black people, and the entire gamut of Black positionalities. In this way, BLM distinguishes itself from its predecessors in that its vision strives to encompass the totality of Black life and not just those privileged by certain political programs that distill aspects of Black life as the focus of their liberation vision, thereby obscuring other aspects, particularly the non-heteropatriarchal aspects and those who defy conventional notions of respectability. The movement has a broad sense of what it wants to achieve, it's just not inflexibly devoted to any one way of getting there, opting instead for an *à la carte* strategic approach. This has become a focal point of criticism by proponents of various

⁴³ Specifically referring to those who have been arrested, convicted and incarcerated.

movement traditions who regard this strategic promiscuity as a symptom of a lack of clarity, direction, and structure. What many have interpreted as an irritable refusal to explicitly commit to an existing strategic framework or articulate a more elaborate one beyond Alicia Garza’s “Herstory” statement⁴⁴ has put into question whether BLM is indeed a rigorous liberation project or just a reactionary spectacle that ultimately may undermine the advocacy work of other liberation developments. This compulsion to circumscribe the movement with specific programmatic boundaries would have BLM neatly fall into place along a static historical continuum of liberation traditions. We will call this *strategic absolutism* – the singular devotion or commitment to a particular set of tactics in pursuit of a political objective. This outlook regards the notion of strategic versatility as unsustainably riddled with contradictions and therefore makes the movement too splintered to gain any significant traction. Moreover, each absolutist tradition tends to assume that their chosen pathway is the one true direction towards freedom in a zero-sum struggle in which all other pathways will either lead to a mere oasis of freedom or into winding, never ending side roads of fruitless outcomes.

Certain conventions would have us further reduce the landscape of Black political thought into a dualistic binarism between reformism and radicalism, which is routinely understood as the conflict between the Civil Rights tradition of liberal-integrationism and the Black Power tradition of revolutionary nationalism; essentialized as the political dilemma between the non-violent multiracial gospel of Dr. King and the self-defense self-determination teachings of Malcolm X. Of course, such tendencies egregiously gloss over the tremendous complexities that exist within each of the two essentialized orientations,⁴⁵ erasing the radical aspects of civil rights activism, the radicalism of Dr. King; and conflating leftist ideology and nationalism into the same category, ignoring the histories of tension and fundamental philosophical disagreements between them. Both white supremacist simplifications and imprecise iconographies of Dr. King and Malcolm X are to blame for such misunderstandings. For instance, Malcolm X hardly ever identified as a proponent of the radical left, but many of those who fashioned themselves as his disciples variously combined his nationalist principles with Marxist, Maoist, and Leninist philosophies, thereby promulgating the false association between Malcolm and leftist politics. It is between these frameworks that BLM finds itself ambiguously situated in the minds of many onlookers. Yet, even between these aggregated categories of Black political thought, BLM finds no permanent affiliation with either one. It has emerged as a distinct undertaking while not entirely disconnected from them.

It is for this reason that it is more practical to conceive of BLM as a broad-based *populist* movement rather than as a narrow political identity. We cannot, with any degree of conviction, absolutely or strictly regard proponents of BLM as civil rights activists, integrationists, or nationalists, or Marxists. Through the lens of a populist conceptual prism, we are able to come to terms with the notion that not all BLM activists are uniformly integrationists, or nationalists, or Marxists, but rather that the BLM movement at-large is comprised of an array of individuals whose political identities include all of the above and others. Participation and advocacy for BLM does not necessarily require anyone to wholly relinquish their political affiliations in place of a BLM strategic absolutism. A populist framework of understanding the movement not only allows us to conceptually situate BLM, it also generates possibilities for movement cohesion and maneuverability as both a catalyst for enhancing other adjacent, more concretized political

⁴⁴ As well as the Movement for Black Lives 2016 and 2020 policy platforms.

⁴⁵ Gary Peller, *Critical Race Consciousness: Reconsidering American Ideologies of Racial Justice*, Paradigm Publishers, 2012.

programs and as a discursive intermediary between them. While its compositional integrity is bound together by a solid resolve to resist anti-Black racism, its physiology is of a more fluid nature; dynamic and nimble in its movements; both ebbing and flowing between concretized political schemes and loosely tethering them together into an interconnected Black freedom conglomerate – keeping them from drifting into the abyss of obscurity. In this sense, BLM is also multifaceted in its radical praxis. Unlike other populist movements that are strictly extensions of other absolutist traditions, BLM references and employs a plurality of liberation paradigms and reciprocally re-energizes them with its populist momentum. Reluctant as many strategic absolutists may be to admit it, but BLM has resuscitated new relevance and appeal to those forms that, over the past few decades, had either lost momentum or remained relatively stagnant in form and expression. It has done so, not through a stale repetition of traditional dogma, but through the explosive dynamism and versatility of populist movement building.

This concept of Black Lives Matter as a *populist* development comprises three criteria. The first is its divergence from traditional paradigms and its resistance to being subsumed under the rubric of strategic absolutism. The second is its profound ability to call in, attract, and recruit participants from across disparate and diverging political identities while drawing a vast audience of supporters and opponents to its spectacle of indignation. The third is its capacity and ambition to accommodate all aspects of Black life in its mobilization. This framework not only allows for a more cogent understanding of BLM, but enables for political differences between organizations and ideological traditions to interact in strategic mutualism, or what we will call *symbiotic mutualism* with one another. Political difference is therefore embraced as an asset to movement building rather than being viewed as an obstacle or impediment to unity and inter-organizational cohesion. The greater diversity of strategic and programmatic curricula, the stronger and more resilient the overall Black liberation project becomes. The zero-sum notion of strategic absolutism therefore poses as one of the greatest threats in weakening the movement's immunity to disruption, infiltration, co-optation, and demobilization. Moreover, this populist movement is peculiar in that its focus isn't primarily centered on the notion of advancing civil rights legislation or on building a Black nation. It is bluntly focused on the *conservation* of Black people in naming the totality of "Black lives" – not just Black civil rights, not just Black nationhood, or Black proletariat power – but as the subject of its political focus. Therefore, it is necessary to employ analytic concepts that account for this notion of conserving, protecting and preserving Black lives. In the concluding section of this chapter, we will explore how ecological terms and concepts can facilitate our understanding of contemporary movement dynamics.

To review, we will first identify the historical juncture at which BLM definitively shifted away from traditional strategic repertoires of activism. Then we will survey the various interpretations of the movement across the political spectrum. Then we will review the history of interaction between populism and the Black freedom struggle and consider how Black populism is necessitated by the surge of white nationalist jingoism. Lastly, we will explore the possibilities for how political differences can be operationalized in symbiotic mutualism.

The Black Lives Matter Movement At-Large

We have established that there is a distinction between BLM and the Movement for Black Lives (MBL) with the former being a network of grassroots chapters seeking affiliation with the Global Network and the latter being a larger coalition of various organizations and efforts aimed at transforming the social, political and economic circumstances that detrimentally impact Black lives. It is important to make a further distinction between the organizational structure that is the BLM Global Network and its affiliated chapters and the BLM movement *at-large*. While the network, its founders, and its leaders have played a pivotal role in upholding intersectional consciousness and abolitionist rhetoric as fixed properties of the movement over the past decade, it has never been alone in shaping and sustaining the life force of BLM. Moreover, BLMGN has, for some time now, come under heavy scrutiny for its increasing tendency towards what may very well be strategic absolutism, particularly in its formation of a Political Action Committee, BLM PAC. Nevertheless, there are masses of advocates who organize and campaign for justice under the banner of BLM without affiliation to BLMGN. They continue to push the BLM movement *at-large*, which ultimately transcends the internal politics of the Global Network, its founders, and its leaders. BLM at-large is a force of resistance that was sparked years before the founders put a name to it and it may yet persist regardless of whether or not the Global Network has indeed drifted towards strategic absolutism.

Stan Van Gundy, a 61 year old white man and current NBA head coach for the New Orleans Pelicans, who holds no association whatsoever with BLMGN or any of its affiliate chapters, poignantly stated that BLM “is not just an organization. It is a statement and a movement.”⁴⁶ This was a response to accusations from the right that BLM leaders are manipulating the ignorant masses towards insidious ends. What is clear to even a casual supporter of the movement like coach Van Gundy is that BLM is, and always has been, much larger than those who patented and branded it. No one organization holds a monopoly on defining the movement, in the same way that no one single organizing body held a monopoly on defining the Civil Rights movement or the Black Power movement. “Black Lives Matter” is a humanist ethos focused on the specificity of Black equity and justice that many have been called to declare, demand, and march for. This was the case for waves of activists and protesters who neither needed membership nor permission from the Global Network to jump into action. From the Oakland uprisings for Oscar Grant in 2010, the Ferguson uprisings for Mike Brown in 2014, the Baltimore uprisings for Freddie Grey in 2015, to the nation-wide uprisings for George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020, hundreds and thousands of protesters have taken to the streets to demand justice without being prompted or sanctioned by a centralized leadership structure. They were called to action by the blatant disregard for Black life routinely exhibited by police, vigilantes, and the state.

The movement was born out of the urgency felt by the Black community and non-Black sympathizers to confront the endangerment of Black lives. The uprisings have been repeatedly spurred by the raw collective impulse to vocalize outrage at anti-Black racist violence, not by the prodding of an insurgent intelligentsia to advance an absolutist platform. While there is certainly a need for ideology and organizations to anchor and sustain the movement beyond spontaneous expressions of outrage, what has predominantly characterized BLM activity has been its broad-

⁴⁶ Stan Van Gundy, Twitter post, September 24, 2020, 5:15 a.m.
<https://twitter.com/realStanVG/status/1309104140937814016>

based populist tendencies, not the charismatic appeal nor the organizational structure of its leaders. The movement at-large has remained focused intently on responding to injustice rather than directing the masses into any particular organizational program or absolutist strategy. This came into fruition in 2013 in the mass mobilizations that precipitated the initial posting of the BLM hashtag and the first official BLM action. The problematization of traditional strategic frameworks had been well underway in small bursts of racial justice advocacy for years leading up to the birth of BLM. On one hand, student-led campaigns and organizing efforts across the country were cultivating de-centralized and intersectional leadership practices in developing “new forms of civic engagement that make public institutions more accountable and responsive in the interest of the public good.”⁴⁷ On the other hand, youth radicalism was festering in urban communities where the impact of economic inequality and racist state-sanctioned violence were most dramatically felt. The former would guide the movement under the principles of group-centered leadership and intersectional consciousness. The latter would spearhead the continuous waves of urban insurgency unseen in the U.S. since the Black Power movement. “To our knowledge, there have been no large-scale uprisings in this century that have not been in response to a shooting death of a Black person by a police officer.”⁴⁸

Divergence from Strategic Absolutism

On the evening that George Zimmerman’s acquittal was announced, protesters in Los Angeles flooded the streets, congregating at Leimert Park in South Central. From there, they marched north up Crenshaw Blvd. going towards the Mid-City area before their path was obstructed at the King intersection by a squadron of police officers adorned in full riot gear. Some hundreds were able to break through and push a few more miles before they were summarily thwarted by a more intensified effort by LAPD with dozens of police cars forming a barrier that thoroughly sealed the street at the Exposition intersection. Professor Melina Abdullah and a handful of her mentees, including a few members of the Pan African Student Collective (PASC) were among them. Despite the intimidation of LAPD’s forces, the South Central resistance marchers remained undaunted as they increasingly looked to refocus their grief into collective action. On the next day, July 14, 2013, Professor Abdullah and the PASC looked to regroup with the hundreds of South Central residents and other enraged LA community members as they did the night before, hoping to pick up where they left off. “We would rise, converge, and do it again.”⁴⁹ They were poised to double their efforts and push further north from the Interstate-10 freeway. However, there were many more in attendance that day who were not present the night before, some of them members of other Black-led organizations with competing plans of action.

⁴⁷ John Rogers, Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, Joseph Kahne, and Veronica Terriquez, "Building Power, Learning Democracy: Youth Organizing as a Site of Civic Development," *Review of Research in Education* 36 (2012): 43-66. Accessed May 25, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41349023>.

⁴⁸ Judson L. Jeffries and Jerrell Beckham, “Multiethnic Uprisings in Urban America and their Implications for Progress,” *Journal of African American Studies*, 2021: 53.

⁴⁹ Melina Abdullah, “Black Lives Matter and the Building of a Mass Movement,” *KCET*, November 3, 2015, paragraph 10.

One organization, the Black Riders for Liberation Party (BRLP), were motioning for the crowd to march in the opposite direction, deeper into South Central with the intent of going all the way to the LAX airport. As they began their descent going south on Crenshaw towards Slauson Ave, Sharlia Gulley sprinted through the crowd, dashed across to create a split between the BRLP vanguard marchers and those following them, and successfully redirected the marchers to turn around completely and move northward as the original group of marchers had planned. It was with very little persuasive effort on Gulley's part that the marchers abandoned the BRLP's plan and opted to follow Gulley's guidance to reverse course. "Nobody cares when you march in your own neighborhood. Only when there is disruption are we able to hear clearly. Go north."⁵⁰

That moment represented a microcosm of a larger monumental shift in the dynamics of social movement mobilization that was unfolding across the nation. In one regard, social justice advocates and movement participants were moving away from the tired male-centered leadership tropes towards more salient intersectional expressions of leadership that resonated with youth, particularly with college students, most of whom had embraced radical feminist, queer and trans affirming liberation practices in campus organizing spaces. In another regard, advocates and protest participants were also moving away from liberation paradigms and curricula that too closely mimicked the aesthetics and presentation of past iterations of the freedom struggle⁵¹ as well as those that evoked a false sense of arrogant certainty in the realization of desired outcomes contingent on mass adherence to a particular approach. The precise regurgitation of past rhetoric had largely fallen on deaf ears throughout the decades since the 1970s. The movements that emerged in the 2010s did not regress back into the dogma⁵² of old forms of decades past. Instead, the masses collectively steered towards new directions – as the Los Angeles protesters had on the day after the acquittal. They were drawn to more comprehensive forms that, in one regard, widened the scope of how liberation could be envisioned across gender and sexual identities, and, in another regard, evoked a more sincere and organic expression of indignation to injustice that does not simply pick up where the movements of the past left off.

Sharlia Lebreton Gulley and the March from Leimert Park to Hollywood

The Black Riders for Liberation Party (BRLP) was an organization founded in 1996 by Mischa Culton, better known as General TACO (an acronym for "Taking All Capitalists Out"). Its members regarded themselves as the "new generation of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense." Deeply inspired by the rhetoric, style, and attire of the Black Power era, they were typically seen wearing the familiar all-black attire with black berets, black sunglasses, black boots, and black leather jackets that iconized the Black Panthers.⁵³ They would frequent Leimert

⁵⁰ Sharlia Gulley, "A Word for Freedom," IGTV *Instagram* Post, June 10, 2019.

<https://www.instagram.com/tv/ByidpgMnbUG/>

⁵¹ This includes traditional civil rights rhetoric focused on voter registration and participation as well as nationalist and Black Power era attire and performativity.

⁵² Referring specifically to the hetero-patriarchal and vanguardianist expressions that typified past movements.

⁵³ Not to be confused with the New Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (NBPP), a separate organization that was founded in Dallas Texas in 1989. The NBPP had no official affiliation with the original Black Panther Party. It is widely regarded as a fanatical distortion of the BPP's legacy. Its leadership issued a bounty of \$10,000 for a citizen's arrest of George Zimmerman.

Park and put on Martial Arts exhibitions, demonstrating their skill in weapons training and fight choreography. Moreover, they proclaimed programmatic fidelity to the BPP, declaring their belief in revolutionary socialism and the principles of armed self-defense, and denouncing the “white-dominated, oppressive capitalistic system.” By all accounts, the BRLP presented themselves as the heir apparent of the tradition of Black Power activism. On July 14, 2013, they were primed and ready to present their organizational platform and mission before the largest audience they had the opportunity of engaging. General TACO looked to seize his role as the leader of the movement.

As the BRLP began to steer the marchers southwards, Abdullah and the PASC objected.⁵⁴ They surmised that the best course of action was not to delve deeper into South Central, but to move northwards, outside of the Black community and into the more affluent parts of Los Angeles where they could disrupt business as usual in those areas where their cries for justice would have the most impact. As a college athlete and one of the best sprinters on the track team during her time at Cal State LA, Gulley was in exceptional physical condition with skills particularly well suited for the role of running back and forth along the throngs of marchers. When she redirected the crowd to move northwards, she did not posture as someone competing for General TACO’s place as the leader of the march nor was she denouncing the BRLP. She simply appealed to the notion that at that moment, on that day, and under those particular circumstances, it was more sensible for them to march north rather than south. But why did they listen to her? After all, she was seemingly just one lone woman casually dressed in a blue tank-top, shorts and running shoes with a small bag slung on her shoulder.

The BRLP were certainly more coordinated in their presentation, their attire, their marching formation and chants, with their regalia, their flags, and their structure. They outnumbered Gulley and they seemed like they were in the midst of executing a calculated plan of action. It may have been the case that the logistics of what Gulley proposed simply registered as more sensible to the marchers who altered course. Perhaps they just came to realize the absurdity of marching to the airport and found Gulley’s course of action more persuasive. However, the reason may have also been because of the BRLP’s aggressive vanguardianist posture with General TACO as the self-appointed leader of the march. This might have actually deterred some marchers. In comparison, Gulley presented herself, not as an exceptional or messianic vanguardian leader, but as one them – another marcher who positioned herself horizontally with them, but with a more decisive resolve on what course of action to take. In fact it may very well have been the case that it was her unassuming casual attire that conveyed to the marchers the sense that she was someone who shared their sincerity in taking to the streets and not an overly performative charlatan soliciting her followers for her personal agenda. Clearly, Gulley was received as someone who they could trust to administer directions. She certainly stood out among the crowd as someone who was confidently determined and physically fit.

Of course Gulley was not at all just a random lone marcher who was suddenly and spontaneously inspired to challenge the leadership of the BRLP and to take the initiative of single-handedly steering the masses into an alternate course of action. She was an experienced student activist and an exceptional athlete. At Cal State LA, she had best marks of 12.08 in the 100 meter dash, 25.3 in the 200, and 57.08 in the 400. In 2011, she earned a CCAA All-Academic Award. At Modesto Junior College, she was the captain of the track team.⁵⁵ She also

⁵⁴ Melina Abdullah, “Black Lives Matter and the Building...,” paragraph 10.

⁵⁵ Cal State LA Track-and-Field Website. “Sharlia Gulley,” *2012 Women’s Track and Field Roster*. <https://lagoldeneagles.com/sports/womens-track-and-field/roster/sharlia-gulley/1316>.

competed in volleyball and cheerleading in high school and was a national competing elite gymnast for seven years. As an activist at Cal State LA, she regularly organized and facilitated political education sessions as a member of the PASC. She also co-organized direct actions on campus to protest rising student fees and she was fervently involved in activities and events of the Pan African Studies department. For the last two and half years leading up to the George Zimmerman verdict, Gulley had been extensively engaged in the study and praxis of radical liberation. When the time came for her to put her training into immediate action, she was confidently prepared both as an athlete and as a scholar-activist.

Hundreds of marchers would follow her up Crenshaw Blvd. until they found their path obstructed at the overpass of the Interstate-10 Santa Monica freeway where LAPD officers in full riot gear were waiting to intercept them, keeping them insulated in South Central and preventing them from moving any further towards the more affluent parts of the city. At that moment, Gulley noticed that the police neglected to block the freeway onramp. A fellow marcher, the late Marcus “Maccapone” Higgins, who was a frontline activist with the Africa Town Coalition, looked to her and asked “what do you want to do? I will follow you.” To which she responded “Let’s get on the freeway.”⁵⁶ She then stepped onto the onramp and urged everyone else to follow her. The marchers then flooded onto the freeway, blocking both eastbound and westbound sides to disrupt traffic. They held that space for approximately 30 minutes, displaying their signs and chanting for justice. It was at this point that LAPD officers were placed on a citywide tactical alert and called in the California Highway Patrol to disperse the protesters from the freeway. The police moved in on them and pelted them with bean bags and rubber bullets.⁵⁷ Marchers resisted by throwing water bottles and D-cell batteries back at them. Thereafter, most of the marchers went back to Leimert Park, but Gulley and a determined few persisted and pressed on. They continued north even with their numbers thinning to as few as a dozen. Gulley wasn’t done. She wasn’t satisfied with the disruption on the freeway, she wanted to disrupt business as usual in the LA areas “where the money was.”

This march would regain numbers, building up to about a hundred as they pressed through Mid-City. They would block traffic again at the intersection of Beverly Blvd. and La Brea Avenue and then press even further north into Hollywood. At this point, the police yielded for them to march on Hollywood Blvd. Traffic was as congested as ever with both the march and with many drivers making their way to a concert at the Hollywood Bowl nearby. They repeatedly chanted “we believe that we will win!” as they went along. At the Highland Avenue intersection, they rallied. However, things began to get tense as one marcher grew increasingly agitated and animated, yelling obscenities at other marchers. With veins bulging out of his bald and sweaty head, he kept yelling “WHAT ARE WE GONNA DO ABOUT IT?!” “We are still talking. WHY?!” seemingly compelling others to take more drastic action, but with no apparent plan of action. Some seemed to be intrigued by what he was saying, others urged everyone to “stay in solidarity.” It seemed as though the march would dissolve in confused division regarding the purpose of their action. Gulley quickly intervened and the crowd once again followed her lead. Her objective on that night was to disrupt business as usual, not incur a violent insurrection, so she was intent on keeping the rally and march peaceful. “This woman knows how to focus a

⁵⁶ Sharlia Gulley, “The Conduit,” IGTV *Instagram* Post, June 9, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CBOt6eRgtbg/>.

⁵⁷ “Anti-Zimmerman Demonstrators Disrupt Traffic on 10 Freeway, Crenshaw Boulevard,” *Los Angeles CBS Local*, July 14, 2013. <https://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2013/07/14/zimmerman-demonstrators-close-sb-110-freeway/>

crowd” noted one marcher who was documenting the action with his camera.⁵⁸ She unified the crowd, repeatedly prompting them to chant “As one! As one! As one!” The agitator tried to press his case, but his yelling was drowned by the crowd before he too eventually began to clap his hands and joined with the chant. “We need to remember what we’re here for,” urged Gulley, “we need to stay together as a collective. Tomorrow we will be moving again. Every day we will be moving! It does not stop here!” She then declared that “this is the beginning of the beginning of a revolution!” After getting into a frenzy of hearty embraces and shouts calling for peace, the marchers, including the agitator, continued on with Gulley at the lead yelling “Justice now!” When the police moved in to start arresting protesters, they finally dispersed.

“My feet carried me [for] nine hours” recalls Gulley. From Leimert Park in South Central all the way to one of the most visited tourist sites of the city at the intersection of Hollywood and Highland near the Chinese Theater – she had embarked on the longest eight mile trek of her life. Throughout that day and into the night, she was able to corral hundreds of people and coordinate the beginnings of a movement that would persist well into the present. She was one of many across the nation who were not only called to action, as thousands were, but to also bring focus and direction for a more sustained mobilization that invited others to co-lead, co-facilitate, and co-create rather than presenting a fixed organizational program that invited them to follow a self-designated vanguard. Gulley had no intention of building a personal profile as the hero of the movement, she merely knew that she couldn’t stay home. It wasn’t until she joined Professor Abdullah and her fellow PASC comrades that it became clear that she needed to step up in a major way. “I was fighting for my life. For *our* lives. Fighting to turn pain to power.”⁵⁹

Towards an Intersectional and Group Centered Movement

Gulley would continue to organize, collaborate and mobilize with other activist groups in the days and weeks thereafter. It was she who developed and presented the plan for the first official BLM action in Beverly Hills, which would be mobilized three days after the march from Leimert to Hollywood and Highland. The coalition that would become J4TMLA in St. Elmo’s Village accepted her as a core leader. Its members committed to implementing her plan. After listening to the sermons and speeches fervently presented by the older traditional civil rights and nationalist leaders who were competing for the mantle of leadership – pitching their movement platforms ad nauseum at Leimert Park – the younger and gender, queer, and trans conscious contingencies of activists sought to reach out to one another, to connect, and to hold a space of collective leadership away from the male-centered heteropatriarchal guard of perceived opportunists looking to build their leadership profiles among the masses. When asked by reporters what group or organization we were representing, J4TMLA members specifically stated that we were resisting “vanguardian” or centralized frameworks of leadership and that they were simply working as a response team to stand in solidarity with the thousands across the nation who had risen up to confront anti-Black racism and state sanctioned violence in the wake of the Zimmerman verdict. This was a shift away from the traditional leadership frameworks of the civil rights and nationalist traditions and building towards an intersectional, intergenerational, group centered populist movement under the slogan of “Black Lives Matter.” Gulley was at the

⁵⁸ Brian Donnelly, “Trayvon Martin Protests in Hollywood,” *YouTube* video, 2:50, July 21, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Fhxh4vkFLg&t=213s.

⁵⁹ Sharlia Lebreton Gulley, “A Word for Freedom,” 1:38.

core of these efforts to diverge from strategic absolutism, the formation of J4TMLA, and the beginning of the BLM movement. She joined others across the country who would spearhead the growth of this emerging framework into a nation-wide phenomenon.

A year later, when the Ferguson rebellion erupted in August 2014, civil rights icons like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton were summarily dismissed from taking center stage. Street activists had come to perceive these traditional civil rights figures as opportunists looking to fundraise and increase their own media profiles.⁶⁰ Furthermore, their calls for calm and civility were not well received. The Ferguson protesters boldly declared their disregard for respectability politics to honor the assertion that Michael Brown Jr. deserved to live despite media attempts to disparage his character as a way to justify Darren Wilson's decision to shoot him. If the abandonment of respectability frameworks and the overall divergence from strategic absolutism was only introduced in the justice for Trayvon protests, they would become fully realized with the Ferguson rebellions. "The pot began to simmer when Trayvon Martin was killed in 2012. In Ferguson it boiled over. The uprising shifted society: long before Trump's Inauguration, resistance marches emerged across the country, mirroring Ferguson in tenacity and power, centered on their own victims of police violence."⁶¹ With each successive high profile state-sanctioned killing of a Black person in the U.S., the populist resolve of the movement at-large would continuously respond with increased emphasis on rejecting respectability, asserting intersectionality, and affirming the need for abolitionist solutions.

The Black Lives Matter movement grew out of the need to confront the racist, heteropatriarchal, and capitalist specificities of societal injustice, but its leading advocates didn't pretend to have a thoroughly detailed, step-by-step, ready-made solution that guaranteed the eradication of injustice. Instead, they embodied something of a more honest sense of uncertainty about what is to be done beyond the spectacle of mass protests. This is not to be confused with a nervous or anxious sort of uncertainty. Rather, it is a calculating, stubbornly persistent sort of uncertainty that is diligently struggling towards developing a clearer picture or understanding of what it will truly take to abolish these persisting systems of oppression. It is an uncertainty that readily admits the current limitations of their understanding, but is nonetheless determined to figure out how to envision freedom even though the existing picture is incomplete and without a frame to be neatly displayed. They neither pretended to know what the picture looks like nor did they succumb to stagnation in their uncertainty. It is this work-in-progress and under development sort of presentation that the movement comes across as a more sincere and appealing space for popular participation. The movement requires little to no prerequisites before one can join a protest or express their support on social media. The ease with which one can participate in and be a part of today's movement is, in many ways, akin to the ease with which anyone can begin supporting a sports team. Unlike many of the movements of the past, some of which required exhaustive initiation processes and rituals, the BLM movement at-large only requires that you show up, righteously condemn the acts of violence sanctioned by the state, and declare solidarity with the movement. Some are compelled to wear a t-shirt or bring a picket sign that displays the hashtag or other progressive political slogans. This is even more accessible than

⁶⁰ Philip Swartz, "Ferguson Protesters Confront Jesse Jackson: 'When You Going to Stop Selling Us Out?'" *The Washington Times*, August 23, 2014. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/aug/23/ferguson-protesters-confront-jesse-jackson-when-yo/>

⁶¹ Brittany Packnett Cunningham, "How Ferguson Woke Us Up," *TIME*, August 19, 2019. <https://time.com/5647329/ferguson-police-brutality-activism-america/>

attending a professional basketball game and wearing a jersey to support your city's team considering that the tickets and apparel are probably more costly than a BLM t-shirt and the materials needed to make the sign. Unless you are a core organizer with a BLM chapter or unaffiliated BLM organization, you are free to attend and participate as you please, at your pace and at your time. While certain chapters of the BLM Global Network, like BLMLA, now requires prospective members to attend at least three general meetings before conferring them membership⁶², the movement at-large is as open for anyone to attend as the MLK Day parade on Crenshaw. The movement thrives on garnering masses of participants to its rallies and marches.

It has been nearly a decade since Gulley led the march from Leimert Park to Hollywood. Upon reflection, not much about the character of the movement has actually changed. Its populist routines have hardly shifted but rather intensified exponentially over the years. For the masses as well as the liberation traditionalists, the question still lingers: what exactly does the Black Lives Matter movement represent? What is it all about? At the very least, what is abundantly clear is that it is an ongoing series of direct action responses to the prevalence of anti-Black police violence in the United States. For many whose only exposure and engagement with BLM is limited to the images and news reports of turbulent protests and picket line confrontations with police, what needs more elucidation are its political philosophy, its programmatic curriculum and objectives, and its place in the tradition of Black liberation advocacy and U.S. social movements. Analysts and pundits from across the political spectrum have unavoidably had to grapple with interpreting the significance and meaning of Black Lives Matter and its relevance to their respective platforms. BLM and the broader have been perceived, engaged, and interpreted in a myriad of ways.

Mainstream Political Impressions of BLM

Misinterpretations of BLM have been prevalent across right-wing, center-left, and leftist discourses. Assessments of the movement have ranged from deliberate mischaracterizations, which are to be expected, to scathing critiques of its perceived lack of programmatic clarity and its reactionary tendencies. It has been confused as a militant project and it is frequently aggregated and obscured under a large umbrella of populist left activity. It has also been castigated by others who view it as a well-intentioned, but poorly executed and misinformed effort in its delivery. Both of the aforementioned outlooks are completely detached from the direct first-hand experiences of the likes of frontline activists like Gulley and are therefore predicated on their perception of BLM as an existential threat to their political ecosystems. They are of course the dominant mainstream political worldviews of the conservative and liberal perspectives. There is also a third perspective from the self-proclaimed revolutionary left which is intermittently engaged but also in constant tension with BLM activists. This is largely because

⁶² Field Notes, June 14, 2020. At a BLMLA General Meeting at McCarty Memorial Church on Adams Blvd., that was attended by hundreds of people in the wake of the George Floyd protests, many of them being white and other non-Black supporters, Melina Abdullah clarified that membership for BLMLA was open only to Black identifying attendees and that prospective persons seeking membership must attend at least three general meetings, held biweekly on Sunday evenings. White attendees were encouraged to join the ally organization known as White People for Black Lives (WP4BL).

this view paternalistically regards BLM as a misguided reactionary force that is in desperate need of a leadership vanguard to steer them in the correct direction towards true liberation. Despite its professed commitment to anti-racism, proponents of this view are as quick to proclaim “All Lives Matter” as quickly as either the conservative right or the liberal center-left. Each of these perspectives are plagued by a medley of distortions and inaccuracies.

BLM and the Conservative Right

Much of the more crude evaluations of the movement are deeply steeped in anti-Black racism and the perception that the conditions of poverty, policing and incarceration that Black people experience are largely attributed to their supposed maladaptive cultural deficiencies; that they are victims primarily of their own pathological tendencies rather than systems of racial oppression. Therefore, notions of Black respectability and civility are understood to be the sole remedies to the abject conditions that Black communities suffer, not protest and reparations. Such narrations tend to also be accompanied by assumptions about how Martin Luther King Jr. – who has been reinvented as the epitome of Black respectability and civility in the right-wing collective imagination – would not have approved of the expressions of outrage displayed by BLM.⁶³ In 2016, Fox News analyst Bill O'Reilly suggested that the movement is responsible for increased rates of homicide throughout the country, which he attributed to the supposed decrease of aggressive policing due to the backlash against excessive force in the wake of the 2014 Ferguson uprisings. He boldly stated that “Black Lives Matter is killing Americans,” implying that diminished police enforcement has allowed for the “subculture of violence” – that supposedly festers within Black communities – to go unchecked. In a separate interview, he lauded Dr. King as the “best American patriot for the advancement of civil rights ever” and suggested that Dr. King would have never participated in Black Lives Matter, that he would have in fact condemned it and been ashamed of it because it’s “too volatile.”⁶⁴ Such assumptions are of course inconsistent with Dr. King’s reflections on the urban uprisings of the 1960s,⁶⁵ but these sensibilities have persisted as core tenets of conservative opposition to BLM.

Other commentators have gone so far as to describe Black Lives Matter as a subversive undertaking, labelling its proponents as “terrorists.” This was prompted by the events of the summer of 2016, when Michael Xavier Johnson ambushed and fired upon a group of police officers in Dallas TX, claiming the lives of five officers and injuring nine others. The shooting occurred at the end of a solidarity demonstration calling for justice for the police killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile. Johnson claimed that his motive was to kill white people, particularly white police officers. Despite the fact that Johnson was not affiliated with any BLM organization, the incident spurred law enforcement and conservative pundits to decry BLM as a terrorist operation.⁶⁶ This would be echoed in the years to come by law enforcement, particularly

⁶³ Justin Gomer, *White Balance: How Hollywood Shaped Colorblind Ideology and Undermined Civil Rights*, (United States: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

⁶⁴ Interview with Seth Meyers on Late Night with Seth Meyers. July 14, 2016

⁶⁵ Dr. King is famously quoted for stating that “A riot is the language of the unheard.” Lily Rothman, “What Martin Luther King Jr. Really Thought About Riots,” *TIME*, April 28, 2015. <https://time.com/3838515/baltimore-riots-language-unheard-quote/>.

⁶⁶ Ra Gulamhusein, “The Black Lives Matter Organization is a Domestic Terrorist Group,” *Medium*, October 28, 2020. <https://medium.com/another-side/the-black-lives-matter-organization-is-a-domestic-terrorist-group>

when the 2020 uprisings resulted in the firebombing of police precincts in Portland and Minneapolis. The president of the Police Officers Federation of Minneapolis, Lieutenant Bob Kroll, also described BLM as a “terrorist organization” after two officers were not charged for the shooting of Jamar Clark. Others have focused on the extent to which the uprisings have wrought millions of dollars of property damage, including local business.⁶⁷

The BLM Global Network and its affiliate chapters have steadily maintained a commitment to nonviolent action. They have neither participated in nor encouraged the acts of violent insurrections that have incurred the property damage. For instance, BLMLA is very clear on when their “official” BLM actions begin and when they end, marking the announcement of its conclusion as the point at which everything that happens afterwards cannot be attributed to nor associated with the organization. However, in the true spirit of the radical Dr. King who famously stated that “a riot is the language of the unheard,” they have opted not to decry the violence or the looting as reprehensible. They recognize them as the symptoms and the inevitable repercussions of racialized violence in the U.S. Some, like BLM Chicago organizer Ariel Atkins, have gone so far as to describe the looting and damage as a form of “reparations.”⁶⁸ Since the calls for “peace” that Gulley and others had maintained at the onset of the movement has apparently fallen on deaf ears since 2013, organizers have increasingly held the posture that the onus of stopping the property damage is not on activists and organizers to quell righteous community anger, but on the state and its institutions to end its complicity with the wanton killing of Black lives.

BLM and the Liberal Center-Left

Beyond the crude assessments of the movement by the conservative right, the center-lefts’ relationship with the movement has been somewhat riddled with ambiguity over the course of the last decade, but it has largely regarded BLM as irresponsible.⁶⁹ While the 2020 uprisings had finally compelled the Democratic Party to declare sentimental support for Black Lives Matter, the Democrats have largely avoided engaging BLM activism or the M4BL policy platform. At times, movement organizers have accused Democrats of white liberal racism; of falsely posturing as anti-racists in sentiment while enforcing racist policies in practice.⁷⁰ At best, Democrats have postured as fickle fair weather friends who have always been hesitant in offering their support of the movement. What has been most typical of the Democratic Party is its rather faint display of sympathy for the condition of anti-Black racism and state-sanctioned violence accompanied by a more emphatic admonition for activists to prioritize voting and electoral campaign work in their organizing capacities in lieu of direct action protest. In response, BLM activists have been adamant in both rejecting this paternalism and in expressing their frustrations

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Lauren Leazenby and Milan Polk, “What you Need to Know About Black Lives Matter in 10 Questions,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 3, 2020. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/ct-life-cb-black-lives-matter-chicago-20200903-xh75kbw5nfdk5joudlsgb2viwq-story.html>

⁶⁹ Sahil Kapur, “Democratic leaders clash with Black Lives Matter activists over ‘defund the police,’” *NBC News*, June 8, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/democratic-leaders-clash-black-lives-matter-activists-over-defund-police-n1227671>.

⁷⁰ Laura Barrón-López and Holly Otterbein, “Black Lives Matter activists strike back at Dems slamming ‘defund the police,’” *Politico*, November 11, 2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/19/blm-defund-police-democrats-437940>.

with the center-lefts' inaction and their insincerity in promising change to solicit Black votes. During the campaign efforts of DNC presidential candidates leading up to the 2016 elections, BLM activists disrupted various rallies including when protesters interrupted Hillary Clinton in Atlanta, compelling her to say "Yes, Black lives do matter,"⁷¹ as well interrupting Bernie Sanders, running him off the podium and off the stage at his own rally in Seattle.⁷² Despite these tensions, BLM has cautiously maintained some degree of investment in the Democratic Party throughout the past decade.⁷³ Although the BLM Global Network and its chapters do not endorse political candidates on behalf of the organization as a whole, individual leaders, including the co-founders, have variously voiced their support for certain candidates over the years.

Nonetheless, contentions have endured with some Democrats going so far as to blame the BLM call to "Defund the Police" for certain political losses in the November 2020 elections. Former president Barack Obama would echo this sentiment in criticizing the campaign as a "snappy slogan," stating that "you lost a big audience the minute you say it, which makes it a lot less likely that you're actually going to get the changes you want done."⁷⁴ This is consistent with the liberal fidelity to gradual reformism and the Democratic Party's aversion to notions of police and prison abolition, dismissing such ambitions as brash, impractical and divisive. Obama continued his critique by saying that "the key is deciding: do you actually want to get something done or do you want to feel good among the people that you already agree with?" While he hurriedly expressed that he found the overall objectives of the movement to be agreeable, the focus of his critique was to caution young activists to be wary of how expressions of radical dissent can jeopardize the realization of their policy demands.

While the conservative right tends to either dismiss systematic racism as a figment of the Left's imagination or justify the disproportionate killings and arrests of Black people in the U.S. as a reasonably measured response to quell the supposed "subculture of violence" festering in Black American neighborhoods, the center-left has dragged its feet with the Democratic Party's insipid reluctance to address the issue of anti-Black racism and state-sanctioned violence with any sense of urgency. They have more often opted to display momentary symbolic gestures of sympathy and grief rather than to act with urgency and tireless indignation, as BLM activists have, to incur substantive policy changes. Only at the tail end of the exhaustive efforts of direct action organizers, when what was thought to be impossibly too radical rears into feasibility (or when the intensity of political pressure to act was no longer negligible), has the Party looked to align itself with the movement.

⁷¹ Sabrina Siddiqui, "Black Lives Matter protest interrupts Clinton speech on criminal justice," *The Guardian*, October 30, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/oct/30/black-lives-matter-protest-interrupts-hillary-clinton>.

⁷² Jim Brunner, "Black Lives Matter protesters shut down Bernie Sanders; later rally draws 15,000," *The Seattle Times*, August 11, 2015. <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/black-lives-matter-protesters-shut-down-bernie-sanders-rally/>.

⁷³ BLM activists have individually endorsed Democratic Party candidates and the organization has made attempts to reach out to request a meeting with the Biden/Harris administration, to which there was no response.

⁷⁴ Interview with Peter Hamby, host of the Snap Original Good Luck America. December 2, 2020.

BLM and the Revolutionary Left

Certain proponents of the left view the movement as something of a faux radicalism or a performative show of indignant bravado and sensationalism. Elaine Brown, former Chair of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, scathingly critiqued BLM of having a “plantation mentality.”⁷⁵ In comparing today’s movement with the BPP, she expressed how much clearer the objectives and organizational framework were with the latter: “We advocated community self-defense organizations to be formed, so that we would not be assaulted by the police, so that we would bear arms and assume our human rights.” She emphasized how, beyond armed self-defense, the BPP looked to transform material circumstances through sound and methodical tactics like their free breakfast program and free clinics. In comparison, she views BLM as a project hinged on appealing to the morality of its oppressors. “It smacks of ‘master, if you would just treat me right.’ And it has nothing to do with self-determination, empowerment and a sense of justice, or anything else.”⁷⁶ As one of the most prominent figures of the Black Power era, Brown has denounced BLM as nothing more than a tantrum with no clear sense of direction, structure, or values. In her view, the movement possesses none of the attributes that qualified the BPP to declare themselves a force of “revolutionary change.”

This perspective overlooks a number of contextual details in comparing different eras of activism. The first is how circumstances have changed over time and how the feasibility of certain tactics and organizing strategies in one era may not be translatable in another. The second is how the Black Power movement was summarily dismantled by COINTELPRO and how today's activists are more wary of replicating the BPPs tactics too precisely so as to avoid the limitations of its organizational structure and approach such as its toxic leadership tendencies and its rigid and centralized chain of command. Still, there are many who share Elaine Brown’s sentiments, which can perhaps be summarized as “I don’t know what Black Lives Matter does.” This brings us back to the question of what BLM signifies, what it represents and what its impact is.

As we have previously established, BLM is situated between and beyond existing programmatic traditions. In one regard, BLM advocates certainly continue the repertoires of direct action tactics reminiscent of the Civil Rights movement such as mass marches, sit-ins, disruptions of traffic, of “business as usual,” and boycotts, which are all very much derived from 1960s protest curriculum implemented by groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the NAACP. This is perhaps what has prompted the radical left to dismiss it as another integrationist-oriented scheme. In another regard, BLM advocates have also very much evoked the confrontational and unapologetic posture, spirit and attitude reminiscent of the Black Power movement, if not its organizational structures and its thoroughly defined political objectives. Their utter rejection of respectability politics, their celebration and embrace of Black cultural aesthetics, and their emphasis on the need for Black centered and Black exclusive spaces for political organizing are aspects of the movement that are derived from the Black Power era. The flair and ferocity of BLM advocacy certainly mirrors the revolutionary spirit of groups like the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the Us organization. Given the history of polarization between civil rights liberal integrationism and Black Power nationalism, BLM’s salient embrace of aspects of both traditions makes the current expressions of Black liberation

⁷⁵ “Elaine Brown Thinks Black Lives Matter Has a ‘Plantation Mentality,” *Ebony*, October 21, 2016.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

advocacy resistant to being clearly defined as either integrationist or nationalist. While this can be interpreted as a lack of programmatic clarity, such a comprehension fails to appreciate the tremendous versatility and flexibility in mobility that its embrace of both allows for movement building. Attempts to distill BLM as either distinctly a civil rights or Black power undertaking tragically overlooks the unique capabilities that resisting alignment with either equips it with.

The Case for Black Populism

While populism has been an ever-present feature of commentary on the state of politics, it surged in prominence throughout the 2010's,⁷⁷ distinguishing the era as a turbulent decade of protests that John B. Judis has described as “the populist explosion.”⁷⁸ While the impact of populism has undeniably and profoundly reshaped the global political landscape, what remains rather elusive is a comprehensive grasp of its meaning and definition. In 1967, a conference was held at the London School of Economics on how to understand notions of populism. Its participants resolved that “there can, at present, be no doubt about the importance of populism. But no one is clear on what it is.”⁷⁹ While scholars have since identified certain trends and aspects of populism that have enhanced our understanding, the term continues to befuddle most. Nonetheless, its impact has been evident in the increased electoral success of populist parties over the course of the decade. Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris have observed that internationally, the median vote share for “populist right” parties doubled from less than 7 percent in the 1960s to almost 14 percent in the 2010s. On the left, populist party support went from less than 3 percent to almost 13 percent in the same period.⁸⁰ Consistent with our premise on the preconditions of Black urban insurgency, Claes H. de Vreese et al. postulate that these increases in populist support can generally be attributed to “*economic insecurity* on the one hand and *cultural backlash* on the other.” As global capitalism has revealed its inability to uphold the promises of neoliberal prosperity, populist movements of the political left emerged to confront the state and its collusion with corporatism, identifying white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism as the basis of their tyranny. Simultaneously, populist movements of the political right also emerged to confront the state and its collusion with corporatism, similarly frustrated by economic insecurity, but identifying liberal ideology, “woke culture,” “cultural Marxism,” and “illegal” immigration as the sources of the problem. Both movements grow out of the adverse effects of economic instability and precarious circumstances, but each differs in its attribution of what is causing the instability. The latter has cultivated a nativist logic of anti-immigrant, anti-Latinx, anti-Arab, anti-Asian xenophobia, anti-Jewish hatred, misogyny, and Islamophobia. It has emboldened white supremacy to a degree unseen since it was presumably muffled in the 1960s. Considering the atmosphere of white terrorism that has endangered the nation, the need to strengthen Black populism has never been more urgent. Hence, we will endeavor to first grapple with the concept of populism and its relation to Black Lives Matter. That both have been elusive in the endeavor to ascribe a definitive meaning to them is of no coincidence. We will then underscore the importance of reconciling the two as a movement framework in combating white

⁷⁷ Tormey 2019, page 3

⁷⁸ Judis 2016

⁷⁹ Claes H. de Vreese et al., “Populism as an Expression...,” SAGE, 2018: 424.

⁸⁰ Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, “Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism...,” 2017: 23.

terrorism. In the determination of whether or not populism is an appropriate or useful framework for understanding and operationalizing the contemporary Black freedom movement, it is important to begin with a review of how populism and Black activism have interacted historically.

The Historical Interface of Populism and Black Liberation

Progressive white-led populism has historically posed as a friend to the so-called “underdog” or “submerged” American, particularly Black people. Whether that engagement is constructive or insidious has been contested. There are those like C. Vann Woodward, Fred A. Shannon, Jack Abramowitz, William Z. Foster, T. Henry Williams, and Norman Pollack, who held a positive view and understood populist efforts to be genuine in its support of Black people and its promotion of egalitarian values.⁸¹ In his essay “Tom Watson and the Negro in Agrarian Politics,” Woodward discusses the significance of Georgia populist leader Tom Watson who championed an alliance platform seemingly favorable to the Black freedom cause. “A favorite device of Watson was to pledge the white listeners to defend the Negro’s constitutional rights, making them hold up their hands and promise. Never before or since have the two races in the South come so close together politically.”⁸² Woodward also points out how populist platforms have included support for anti-lynching law and a denouncement of the convict lease system.

Alternatively, the school of thought that views populist efforts to be disingenuous argues that populism actually created the impetus for the disenfranchisement of Black people. Proponents of this view include Joseph Taylor, Andrew Buni, Robert Saunders, Charles Crowe, and John Hope Franklin.⁸³ In stark contrast to Woodward’s elaboration of how populist efforts have advanced Black causes, Saunders contends that populism has actually compromised anti-lynching laws and the convict lease system.⁸⁴ Crowe re-evaluates the legacy of Tom Watson, asserting that it is more correctly defined by “an uninterrupted devotion to the idea of ‘white supremacy’.”⁸⁵ He concludes that, at best, populism never fully embraced Black people nor the imperative to truly address anti-Black racism, and at worst, it cynically exploited Black support and the Black vote only to realign with the conservative whites once their political goals were realized to thwart the perceived threat of “Black rule” at all costs.

R. Jean Simms-Brown argues that these critics have focused too intently on isolated aspects of populist-Black coalition history and that it can be very easy to succumb to such a pessimistic view without regarding the total body of work. Moreover, he brings attention to a glaring omission on both sides of the debate: the agency of Black people themselves. In the thick of the discussion of whether populists are ultimately beneficial or harmful for the Black community, there is a default assumption that the populists are always and necessarily white, completely eliding any notion that Black people have the agency to act and identify as populists

⁸¹ R. Jean Simms-Brown, “Populism and Black Americans: Constructive or Destructive?” *The Journal of Negro History* 65, no. 4 (1980): 350-351.

⁸² C. Vann Woodward, “Tom Watson and the Negro in Agrarian Politics,” *The Journal of Southern History* 4, no. 1 (1938): 14-33. Accessed July 8, 2021. doi:10.2307/2191851.

⁸³ R. Jean Simms-Brown, “Populism and Black Americans,” (1980), 352-353.

⁸⁴ Robert M. Saunders, “The Southern Populists and the Negro in 1892”. *Essays in History* 12 (1967): 7–25.

⁸⁵ Charles Crowe, “Tom Watson, Populists, and Blacks Reconsidered,” *The Journal of Negro History* 55, no. 2 (1970): 99-116. Accessed July 8, 2021. doi:10.2307/2716444.

themselves, as if populism was something that could only be prescribed by whites. To this point, Simms-Brown asserts that in surveying the total body of work concerning populist-Black coalitions, the constructive aspects of this framework is “derived from the Black leaders' awareness and political picture, their active involvement toward increasing the fears of whites, and the long-range effects of the movement.”⁸⁶ In this sense, interrogating the uses and limitations of populist frameworks and asking whether they complement or conflict with Black community interests is somewhat akin to interrogating the uses and limitations of any political, social, spiritual, or religious paradigm and its constructive or destructive potential in relation to Black liberation efforts. The underlying factor is what Black people themselves make of it— how *they* utilize and define it – rather than how it is prescribed by whites.

In regarding Black Lives Matter as a populist project, we must first establish what features qualify a movement or political development as “populist.” Is it the catchy “snappy slogans,” soundbites, and mass marches? Is it how loud its declarations of righteous indignation are? Why ascribe populism to any movement? After all, BLM activists and organizers seem not to self-identify as populists. In fact, hardly any proponents of any current political developments have described themselves as “populist” whether they be conservative, liberal, or radical. Do they resent the term? Perhaps it is because populism, to some degree, has come to be associated with notions of shallow reactionary, “cry baby” tantrum politics or even fanaticism.⁸⁷ Or perhaps it is the implication that its proponents are being deceived and manipulated in some way; that its leaders are opportunists taking advantage of the frustrations and emotional vulnerability of the common people during times of hardship by grossly exaggerating the perceived corruption and malignant nature of the ruling elite, casting them as the purveyors of their turmoil and suffering, and then misdirecting them into irrational action. In this sense, regarding BLM as populist may inadvertently run the risk of bolstering the conservative view that the movement’s leaders along with the Democratic Party is misinforming and misdirecting people into blaming police institutions for their misery, when it is supposedly their own pathological tendencies and cultural deficiencies such as “Black on Black violence” and rampant drug abuse that is to blame. The political right has certainly made such indictments, but they have also tended to defend populism in a positive view so long as its expression advances their nativist anti-government goals.⁸⁸

Alternatively, espousing a populist framework for understanding this current wave of Black radical protest may also serve to expand the possibilities of its application. This depends on how we introduce the term into the discourse of Black liberation advocacy. The uses and definitions of populism are varied and complex. Some of the broader, more constant features include its appeal to and galvanization of “the people” or common folk around a collective plight against a perceived injustice and its oppositional and confrontational posturing against a ruling elite with whom the interests of “the people” are at odds.⁸⁹ In this view, populism can be defined as a dualistic antagonism between “the people” and “the elite,” however each side may be construed.

Some of the more intricate observations of populism include Jan-Werner Müller’s postulation that at its core, populism is a rejection of pluralism and that, unfettered and

⁸⁶ R. Jean Simms-Brown, “Populism and Black Americans: Constructive or Destructive?” *The Journal of Negro History* 65, no. 4 (1980): 354

⁸⁷ Jan-Werner Muller, *What Is Populism?*, United States: University of Pennsylvania Press, Incorporated, 2016.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Tormey, Simon. *Populism: A Beginner's Guide*. United Kingdom: Oneworld Publications, 2019, 10.

unchecked, it will manifest in authoritarian takeover.⁹⁰ He and others argue that pluralism is the basis of a thriving liberal democracy and that populism can only work to dismantle it.⁹¹ This is a rather limiting view of populist discourse and it erroneously assumes that U.S. society has cultivated an equitable pluralism. It would simplistically regard the populist reign of Donald Trump and the populist resistance of BLM as “two sides of the same coin,” and therefore merely representing different expressions of the same corrosive force. What Müller and others fail to take into account is that the state and the market are structurally and institutionally constituted by white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism. The state and the market tend to not only be complicit in anti-Blackness, misogyny, and imperialism, they are formed and predicated by these interlocking forces of oppression. Therefore, not all expressions of populism can be considered equivalent when its right-wing form is often in collusion with the state and the markets in upholding white supremacy, albeit that it is simultaneously frequently at odds with the state and the market concerning class stratification and in the instances in which either or both are perceptively conceding to political pressure for progressive reform.

Fortune Favors the Bold

On January 6, 2021, hundreds of right-wing insurrectionists stormed the nation’s Capitol. Enraged by Joe Biden's victory over Trump, a throng of predominantly white male protesters mobilized to besiege the Capitol building. Among them were members of anti-government paramilitary Oath Keepers and the neo-fascist Proud Boys. Seething from their support of QAnon and their pro-Trump conspiracy theories about the election being rigged, these right-wing zealots rallied around Trump’s accusations that the Democrats had committed voter fraud and his false claims that the election was stolen from him.⁹² Adorned with their red MAGA hats, their pro-Trump and Confederate flags, and other bizarre spectacles including one shirtless individual wearing a furry hat with horns, they surrounded the building and moved in to disrupt the proceedings of the joint session of Congress to formalize Biden’s victory. District of Columbia police utterly failed to take decisive action to thwart their advance. The insurrections proceeded to occupy, vandalize and loot the building for several hours. They assaulted and injured Capitol police officers and reporters and attempted to locate and capture lawmakers. The building’s security was entirely breached. As the world looked on, many were perplexed by the perceived ease with which the marchers were able to intimidate and get through security. The crude eye of right-wing ideology views BLM activists, the Democratic Party, Democratic Socialists, and Barack Obama, as a conglomerate of cultural Marxist subversion. This backlash to the perceived transgressions of progressive political reform was first prompted by the election of Barack Obama in 2008 and it would reach its height throughout Donald Trump's presidency. Beyond the zealous display of white supremacist symbols and rhetoric, this atmosphere of fascist and nativist fervor has also devastatingly produced the increased rates of white domestic terrorist acts.

⁹⁰ Jan-Werner Muller, *What Is Populism?*, 2016.

⁹¹ William A. Galston, “The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy.” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018): 5–19.

⁹² Stephen Collinson, “Trump’s false election fraud claims face a dead end in Congress,” *CNN*, January 6, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/06/politics/donald-trump-mike-pence-congress/index.html>.

White Nationalist Terrorism

Expressions of bigotry and white supremacy had been thoroughly cultivated by the Trump administration in what Erin Maye Quade describes as the “trafficking of white nationalism.”⁹³ From the repeated xenophobia of targeting migrant Central American communities as “drug dealers, criminals, and rapists,”⁹⁴ to the scapegoating of Chinese people throughout the pandemic, there can be no doubt that the hate-filled rhetoric by the Trump administration has incited blatant white supremacist movement building. Globally, terrorist attacks have decreased but they have increased in the U.S. because of white terrorism. “White nationalism is what terrorism looks like in the United States.”⁹⁵ Between 2002 and 2009 there have been 172 white terrorist attacks in the US. While white nationalism has been ever present in U.S. life, politics, and culture, it has certainly been bolstered in the wake of Donald Trump's presidency since 2016.⁹⁶ The Center for Strategic and International Studies found that white supremacist groups were responsible for 41 of 61 “terrorist plots and attacks” in the first eight months of 2020.

The popular discourse on terrorism in the post 9/11 era has been fixated on an exaggerated characterization of Muslim extremism. This focus is evidenced in censorship trends on social media platforms. One study found that out of 4000 white nationalist accounts and roughly the same number of Muslim extremist or Isis accounts, 1100 Isis accounts were suspended compared to only four white nationalist accounts. This is because white nationalism is embedded in the fabric of US politics.⁹⁷ The Trump administration was rife with former and current officials who are white nationalists. Despite the staggering instances of what are undeniably acts of terrorism, the naming of these attacks as white terrorist has largely been suppressed in public discourse. The perpetrators are often described as government hate crimes but seldom have they ever been described as terrorists.⁹⁸ The failure to name these attacks as such has impeded effective data collection on just how prevalent white nationalism has been. It certainly is not anywhere as intricate as data collected on so-called Black and Brown gang activity in urban neighborhoods. Their motives could not be made more blatant and more explicit than white nationalist displays of bigotry evidenced in their tattoos, Confederate flags, and even their written manifestos. 2021 has seen some significant shifts, such as when Attorney General

⁹³ Erin Maye Quade, “The Rise of White Nationalism,” TEDx Talks *YouTube*, November 14, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaGNiqB0J8Q>.

⁹⁴ Amber Phillips, “‘They’re rapists.’ President Trump’s Campaign Launch Speech Two Years Later, Annotated,” *The Washington Post*, June 16, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/06/16/theyre-rapists-president-trump-campaign-launch-speech-two-years-later-annotated/>

⁹⁵ Erin Maye Quade, “The Rise of White Nationalism,” 2019.

⁹⁶ Robert O’Harrow Jr., Andrew Ba Tran and Derek Hawkins, “The rise of domestic extremism in America: Data shows a surge in homegrown incidents not seen in a quarter-century,” *The Washington Post*, April 12, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/domestic-terrorism-data/>.

⁹⁷ Dustin Volz, “White nationalists use Twitter with ‘relative impunity’: report,” *Reuters*, August 31, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cyber-whitenationalists-twitter-idUSKCN1173J7>.

⁹⁸ Shereen Marisol Meraji, “What Does It Mean To Call The Capitol Rioters ‘Terrorists’?,” *NPR*, January 14, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2021/01/14/956881738/what-does-it-mean-to-call-the-capitol-rioters-terrorists>.

Merrick B. Garland and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro M. Mayorkas testified to the Senate that the top domestic terrorist threat facing the U.S. is in fact “racially motivated violent extremists.”⁹⁹ From an abolitionist perspective however, this long overdue admission is not enough to effectively address the ways that the state itself tends to purvey white supremacy and nationalism, imperiling Black lives through policing and institutional racism.

The Black Face of White Supremacy

Despite Joe Biden’s victory and the anti-Black and xenophobic narratives that Trump has upheld throughout his term, the election results document an increase of Black and Latino voter support for Donald Trump since 2016. Black conservative pundit and Trump supporter Candace Owens would rise to prominence as a perennial spokesperson to counter critical interventions of progressive discourse. She has been championed by the right as a voice of reason in her denouncements of BLM’s supposed tendency to “martyr[ize] criminals” and the “socialist thuggery that these Democrats come up with.”¹⁰⁰ As a Black woman professing to be a former liberal who became disillusioned from the “permanent victimhood” fostered by the left, she has galvanized the Trump supporting youth through her “Blexit” campaign – the exit of Black people from the Democratic Party.¹⁰¹

The ideological terrain of Black conservative thought is more complex and varied than what many might typically restrict to something of a self-serving betrayal of the Black freedom struggle. In the cursory understanding of both the liberal and radical perspectives, Black conservatism is typically regarded as a self-serving pandering to appease and comfort white supremacist sensibilities concerning race and the legitimacy of policing and U.S. militarism for personal gain and in the hopes of being accepted by the white American mainstream.¹⁰² Such is certainly amplified by the prevalence of Black right-wing voices looking to validate the police killings of Black people as justifiable, often contributing most adamantly to the character assassinations of the victims and suggesting that these acts of violence are necessitated by the supposed scourge of Black deviance and criminality bolstered by the misguidance of the Democratic Party and radical leftists.¹⁰³ But beyond these so-called “Uncle Tom” and “Uncle Ruckus” tropes, the populist appeal of conservatism for many Black Americans rests not solely or even primarily in its alignment with white mainstream ideology, but in the notions of self-respect, self-determination, personal responsibility, and independence that it evokes.

In fact, Black conservative ideology has historically aligned with some Black nationalist principles and idealisms. The two have been agreeable in their emphasis on the Black heterosexual nuclear family. For some Black Americans, conservatism offers an avenue of empowerment and pride ostensibly grounded in a sober understanding that the impact of white

⁹⁹ Eileen Sullivan and Katie Benner, “Top law enforcement officials say the biggest domestic terror threat comes from white supremacists,” *The New York Times*, June 15, 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/12/us/politics/domestic-terror-white-supremacists.html>.

¹⁰⁰ House Joint Resolution 356. <https://www.capitol.tn.gov/Bills/112/Bill/HJR0350.pdf>.

¹⁰¹ David Smith, “Candace Owens woos the right as provocative face of Trump youth,” *The Guardian*, March 2, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/mar/02/candace-owens-provocative-face-trump-youth>.

¹⁰² Angela K. Lewis, “Black Conservatism in America,” *Journal of African American Studies* 8, no. 4 (2005): 3-13. Accessed July 8, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41819065>.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

supremacist racism is supposedly declining in significance in politics and economic affairs and that the primary obstruction to upward mobility for Black people in the U.S. is the widespread perception that “the system” is keeping them down.¹⁰⁴ It offers a more optimistic view of material reality that shifts the attribution of depressed racial conditions away from white supremacist forces and the perspective that systematic racism is as prominent a barrier as the left and center-left are suggest.¹⁰⁵ Economist Thomas Sowell has been a longtime voice of Black conservatism, arguing that “Racism is not dead, but it is on life support – kept alive by politicians, race hustlers, and people who get a sense of superiority by denouncing others as “racists.”¹⁰⁶ Sowell has long denounced civil rights figures such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton as demagogues profiting from trafficking the gospel of self-victimhood and “blaming the system,” and long decried diversity and inclusion policies like affirmative action as deleterious to the Black community’s ability to build political and economic power. He views BLM as the continuation of these traditions. Claiming his own redemption arc from his leftist inclinations and his attraction to Marxism earlier in life, he embodies Milton Friedman, and Ronald Reagan’s adage that “if a man is not a socialist by age 20, he has no heart. If a man who is still a socialist by age 40 has no head.”¹⁰⁷

Conceptualizing a Black Liberation Conglomerate

The radical left may critique the BLM movement as shallow and reactionary and the center-left may caution against the supposed hazards of populist uprising, but for all of their misgivings and admonitions about how the movement should or should not be pursued and how its current expression lacks programmatic clarity, neither has been able to match the intensity, urgency, and reach with which BLM has mobilized over the course of the past decade. Neither can boast of the level of impact that these Black populist uprisings have had in tearing away the veil of post-racialism. This is not to say that proponents of the radical Left or the center-left have not at all contributed or participated in building the movement. On the contrary, we would be remiss to ignore how the current era of Black populism has very much been shaped and informed by the traditional legacies of Black nationalism, Black Power and Civil Rights activism. However, we would also be remiss to not consider that over the course of the last five decades, these forms have waxed and waned. They have undergone long periods of stagnation in the face of ever-changing circumstances and the ever-evolving face of white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism – *white supremacy et al.* These interlocking forces of oppression have been dynamic, versatile, and nimble in their concerted ability to adapt, readjust, reconfigure, and re-engineer their functions. White supremacy et al. would have collapsed had it remained rigid in form and expression. With each successive wave of insurgent resistance – from 19th century abolitionist uprisings, civil rights protests, revolutionary nationalist rebellions, to today’s Black Lives Matter movement – these hegemonic forces have flexibly withdrawn,

¹⁰⁴ Leah Wright Rigueur, *The Loneliness of the Black Republican: Pragmatic Politics and the Pursuit of Power*. United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2016.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Sowell, “Racism Isn’t Dead – But It Is on Life Support,” *National Review*, November 18, 2015. <https://www.nationalreview.com/2015/11/racism-america-history/>.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Has been evoked by a host of writers and figures.

regrouped, and ostensibly yielded to the demands of these campaigns and rebellions, only to reinvent its appearance, and redeploy its oppressive function with renewed vigor in a different form.

Out of the ashes of the slave trade and the plantation economy arose the Southern Black Codes, convict leasing, and Jim Crow segregation under the guise of “separate but equal.”¹⁰⁸ A century later, the state would seemingly yield to the demands of civil rights protest with the passage of Civil Rights legislation, but would then create the system of mass incarceration and institutional racism under the guise of “post-racialism” and “equal opportunity.”¹⁰⁹ Half a century later, white supremacy has found itself besieged by Black Lives Matter uprisings and it is now looking to reinvent itself as it had in the past. The state and the market have ostensibly allied themselves with the cause by adopting the BLM slogan, having it painted on city streets in vibrant colors, featuring it in corporate marketing content, bolstering their “diversity and inclusion” efforts, and issuing solidarity statements affirming the need to reform policing and finally admitting the continued prevalence of racism in U.S. society.¹¹⁰ This signifies that the state and the market are certainly experiencing the stress imposed by the pressures of mass protests and urban rebellions, but it does not signify that white supremacy is surrendering its power.

Consistent with its behavior in the face of heightened resistance in the past, it would behoove us to recognize that this is how white supremacy behaves in retreat, not in defeat. While the state and markets look to adapt under the stress of BLM’s transformative thrust, white supremacy has bolstered its pro-fascist and nativist rhetoric in agitating the white-underclass masses to mobilize its own populist movement to counter Black liberation.¹¹¹ This is where the BLM movement’s most valuable feature can be found – in its dynamism, versatility and real-time responsiveness. These attributes have allowed it to amass a wide array of participants to embrace its cause and to reach a vast audience over the course of the past decade. Whereas strategic absolutism has left various organizations rigidly committed to traditional frameworks, slowing their mobilization efforts, BLM holds the potential of strengthening the interconnectedness of those frameworks to foster a system of interdependency among them, thereby developing a more cohesive and efficient management of the liberation tools and tactics at the Black freedom struggle’s disposal.

Black Political Ecosystems

Considering that it has been primarily through the populist discourse of Black Lives Matter that the forward thrust of the Black freedom struggle has continued in this era, perhaps its current expression need not shift towards a more elaborate political program akin to its civil

¹⁰⁸ Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*, United Kingdom: Icon Books Limited, 2012.

¹⁰⁹ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, United States: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006.

¹¹⁰ Sean Sullivan, “Biden hasn’t matched condemnations of racism with similarly forceful action,” *The Washington Post*, April 27, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-race-equity-100-days/2021/04/26/8402be0e-a399-11eb-a774-7b47ceb36ee8_story.html.

¹¹¹ Yasmeen Serhan, “Populism Is Undeclared: The U.S. election proves that this divisive style of politics is still viable,” *The Atlantic*, November 5, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/11/what-us-election-proved-about-populism/617003/>.

rights, Black power, leftist and nationalist predecessors. Perhaps it can remain as emotionally charged as it has always been and it can continue to be an outlet for Black activists and allies to channel their righteous rage into community solidarity and togetherness. The advantage of eluding a fixed association as nationalist, socialist, Marxist, or even integrationist is that the movement allows itself to cast a wider net of participants to mobilize. The Black populist thrust of BLM activism can continue to function as a catalyst for the development and growth of a multitude of liberation strategies. Traditional civil rights advocates, Black nationalists, Black Leftists, Pan Africanists, and the entire gamut of Black freedom forms stand to lose nothing in supporting Black Lives Matter. Its sustenance and growth can serve to benefit all of these more elaborately defined programs, creating a multitude of liberation possibilities.

Far from the antithesis to pluralism that Müller theorized, Black populism can only serve to optimize the chances for a plurality of ideological paradigms to thrive. Each political framework constitutes something of a paradigmatic ecosystem that comprise a variety of interdependent components: organizations and tactical repertoires. In this analogy, we can think of the organizational plurality within a political ecosystem as we would of the variety of species living within a natural ecosystem.¹¹² Each organization or species possesses its own unique operational or behavioral properties and tendencies. We can also think of the tactical repertoires that these organizations utilize as the physical environment of that ecosystem. For instance, what we might call a Civil Rights ecosystem is comprised of a variety of organizations (organisms) – such as the National Action Network, the NAACP, the ACLU, the Los Angeles Black Worker Center, Los Angeles Community Action Network, etc. – with tactical repertoires like marching, political campaigning, boycotts, etc. What we might call a Black nationalist ecosystem is also comprised of a variety organizations (organisms) – such as the Nation of Islam, the Africa Town Coalition, the Moorish Science Temple, etc – with tactical repertoires like developing and supporting Black business, Black economic solidarity, cultivating Black cultural practices etc.

Black Symbiotic Mutualism

While Gramsci, Fanon, and Marx have all warned of the dangers of spontaneity, this particular epoch of spontaneous insurgent actions is nurtured and informed by the lessons of freedom movements past that have learned from the continuous development of a more comprehensive liberation discourse. As is, this populist explosion is an essential precondition for the more elaborate political programs to develop beyond the fringes of political discourse. At the very least, populism challenges and disrupts the presumed common sense of neoliberal discourse, thereby creating space for a wider plurality of counter-discourses to secure a foothold in the landscape of political contestation. However, the complications arise when those counter-discourses are in contention with one another, vying for the position of top contender, thereby allowing for neoliberal hegemony to defend its place as the undisputed common sense narrative. Strategic absolutism compels each ecosystem of political thought to negate and subdue the development of its counterparts.

¹¹² This analogy includes predator and prey dynamics that occur between and among those who inhabit an ecosystem; the conflicts, tensions, and antagonisms that arise among the diverse and varied positionalities and identities that make up any race of people.

*“We cannot reproduce the force that tried to kill us off. Because if we do, I’m telling you, we’ll have to pay a real cost. What I’m saying is quite simple: we cannot throw each other away. We are complex and conflicted, often stuck in our ways. But regardless of all that, we’re absolutely here to stay.”*¹¹³

In revisiting the question of exactly which of the two – Civil Rights or Black Power activism – BLM most closely resembles, the answer is neither and both. It is in between what Peniel E. Joseph has conceived as the call for Black radical dignity¹¹⁴ and the call for Black radical citizenship¹¹⁵, and its function transcends the limitations of both. It has been efficient in diagnosing and identifying glaring inequities through plain and accessible pedagogical devices, diligent in its ability to mobilize in real time, and successful in fostering an openness to collaboration and collective movement building. Most critically, Black populist discourse allows for the accommodation of Black political differences. The movement can either try to overcome those differences in vain or it can maintain a sobered groundedness in accepting the reality that there are a multitude of irreconcilable ideological differences. Such a recognition need not be a point of discouragement.

After all, romanticized notions of unity may have historically propelled movements into powerful bursts of forward momentum at the onset of mobilization, but the challenges arise over time when the very real ideological and positional differences that were glossed over eventually create tension, disagreement, and even conflict. Because societal transformation tends to be a protracted process and not cataclysmic, the hearty enthusiasm for unity will fade over time, like the crash from a caffeine high. When this happens, the initial fervor for unity and togetherness will rapidly dissolve into a sober realization that they actually have as many differences between them – as well as varying positions of relative privilege and disadvantage in terms of class, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, etc. At this point, the need for movement sustainability beyond the moment of spontaneity becomes glaringly obvious.

Alternatively, both intra- and inter-group cohesion can be approached through an understanding of how difference can actually generate a number of possibilities through the notion of interdependence rather than exaggerated notions of homogeneity. Instead of conceiving of solidarity as a makeshift fantasy of sameness between and among distinct groups and individuals, we can explore how varying articulations of distinct political strategies can be complementary rather than conflicting. In other words, instead of forcing one paradigm to give way for or be subsumed or consolidated into another paradigm in hegemonic zero sum terms, both can maintain their integrity and operate as interdependent components of a shared project.

The Civil Rights tradition need not be amalgamated with the Black Power tradition or vice versa. Each can respectively and independently pursue their objectives without undermining the other’s efforts. Such can generate mutually beneficial outcomes. For instance, Black Power repertoires can advance its radical platform, thereby compelling the state to yield the more moderate demands of the Civil Rights contingency. Reciprocally, Civil Rights repertoires can advance progressive legislation, thereby compelling the state to shift resources that may enhance the work of the Black Power contingency. This will be framed as *Black Symbiotic Mutualism* –

¹¹³ *The Intersection: Woke Black Folk*, performed and written by Funmilola Fagbamila, University of Southern California, October 11, 2020.

¹¹⁴ A term that Joseph uses to describe the legacy of Malcolm X.

¹¹⁵ A term that Joseph uses to describe the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

when the interaction between two or more political paradigms produces net benefits. Under this framework of engagement, political difference facilitates cohesion rather than complicating it.

This concept will build on Black radical feminist traditions such as Audre Lorde's recognition of the creative power and productivity of difference. Exploring the avenues through which the positional complexity among women of color can alternatively be viewed as conducive rather than impeding to the growth and development of feminist thought was a central theme present in much of Lorde's essays. This embrace of difference was also taken up by feminist organizer and thinker Chela Sandoval who developed the concept of *differential consciousness*, which she introduced in a 1991 essay¹¹⁶ and then refined in her seminal book, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000). It is from this body of work that we can begin to conceive of practical approaches to operationalizing political differences.

“Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the Creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.”¹¹⁷

— Audre Lorde

The Black Populist Biome

Our conception of a Black liberation conglomerate requires a larger undergirding framework that not only connects the plurality of Black political ecosystems together, keeping them from getting lost in the abyss of obscurity, but also optimizes and strengthens their dynamism in the face of adversity, allowing them to thrive in symbiotic mutualism. We can think of this as the backdrop to a constellation of Black political traditions, strategies and tactics, or as the biome that the diversity of Black political ecosystems inhabit. In nature, a biome is a large community of fauna and flora that have adapted to a specific climate and physical environment. The concept of a biome helps us make sense of the complexities of all the variations of animal and plant species, how they interact with one another, and how they interact with their environment. This brings us full circle to the uses of Black populist discourse and its interdisciplinary properties and capabilities for not only helping us make sense of the complexities of Black political thought, but also for facilitating their growth and development in building a collective ability to survive the fluctuations and mutations of the corrosive forces of white supremacy et al.

¹¹⁶ Entitled “U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World,” *Genders*, Spring 1991, 1-24.

¹¹⁷ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider*, (United States: Penguin Books, 2020).

This is the concept of the *Black Populist Biome* – a community or conglomerate of various Black political identities and traditions that have adapted to the environment of white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism. This biome houses all of the complexities and contradictions of extant beliefs, values, strategies, and doctrines to cultivate. In the natural world, the strength of an ecosystem is defined by its biodiversity and the degree to which its species are interconnected. The more interconnected and intertwined these features are, the denser and more resilient the ecosystem becomes. In the landscape of Black political thought, a greater diversity of interconnected liberation paradigms will actually strengthen an ecosystem's ability to persevere against the fluctuations and mutations of threats like white supremacy, heteropatriarchy and capitalism. Under this framework, it is difference-in-unity rather than unity-despite-difference that enhances the Black freedom struggle's notion of solidarity.

The Conservation of Black Lives

The significance of the Black Lives Matter movement has been defined by its unique ability to cultivate interdependence between and among the varied expressions of Black liberation ideology and practice. It fosters an appreciation and embrace of all the complexities and contradictions of Black life. The concept of the Black populist biome, therefore, offers a framework for building responsive efficiency in defending Black lives from white supremacy, but also how to proactively care for and nurture Black lives holistically. Beyond notions of citizenship and racial dignity, BLM is more broadly concerned with Black “lives,” not only in its name but in its liberation praxis demonstrating a proactive interest in the preservation and protection of those lives. Making Black lives matter includes a working understanding and awareness of how those lives are interconnected in a diverse ecosystem or biome of thought and expression. A framework not only on how to make sense of black political difference but also on how to operationalize difference. The ecosystem analogy is therefore taken up not just as a conceptual tool for a better understanding of the landscape of black political thought, but to operationalize the overall project of the conservation of Black lives.

Chapter 2

Black Radical Propulsions of Marxist Theory

The history of interaction between the Black freedom struggle and Marxist thought in the U.S. has seen both tension and mutual contempt as well as harmony and mutual cohesion. Its contentious history can be described as an acrimonious disagreement concerning whether it is racism or capitalism that is the ultimate culprit in purveying societal oppression. Its harmonious history can be described as the recognition of how racism and capitalism are mutually constitutive and will therefore require intersectional forms of resistance in order to overcome them. This chapter will take up the concept of *racial capital* in analyzing the workings of neoliberalism in the 21st century. It will first survey the contemporary landscape of interactions between the Black freedom struggle and class struggle, assessing how BLM/MBL is situated amidst various anti-capitalist schemes. It will then contemplate the continued relevance of Marxism in particular amidst ongoing racial justice movements. Lastly, it will theorize how Marxism and other leftist paradigms have been consistently mobilized through the forward thrust of Black radical insurgency.

Cedric J. Robinson defined the *Black Radical Tradition* as “the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality.”¹¹⁸ Removed from his book *Black Marxism*,¹¹⁹ in which this definition was articulated, these words may very well be taken as a remarkably apt description of the Black Lives Matter movement. Nearly 40 years since it was originally published, Robinson’s seminal book is as strikingly relevant now as it ever was.¹²⁰ Its title has steered many into the misunderstanding that the book is about a sort of Black adaptation of Marxism or the incorporation of Marxian frameworks into the strategic and analytic toolkit of the Black freedom struggle. It has generally and incorrectly been perceived as a historical survey of how Black left intellectuals and activists have variously developed race-conscious interventions of Marxist, Leninist, Trotskyist, and Maoist traditions. Robin D.G. Kelley has been most adamant in clarifying that, contrary to this popular perception, the book is, in actuality, a critique of orthodox Marxist theory and its failure to recognize the revolutionary potential of anti-colonial struggle in Black, Indigenous, and Third World resistance movements.

Because Marx and Engels’ concept of historical materialism was intently focused on the highly industrialized societies in Western Europe where they presumed that proletarian revolution would most likely occur, they generally overlooked the notion that revolts in feudal and colonial parts of the world held much if any significance in shaping the global political-economy. In accordance with their “scientific” approach to understanding development, they postulated that only a fully realized proletarian force would usher the socialist phase of

¹¹⁸ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 171.

¹¹⁹ Originally published in 1983.

¹²⁰ Robin D.G. Kelley, “Why Black Marxism, Why Now?” *Boston Review*, February 1, 2021. <http://bostonreview.net/race-philosophy-religion/robin-d-g-kelley-why-black-marxism-why-now>

development. Contrary to Marx and Engels' speculations, the 20th century saw a series of profound revolutionary developments emerging from the peasant and colonized resistance forces that they had egregiously underestimated. In many of these undertakings, revolutionaries held fast to Marx and Engel's dialectical conjecture of the imminent collapse of capitalism; that the contradictions of bourgeois society would inevitably give way for a global socialist order. As capitalism endured over the decades, it became increasingly evident to many that Marx and Engels sorely underestimated its ability to adapt through crisis and resistance. Their overly reductionist focus on proletariat-bourgeoisie antagonisms largely failed to account how white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and other forms of oppression reinforce capitalism.

Robinson's intervention in *Black Marxism* emphasizes how alternative Black radical epistemologies such as Pan-Africanism and Third World leftism have been critical in recognizing that racialization and colonization are inseparable functions of capitalist exploitation, not just coincidental outgrowths of class antagonism. This is what he described as *racial capital*.¹²¹ His work therefore underscores two critical interventions: (1) that not all leftist expressions of political thought are inherently Marxist or mere appendages to Marxism; there exists a wide plurality of leftist frameworks distinct from orthodox or revised Marxist articulations, and (2) that racism and capitalism are mutually and inextricably constituted and therefore neither can be thoroughly dealt with under any liberation paradigm that does not account for the simultaneity of both. Other interventions such as the writings of the Combahee River Collective, the activism of Claudia Jones, and the work of other Black radical feminists and Third World feminists have more comprehensively accounted for how heteropatriarchy is also a built-in feature of capitalist accumulation. Proponents of what has been described as *post-Marxist thought*, prompted by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, have also observed the need to diverge from orthodox Marxist conventions in order to avoid the pitfalls of reductionism. With the decline of global communism in the 1980s, Marxist thought would undergo a period of withdrawal over the next two decades. Marxism "suddenly seemed rudderless, no longer relevant to understanding the present or providing a guide as to how society might be changed for the better. Marx had at last returned to the nineteenth century where many suspected it had always belonged."¹²² However, engagement in Marxian and leftist scholarship would survive in the academy where college students would grapple with the race conscious and intersectional interventions to develop revamped interpretations of socialism and anti-capitalism. These developments, along with the tumult of financial crises by the late 2000s, have laid the groundwork for BLM to "emerge organically as one of the most important movements of this [21st century] era."¹²³

Today, notions of *radicalism*, in the broadest sense of the term, are often ascribed to any phenomena or social movement developments and ideas that go beyond the boundaries of liberal reform or integrationist schemes. This includes BLM and the manifestation of various urban uprisings and rebellions across the U.S. Throughout the 21st century, the rise of Black radical movements have coincided with the resurgence of socialist and anti-capitalist thought. These two streams of resistance have ostensibly been mobilized with relative amiability and even some

¹²¹ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism*... (2000),

¹²² Andrew Gamble, "Marxism after Communism: Beyond Realism and Historicism," *Review of International Studies* 25 (1999): 127. Accessed June 17, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097642>.

¹²³ In "Black Lives Matter and the Building of a Mass Movement," *KCET*, November 3, 2015, Melina Abdullah reflected that "In the last two years, Black Lives Matter has emerged organically as one of the most important movements of this era to address state-sanctioned violence against Black people."

degree of cohesiveness. Black Lives Matter and other race justice efforts have generally upheld a positive and agreeable view of socialism and anti-capitalism. In turn, Leftist efforts have generally been affirming of race justice movements. The two, however, have not always been recognized as synonymous or co-dependent in the way that the endeavor to dismantle racial capitalism necessitates. There are even some perspectives that regard the two as irreconcilable at best and antithetical at worst. These interactions prompt the need to interrogate what the significance of each is in relation to one another and whether each is conducive and complementary or in conflict and incompatible to the efforts of the other. In other words, are socialist and anti-capitalist schemes virtues or vices to Black liberation? In turn, what significance, if any, does Black activism hold in relation to leftist thought today?

For BLM in particular, the nature of this interaction has been rather muddled amidst competing narrations. This is attributed to the monopolization that Marxism tends to hold in popular perceptions of “leftist” politics. For this reason, the conservative right tends to view BLM as unabashedly Marxist. They understand both BLM and current trends of socialist thought as outgrowths of what they call *Cultural Marxism*; a conspiracy framework that regards the totality of progressive thought as a coordinated subversive movement aimed at toppling Western society and its Judeo-Christian values. In this regard, virtually any effort accusing U.S. society of cultivating “institutional racism,” “state-sanctioned violence,” or “white privilege” can presumably trace its ideological origins to Marxist thought, particularly to theorists like Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and others affiliated with the Frankfurt School. The liberal center-left vary in their view of this interaction, ranging from those who regard any expression of radicalism as impractical deterrents to BLM’s ability to accomplish its otherwise well intended objectives, to the Democratic Socialists who generally view the interaction as a positive one so long as its brand of anti-capitalism does not degenerate into Stalinist totalitarianism. The radical left also vary in their view of this interaction, ranging from those who view BLM to be in relative alignment with Marxist thought to those who completely reject the notion that BLM has any claim whatsoever to identify as a Marxist movement.

In actuality, BLM has a very weak genealogical lineage to the Frankfurt school or to any Marxist tradition or organization. While movement activists tend to be sympathetic to anti-capitalist ideals and while many regard capitalism as inherently anti-Black, it cannot definitively be said that BLM organizers are uniformly anti-capitalists, let alone Marxists. Moreover, while some BLM activists may, from time to time, reference Marxian or anti-capitalist language in their advocacy rhetoric, such concepts as the “labor theory of value,” “dialectical materialism,” “world systems theory,” or “the dictatorship of the proletariat” are not explicitly incorporated into any of BLM’s programmatic literature or curriculum. Here we will maintain what we had established in the previous chapter: that BLM best fulfills its purpose as a Black populist movement that amasses its following through easily accessible avenues of involvement without requiring its participants to subscribe to a more strenuous political curriculum. Its ability to mobilize against state-sanctioned violence with its blitz style activism would be weakened if the protests and rallies were overly inundated with Marxian rhetoric or if participants were made to feel like reading *Das Kapital* or the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* were prerequisites to attending the action. Burdening BLM with the task of imbuing the masses with Marxist or other leftist theory would compromise the efficiency with which it is able to respond to the pulse of community indignation in real-time. For these reasons, BLM need not explicitly declare itself as a Marxist or anti-capitalist organization. It serves a different purpose and it actually holds the unique potential to catalyze, nurture, and lend validation to the development of a distinct yet

interconnected Marxist or leftist undertaking. The two can then operate in strategic mutualism with BLM as the point of entry for a wider array of movement participants and with the leftist contingencies offering a more specialized and rigorous program, making for a more efficient division of labor among organizing bodies that allow each to thrive in their respective areas of specialization rather than burdening either from having to execute all aspects of movement building. From this understanding, we can then proceed to interrogate the problems and prospects of the interaction between Marxist theory and Black radicalism in the U.S.

Historically, the two have had a complex and tumultuous relationship. The posture of Western Marxists towards Black radicalism has tended to be a paternalistic one, dismissing race consciousness as frivolous and reactionary unless it is firmly rooted in Marxian praxis and ideology. Conversely, the significance of Marxism to the Black freedom struggle can be understood through three primary perspectives. The first is that Marxism is an indispensable analytic framework that suffers from the limitations of its Western European focus and therefore merely needs to be extended, amended, or sharpened to find its applicability to Black, Indigenous, and Third World experiences as well as to women's, queer, and trans experiences. This perspective is reflected in the work of Black leftists like the Combahee River Collective,¹²⁴ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Claudia Jones,¹²⁵ Angela Y. Davis, C.L.R. James and Frantz Fanon. The second perspective maintains a positive view of the utility of Marxism, but regards the anti-capitalist body of work produced by decolonization or Pan-Africanist movements as distinct epistemologies rather than amended or sharpened iterations of Marxism.¹²⁶ This perspective is reflected in the work of Cedric J. Robinson, W.E.B. Du Bois, George Padmore, Kwame Ture,¹²⁷ Kwame Nkrumah, and Julius Nyerere.¹²⁸ The third perspective also opts for alternative epistemologies, but holds a rather resentful and disparaging view of Marxism, rejecting it as a Eurocentric tradition that non-western thinkers have very little use for. Such is reflected in the work of John Henrik Clarke and Afrocentric scholars like Molefi Asante.¹²⁹ Among these perspectives, BLM activists find themselves sparsely situated within a concrete political identification with Marxism, more densely situated within the inclination towards alternative anti-capitalist frameworks, and meagerly situated within the anti-Marxist perspective.

Racial Capital in the Age of "Intersectional Empire"

The COVID-19 virus has devastated communities worldwide, incurring over 177 million cases of infection and claiming well over 3.8 million lives between January 2020 and June 2021. The U.S. accounts for just over 600 thousand of those deaths. The American Public Media

¹²⁴ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, United States: Haymarket Books, 2017.

¹²⁵ Carole Boyce Davies, *Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment: Autobiographical Reflections, Essays, and Poems*. United Kingdom: Ayeibia Clarke Pub., 2011.

¹²⁶ Patrick Anderson, "Pan-Africanism and Economic Nationalism: W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* and the Failings of the 'Black Marxism' Thesis," *Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 48, No. 8 (2017).

¹²⁷ Kwame Ture, Abu-Jamal, Mumia. *Stokely Speaks: From Black Power to Pan-Africanism*. United States: Chicago Review Press, Incorporated, 2007.

¹²⁸ Lawrence E. K. Lupalo, *Nyerere and Nkrumah: Shared Vision*, United States: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016.

¹²⁹ Molefi Kete Asante, "Harold Cruse and Afrocentric Theory," May 18, 2009. <http://www.asante.net/articles/18/harold-cruse-and-afrocentric-theory/>

(AMP) Research Lab has assessed race/ethnicity breakdowns for about 94% of these deaths. In their 2020 year in review, they reported that Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people were at least 2.7 times more likely to have died than whites.¹³⁰ The consensus of sociological health research recognizes how racial and socioeconomic inequities create the conditions for inequitable health outcomes for those communities.¹³¹ Whitney N. Laster Pirtle explains that “Racially minoritized and economically deprived groups face capitalist and racist systems that continue to devalue and harm their lives, even within newer, supposedly deracialized neoliberal agendas.”¹³² Her work channels *Black Marxism* in emphasizing how the socioeconomic design of racial capitalism produces the outcomes in which the spread of disease most severely impacts impoverished communities of color. Pirtle and Tashelle Wright also emphasize the interconnectedness between structural racism and structural sexism and how they produce racialized gender inequities,¹³³ which they identify as the underlying cause of a myriad of health issues that disproportionately affect Black women. Moreover, scholars like Pirtle have made clear that these inequities are longstanding issues that were exacerbated by the pandemic rather than produced by it. Kimberlé Crenshaw, the ideological architect of *intersectional* epistemology, observes how this moment has exposed what neoliberal discourse has tried to conceal and deny for the last few decades. She states:

Coronavirus did not create the stark social, financial, and political inequalities that define life for so many Americans, but it has made them more strikingly visible than any moment in recent history. Unfortunately, some of the intersectional dimensions of these structural disparities remain undetected and unreported.¹³⁴

Before the pandemic struck, the same effect was seen in the lead water crisis in Flint, Michigan¹³⁵ and the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, demonstrating the inhumanity of neoliberal development. The harrowing realities made bare by COVID-19 only brought greater clarity to the existing inequities that had long devastated impoverished Black and Brown communities who, under the pandemic, were twice as likely to struggle with job security, food insufficiency, and keeping up with rent and mortgage payments than their white counterparts.¹³⁶ These hardships, combined with the atrocious killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor,

¹³⁰ Andi Egbert and Kristine Liao, “The Color of Coronavirus: 2020 Year In Review,” *American Public Media Research Lab*, December 21, 2020. <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-2020-review>

¹³¹ Gee, Gilbert C., and Chandra L. Ford. “STRUCTURAL RACISM AND HEALTH INEQUITIES: Old Issues, New Directions.” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 8, no. 1 (2011): 115–32. doi:10.1017/S1742058X11000130.

¹³² Whitney N. Laster Pirtle, “Racial Capitalism: A Fundamental Cause of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic Inequities in the United States,” *Health Education & Behavior* 47, no. 4 (2020): 504. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198120922942>.

¹³³ Whitney N. Laster Pirtle and Tashelle Wright, “Structural Gendered Racism Revealed in Pandemic Times: Intersectional Approaches to Understanding Race and Gender Health Inequities in COVID-19,” *Gender & Society*, Vol 35, No. 2 (2021), 168-179. doi: 10.1177/08912432211001302.

¹³⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Under the black Light: The intersectional vulnerabilities that COVID lays bare, episode 1. *African American Policy Forum*, March 25, 2020. <https://www.aapf.org/aapfcovid>.

¹³⁵ Laura Pulido, “Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 27:3, (2016), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2016.1213013>.

¹³⁶ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “Tracking the COVID-19 Recessions Effects on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships,” *Special Series: COVID Hardship Watch*, June 16, 2021 Update. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-recessions-effects-on-food-housing-and>

have compelled the widespread rise in critical consciousness of racial capital in the U.S. which rapidly boiled over into the mobilization of massive BLM protests. Under pressure, state officials and corporations have responded to the calamity with symbolic displays of solidarity rather than yielding to BLM's policy demands for the comprehensive defunding of policing institutions and then shifting those funds towards crisis management and *reimagined* community safety models. Since the onset of the 2020 BLM uprisings, lawmakers and businesses have scrambled to save face in their trivial displays of support for the movement. In June 2020, Congress immediately looked to pass the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2020, which presumably strengthens enforcement mechanisms to remedy violations by police officers, but fundamentally fails to address how policing inherently functions to facilitate the structural violations of racial capital. The announcement of the bill was accompanied by an obtuse visual stunt. A dozen or so Democrats in Congress, with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi at the fore, delivered a photo op kneeling¹³⁷ in a moment of silence with each of them swathed in kente cloth stoles.¹³⁸ This was only the beginning of a trend towards the pageantry of anti-racism and pro-Black symbolism in evading the need to meaningfully and substantively address the structural outcomes of racial capitalism.

Concerning racial capital and anti-Black racism in the U.S., reparations advocacy has driven the economic justice agenda for Black lives, but lawmakers have yet to take the matter into serious consideration. In June 2021, President Biden signed the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act, officially establishing Juneteenth as a U.S. federal holiday – the first federal holiday to be instituted since Martin Luther King Jr. Day. While many applauded this monumental achievement, it was also viewed as an attempt at placating the indignant masses by others who felt that instituting the holiday without taking legislative action to address systematic racism is nothing more than a performative show of solidarity. BLM activists were quick to caution against the deceptive optics of progress in lieu of decisive political and economic action to change the material outcomes for Black lives. The BLMLA Instagram page posted “We must not be duped into embracing symbolism over substance.”¹³⁹ The establishment of the holiday also coincided with the general public's rising historical awareness of the 1921 Tulsa Massacre – the decimation of the once-thriving cooperative economic enclave in the Black district of Greenwood by a white mob. In commemorating the centennial of the massacre, Biden delivered remarks urging U.S. Americans to reckon with their country's history of racial violence, stating that “great nations don't ignore their most painful moments.” A few weeks later, he would urge the country to view Juneteenth as “a day of action” and that “we can't rest until the promise of equality is fulfilled for every one of us in every corner of this nation.”¹⁴⁰ With these statements, Biden has actually been more blunt in calling out the history and persistence of anti-Black racism compared to any president before him. However, what was glaringly omitted from either of his pronouncements was any mention of support for reparations for the descendants of enslaved Africans and for the survivors and descendants of the Tulsa massacre. Dreisen Heath, a

¹³⁷ An ode to the protest gesture originated by former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick.

¹³⁸ Doreen St. Félix, “The Embarrassment of Democrats Wearing Kente-Cloth Stoles,” *The New Yorker*, June 9, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/on-and-off-the-avenue/the-embarrassment-of-democrats-wearing-kente-cloth>.

¹³⁹ Black Lives Matter Los Angeles [blmlosangeles], “#Juneteenthholiday #Reparations,” *Instagram*, 17 June 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQPsq9SguXL/>

¹⁴⁰ Maegan Vazquez, “Biden urges country to use Juneteenth as day of action,” *CNN*, June 17, 2021. https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/biden-signs-juneteenth-bill/h_11ddfb223eb5ca50ad6d155789d9c745

researcher for Human Rights Watch, who published a report on how reparations for the Tulsa massacre could serve as the foundation for a federal reparations program,¹⁴¹ expressed that “people just play games with Black people’s lives too much. It’s not enough [for Biden] to just come in and say words and reiterate the truthful narrative.”¹⁴² As a candidate, Biden stated his support for a commission on reparations,¹⁴³ but his administration has yet to promote a whole-hearted endorsement of the actual bill H.R. 40 – which is named after the “40 acres and a mule” promise. Rep. Cori Bush expressed a cautiously optimistic assessment of these developments stating that “It’s Juneteenth AND reparations... Black liberation in its totality must be prioritized.”¹⁴⁴ Prior to becoming Vice President under Obama, Joe Biden had compiled an utterly abysmal track record with some even describing his politics being to the right of Ronald Reagan.¹⁴⁵ As an older white man, he is easily legible to progressives and BLM activists as someone to be held to the highest standard of accountability. This is not as obvious of non-white neoliberal collaborators, even when their politics are unapologetically neoliberal.

Concerning racial capital in immigration and international policy, we actually see less pageantry and more echoes of the previous administration. For as much as Trump was reviled by the center-left for his blatant xenophobia, and for as much as the Biden/Harris campaign galvanized voters as the champions of advancing a more humane immigration policy in their campaign rhetoric, they merely upheld those same anti-immigrant sensibilities. During a news conference in Guatemala, in what was Kamala Harris’ first international trip as vice president, she ominously stated “I want to be clear to folks in this region who are thinking about making that dangerous trek to the United States-Mexico border. Do not come. The United States will continue to enforce our laws and secure our border.” Her tone and demeanor reflected every bit of her tough on crime reputation; prioritizing intensified policing of the symptoms of structural inequity instead of addressing the root causes of the inequity itself. She made no mention of the role that the U.S. has played in orchestrating economic destabilization throughout Central America.¹⁴⁶ Unlike Biden’s acknowledgement of slavery and white terrorism in the U.S., Harris completely glosses over how the mass migration of Central Americans into the U.S. has been spurred by the meddling of U.S. imperialism over the last few decades. With consideration to Biden’s impassioned indictments of white racism, it was plausible that Harris might have taken a similar approach in addressing the “root causes of migration.” Harris might have acknowledged U.S. America’s culpability in its deployment of right-wing death squads, its financing of coups or investing in extractive and exploitative industries. Instead, she simply gave a callous warning without offering even a symbolic gesture of sympathy for the widespread hardships cultivated by U.S. intervention. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez expressed her disappointment in Harris’ comments in stating that “seeking asylum at any U.S. border is a 100% legal method or arrival” and that “the [U.S.] spent decades contributing to regime change and destabilization in Latin

¹⁴¹ Dreisen Heath, “H.R. 40: Exploring the Path to Reparative Justice in America,” *Human Rights Watch*, February 17, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/17/hr-40-exploring-path-reparative-justice-america>

¹⁴² Eugene Daniels, “Biden privately tells lawmakers not to expect much on reparations legislation,” *POLITICO*, June 2, 2021. <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/02/biden-reparations-tulsa-491607>

¹⁴³ Which was first introduced by Representative John Conyers in 1989

¹⁴⁴ Cori Bush. *Twitter* Post. June 16, 2021, 5:02 PM. <https://twitter.com/CoriBush/status/1405314953444212737>.

¹⁴⁵ Branko Marcetic, “Joe Biden Helped Pull the Democrats to the Right,” *The Jacobin*, February 23, 2020. <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/02/yesterdays-man-case-against-joe-biden-new-deal-reagan>.

¹⁴⁶ Jean Guerrero, “Op-Ed: What Kamala Harris’ callous message to migrants really means,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 9, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-06-09/kamala-harris-mexico-guatemala-migrants>

America. We can't help set someone's house on fire and then blame them for fleeing."¹⁴⁷ Yet, nothing in Harris' body of work as a public prosecutor in California indicates that she might have offered more sympathetic comments. Despite her reputation as a cutthroat District Attorney who upheld a commitment to harsh punitive measures, her rise to become the first Black and the first South Asian woman to hold the position of U.S. Vice President was met with some ambivalence among Black activists. Some have been unmoved in their indictments of her being a purveyor of anti-Black violence. Bay Area activist Blake Simons tweeted "Kamala Harris made her career by locking up Black people in the Bay Area. Her track record consists of terrorizing Black communities through the prison industrial complex," concluding that "Her track record consists of rampant anti-Blackness."¹⁴⁸ During her time as District Attorney for San Francisco, she was in fact the most punitive county prosecutor in the entire state, even more so than prosecutors in conservative white counties in specifically targeting Black people. Others have offered mixed sentiments. Hannah Giorgis notes that "Depending on whom you ask, Kamala Harris is either a hip Hillary Clinton or a political Beyoncé."¹⁴⁹ Professor Melina Abdullah for instance has variously criticized Harris' failure to take a bolder stance on police killings, stating "This is not the time for timidity. ... Martin Luther King [Jr.] said if you tell Black people to wait, that means never,"¹⁵⁰ but upon Biden selecting Harris as his running mate, Abdullah also expressed a degree of enthusiasm. "We're both AKA's. I'm from Oakland, I went to Howard [University], I like the same music she likes," she admitted that "as a Black woman... I felt my emotions getting away from me and having to remind myself that emotions make wonderful followers but terrible leaders."¹⁵¹ Harris' ascension to power is a manifestation of what Roberto Lovato describes as the "The Age of Intersectional Empire"¹⁵² which is premised on the idea that "The more the government looks and feels like the rest of us, the more difficult it is to criticize and attack it."

With consideration to how racism and capitalism are inextricably constituted, Black radical activism and leftist anti-capitalism are both vital ingredients in the making of a truly equitable Black liberation movement that accounts for how anti-Black racism and colonization are essential functions of global capitalism. Not only is neoliberalism driving the corporate right-wing thrust of austere policies that fuel the prison industrial complex and state-sanctioned violence in the U.S., it is also driving the corporate investment expansions that impose structural adjustment programs throughout the global South, fueling Third World exploitation and ecologically unsustainable development practices. Even in the ludicrous fantasy in which anti-Black racism is somehow ameliorated in the U.S. with bourgeois society held intact, there is no viable scenario in which capitalism can survive without the continued exploitation of Black and Brown people globally. Therefore, any comprehensive Black liberation program must

¹⁴⁷ Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. *Twitter* Post. June 7, 2021, 4:16 PM.

<https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1402041820096389124>

¹⁴⁸ Blake Simons [@BlakeDontCrack]. *Twitter* Post. Jan 21, 2019, 9:03 AM.

<https://twitter.com/BlakeDontCrack/status/1087395254930534400>

¹⁴⁹ Hannah Giorgis, "Kamala Harris's Political Memoir Is an Uneasy Fit for the Digital Era," *The Atlantic*, January 11, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/01/kamala-harris-truths-we-hold-review/579430/>

¹⁵⁰ Phil Willon, "Kamala Harris Should take bolder action on police shootings, civil rights advocates say," *Los Angeles Times*, January 18, 2016. <https://www.latimes.com/local/politics/la-me-pol-ca-harris-police-shootings>.

¹⁵¹ Black Lives Matter - Los Angeles, "This is Not a Drill: 'Kamala Harris for VP,'" *Facebook Live*, August 20, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/799880030084316/videos/308154530275836>.

¹⁵² Roberto Lovato, "The Age of Intersectional Empire is Upon Us," *The Nation*, May 10, 2021. <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/cia-video-intersectional/>

necessarily be anti-capitalist. Moreover, because Marxist theory is a vital analytic component for understanding capitalism, no liberation program can afford to neglect accounting for Marxism in praxis. This is not to dictate that every race justice organization and activist must necessarily identify as Marxists, rather, it is to assert that no anti-capitalist framework is complete without at least some degree of engagement with the rudimentary tenets of Marxism, if not a wholehearted adherence to it. In turn, no liberation program can neglect accounting for how Black, Brown, Third World, feminist, queer, and trans activists and thinkers have both profoundly enhanced Marxist thought and engineered alternative, anti-capitalist frameworks. As we have elaborated, liberation paradigms that neglect to integrate Marxist/anti-capitalist theory in practice and implementation can only, at best, re-produce white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism under the guise and pageantry of “diversity” and “inclusion.” That is, the function of western imperialism and racial capitalism will persist through the complicity of Black, Brown, women, queer, and trans leadership in “the integration of a colonized person into the colonized system in order to enact the policies of the colonizer.”¹⁵³

Marxism in the Movement for Black Lives

*It is our duty to fight for freedom
It is our duty to win
We must love and protect one another
We have nothing to lose but our chains!*

On the evening of the first #J4TMLA convening at St. Elmo’s Village in Mid-City Los Angeles, Patrisse Cullors closed out the session by having the attendees stand outside and form a large circle holding hands. She stood at the center of the enclosure and instructed us to follow her lead in chanting the affirmation above. We recited the verse thrice, the first time in a low whisper, the second in a moderate tone, and the third and last time in a loud declarative shout into the warm midsummer air. We were resurrecting the voice of Assata Shakur, the exiled Panther from New York who found refuge in Cuba in 1979 after being put on the FBI’s list of “Most Wanted Terrorists.” Assata had inscribed this incantation into an address entitled “To My People” in 1971. From that first meeting until now, BLM activists close out their meetings, actions, and gatherings by holding hands and reciting these words. The last line, “*We have nothing to lose but our chains*” is an adaptation of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ closing words in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* which states “Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains.” This is the extent to which BLM accesses Marxism... more of a sentimental harkening rather than a rigorous adherence to its theoretical properties. The Black Power movement was marked by the confluence of nationalist and leftist politics to inject “class consciousness” into the discourse of Black liberation. This is a sensibility that today’s Black liberation movements have, to some degree, strived to inherit. Although Black Lives Matter has not firmly declared their objectives to be specifically aimed at toppling bourgeois society through revolutionary socialism, the

¹⁵³ Blake Simons [@BlakeDontCrack]. *Twitter* Post. January 20, 2021.
<https://twitter.com/BlakeDontCrack/status/1352015758692290562>

movement has certainly embraced expressions of radical indignation that communicates the need for societal restructuring beyond the boundaries of what reform can accomplish.

If BLM activists have not wholly subscribed to revolutionary schemes, they have, at the very least, expressed notions of anti-capitalism in their desire to put an end to state-sanctioned violence and the neoliberal order. BLM/MBL presents a critique of neoliberalism that recognizes race and racism as central to the workings of capitalism rather than partitioning them as separate modalities of oppression. Political theorist Siddhant Issar argues that contemporary neo-Marxist and neo-Foucaultian analyses of neoliberalism (such as the writings of David Harvey and Wendy Brown) continue to underemphasize the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness and structural racism in general.¹⁵⁴ While their analyses do not wholly obscure the differential impact of neoliberalism on racially oppressed populations, Issar contends that BLM/MBL expressions of anti-capitalism are more comprehensive. MBL explicitly invokes Robinson's concept of racial capital in its political education agenda, particularly in its call for reparations. In a talk called "Revisiting *Black Marxism* in the Wake of Black Lives Matter," Robin Kelley described the "Vision for Black Lives" 2016 policy platform as "perhaps the clearest articulation of the framework that *Black Marxism* offers."¹⁵⁵ As previously discussed, Robinson's work is a confronting critique of Marx and Engels' concept of capitalism. Therefore, it would be imprecise to wholly identify BLM/MBL as an explicitly Marxist project.

What has fueled the conservative right's indictment of the BLM Global Network as an unabashedly Marxist organization are comments made by Patrisse Cullors in a 2015 interview with Real News Network host Jared Ball. In response to a question posed regarding the concern that BLM lacks ideological direction, she stated that "I think the critique is helpful. I think we do actually have an ideological frame. Myself and Alicia in particular are trained organizers. We are trained Marxists."¹⁵⁶ This statement has been frequently referenced in catapulting the right-wing fear mongering that more nefarious intentions are behind the movement disguising itself as a mere anti-racist campaign. The right has pejoratively castigated BLM and its adjacent liberation projects like LGBTQ activism under the broad umbrella of "Cultural Marxism."¹⁵⁷ Any expression of anti-racism, pro-feminism, pro-queer, pro-trans advocacy or any critique of capitalist society therefore is summarily aggregated into this conspiracy notion that white communists are fueling the "race baiting" discourse in manipulating the supposedly unbeknown Black masses into irrational courses of action, which in actuality will only result in the perpetuation in their misery rather than the achievement of justice. We have clarified that these indictments are intentionally reductionist in an attempt to frame BLM as a threat to the structural integrity of Western democracy. In actuality, a tandem between BLM and anti-capitalism would pose a formidable threat to the structural integrity of white supremacist heteropatriarchal neoliberalism in the making of an authentically equitable democracy. In recognizing that anti-capitalism is a keystone ideology in the making of a comprehensive liberation paradigm, it is

¹⁵⁴ Siddhant Issar, "Listening to Black lives matter: racial capitalism and the critique of neoliberalism," in *Contemporary Political Theory*, (2021).

¹⁵⁵ Speak Out Now, "Robin Kelley: Revisiting Black Marxism in the Wake of Black Lives Matter," *YouTube* video, 1:50:13, October 23, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxRuTQZAT2Y&t=2736s>.

¹⁵⁶ The Real News Network, "A Short History of Black Lives Matter," *YouTube* Video, 10:56, July 23, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zp-RswgpjD8>.

¹⁵⁷ Jason Wilson, "'Cultural Marxism': a uniting theory for rightwingers who love to play the victim," *The Guardian*, January 18, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/19/cultural-marxism-a-uniting-theory-for-rightwingers-who-love-to-play-the-victim>

pertinent to evaluate the actual merits of Marxist thought in relation to anti-racism. The concern here is to interrogate the complexity of Marxist expression as well as its continued relevance in the 21st century – with particular focus on its utility and application in Black liberation activism.

The Lingering Spectre From Highgate Cemetery

After a century of failed and fledgling communist movements, Marxism seemed to have atrophied and reached an impasse at the close of the 1990s with the apparent increase of capitalist prosperity and the waning of communist regimes. The calamitous series of global financial crises throughout the 2000s undermined the rose tinted perception that the unprecedented economic growth of the previous decade would continuously see the realization of prosperity promised by the triumph of neoliberalism.

A Centennial of Communist Revolution

The massive impact that Marxism has had in shaping global politics in the 20th century is irrefutable. Over the course of eight decades, communist regimes claiming to be guided by Marxist principles rose to prominence across the globe starting with Soviet Russia under the leadership of Lenin in 1917, then China under Mao Zedong in 1949, and Cuba under Fidel Castro in 1959. Other emerging communist states included Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in South East Asia as well as Ethiopia, Somalia, Mozambique, and Angola in Africa. These revolutionary developments would constitute a sizable communist sphere of influence comprising a third of the global political economy. International politics throughout the middle decades of the century were largely occupied by Cold War antagonisms with communist and capitalist forces competing for global expansion. However, the latent quarter of the century unfolded with the dwindling of communist fervor as many of these countries struggled with their fledgling economies. By the close of the 20th century, the once thriving force that was global communism had waned into what is now widely regarded as a failed political project with the collapse of the Soviet Union and with China moving towards a free market economy under Deng Xiaoping. At present, there are only a handful of communist countries remaining: Cuba, Laos, Vietnam, and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea). This decline is largely taken to signify that the theories of Marx and Engels and all of their adherents were ultimately proven to be disastrously erroneous. Marxism had popularly come to be perceived as an ideological fantasy that *theoretically* envisions a more just and egalitarian society as the outcome of its application but has *historically* and in actuality only produced totalitarian militarism and dictatorial tyranny. This understanding is exacerbated today by the limited representation of communist sovereignty in global affairs. North Korea under Kim Jong Un has been described as “the one ferocious holdout among the communist nations”¹⁵⁸ and it perceivably bears all of the

¹⁵⁸ Enguld, Will. “Red Century.” *Washington Post: Democracy Dies In Darkness*. (October 26, 2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/world/100-years-of-communism/>.

nefarious features of autocracy and militarism¹⁵⁹ that have become closely associated with communism and the fruits of Marxism.

Those who still cling to the truth value present in the original writings of Marx as well as Engels – the body of work known as *Classical* Marxism – argue that none of the communist developments of the 20th century faithfully upheld the principles of proletarian democracy that Marx insisted was integral to the formation of a true communist society. If there ever was a need for dictatorial rule, it would only be enforced temporarily at the onset of the proletarian seizure of power. This has not been the case in the implementation of communist governments throughout the 20th century. Rather, these regimes have been characterized by prolonged autocratic leadership with some even maintaining something of a monarchic dynasty, as in the case of three generations of leadership held by the Kim family in North Korea. On the basis that none of these proclaimed “communist” developments actually resemble what Marx and Engels envisioned, there remains an optimistic historical perspective that contends that Marxism, as an analytical framework, has yet to “fail” because it has yet to be implemented to fidelity. Even if we were to disregard such a perspective, the merits of Marxist theory is undergirded by the lived material realities of economic disparities and social alienation that we all continue to experience amidst the ongoing *boom and bust* cycles of the free market economies in which we live.

Despite the 20th century failings of communist movements, Marxist analysis survives on the mere basis that the devastation wrought by global capitalism’s internal conflicts has yet to be ameliorated. Since 2008, there has been a profound revival of interest and enthusiasm for Marxism.¹⁶⁰ Worldwide sales of Marx’s works such as *Das Kapital*, *The Communist Manifesto*, and *The Grundrisse* have dramatically increased in lieu of the economic crises that have plagued the global capitalist system.¹⁶¹ In an era defined by working class frustrations with precarious employment, housing instability, and debt, the writings of Marx and Engels have reemerged as pertinently relevant as ever. It has been well over a century since the death of Marx in 1884 and yet much of his commentary on capitalist development resonates with utter clarity as the manifestations of his foresight increasingly materializes before us. As much as he has been criticized for his reductionist tendencies and his rather inaccurate anticipation of the imminent collapse of capitalism, he is not credited enough for his correct assessments of the inevitability of capitalist globalization and of the many factors that would result in the worldwide economic crises of the 21st century. Critics will observe that the capitalist system has persisted nearly two centuries since Marx and Engels first predicted its demise in 1848 and will consider this as irrevocable proof of the irrelevance of their theories. However, this is but one speculative error amidst a much larger body of work that is ripe with critical observations of how the inherent flaws within capitalism detrimentally impact humanity. That their time frame for when capitalism would end was incorrect is grossly overemphasized, thereby prompting a rather narrow assessment of the veracity of their ideas.

¹⁵⁹ On September 3, 2017, Pyongyang announced that the country had developed a hydrogen (thermonuclear) bomb that could be loaded into an intercontinental ballistic missile.

¹⁶⁰ Jeffries, Stuart. “Why Marxism is on the Rise Again.” *The Guardian*. (July 4, 2012), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/04/the-return-of-marxism>.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*.

The Rise of Social Democracy

The 21st century has seen a fresh crop of socialist inspired efforts directed against the depredations of capitalism. Over a hundred years since the communist revolution in Russia and thirty years after its collapse, socialist articulations of political advocacy have been resuscitated amidst a massive growth of high profits for corporations and banks, simultaneously generating the comparably massive growth of inequality. The first decade of the century saw a heightened distrust in capitalist globalization and the second decade opened with the electrifying surge of the Occupy Movement. The fire and flair of anti-austerity street-protests then shifted towards political party organizing with the rise of Bernie Sanders as a formidable presidential candidate in both 2016 and 2020 campaigns. Globally, there have been similar socialist inspired developments with Jeremy Corbyn in the U.K., Die Linke in Germany, Syriza in Greece, Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal, and Podemos in Spain. These campaigns have focused on how the financialization of capital in the current era of neoliberal globalization has maintained a flexible system for the bourgeois order to continuously reproduce itself.

Throughout the 20th century each occurrence of economic crisis resulted in a transformational shift to a new model for capital accumulation in lieu of the implosion of the previous model. The capitalist system has undergone a series of evolutionary ruptures with the rise of one model, the tragic inevitability of it crashing and burning from flying too close to the sun, and then the emergence of a new model to succeed it in the wake of its demise. Consumed by the hubris of its successes, each model sows the seeds for its self-destruction. For instance, the Gold Standard model was disposed of amidst the Great Depression in the 1930s and the Bretton Woods model that replaced it was disposed of amidst the Great Inflation of the 1970s. Unlike its predecessors, the current neoliberal model has survived its first encounter with a major economic crisis in its finance capital form. Its ability to endure is no mystery: the neoliberal model has successfully reproduced itself – despite the crisis-prone environment that it creates – through its shrewd manipulation of monetary policy for stimulus, its aggressive reassertion of austerity policies, and the widened stratification of income inequality. The burden of the adverse consequences of this pernicious plutocratic free for all is, of course, shouldered by a weakened working class and the societal liabilities are suffered most devastatingly by a growing underclass. While the corporate and banking elites rampantly wreak havoc upon the economy with relative indemnity, the working class and underclass are increasingly strained by instability, insecurity, and deepening poverty. These are the glaringly unfair conditions from which the perceived palpability of Marxist discourse has reemerged – or at least the significant rise of a positive view of “socialism.” Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin observe that the neoliberal epoch has reached a new conjecture going into the 2020s. In their view, the social democratic enthusiasm and embrace of neoliberalism as “the most successful ideology in world history”¹⁶² has run its course. They postulate that while neoliberal economic practices have been reproduced – as has the U.S. empire’s centrality in global capitalism – “neoliberalism’s legitimacy has been undermined.”¹⁶³ With the revitalization of socialist discourse coming out of nearly three decades of relative dormancy, some proponents of the white Left continue to underestimate the vitality of

¹⁶² Perry Anderson. “Renewals,” *New Left Review* 1, January/February (2000), 7, 13. “Whatever limitations persist to its practice, neoliberalism as a set of principles rules undivided across the globe: the most successful ideology in world history.”

¹⁶³ Panitch, Leo and Sam Gindin. *The Socialist Challenge Today: Syriza, Sanders, Corbyn*. S.l.: (Haymarket books, 2020), 9.

Black radicalism in sustaining and elevating any notion of a socialist movement in the U.S. In essence, the democratic socialist movement represents what Ocasio-Cortez broadly conceptualizes as focus on equity in healthcare access, housing, and education.

“What [democratic socialism] means to me is health care as a human right, it means that every child no matter where you are born should have access to a college or trade-school education if they so choose it. I think that no person should be homeless if we have public structures or public policy to allow for people to have homes and food and lead a dignified life in the United States.”

Not surprisingly, this current trend of pro-socialism has been met with trepidation from the right and the center-left. Their criticisms are, of course, rooted in the persisting stigma attached to socialist discourse. The global communism of the 20th century is forever fixed in the historical imagination of many U.S. Americans as a sinister and perilously draconian force that has been long defeated by the moral and pragmatic superiority of the neoliberal order. In this way, the right and the center-left understand capitalism’s victory over socialism as incontrovertible evidence of the unsustainability of alternative economic models. Fully aware of the brutally devastating dictatorial failings of Soviet Russia, Maoist China, and Castro’s Cuba, today’s advocates of socialism distinguish themselves as avidly pro-democratic, maintaining a stiff-armed distance from the ghosts of the blood drenched communist past. However, through the prism of right and center left perspectives, those ghosts seem to haunt every iteration of socialism. Conversely, the radical left varies in its reception of this expression, ranging from those who view it as an entry way for a wider audience to increasingly embrace a more radical vision to those who generally reject it as a false and shallow expression of socialist thought. Those who view the trend with great enthusiasm emphasize the maintenance of a commitment to a socialist program that envisions the absolute dismantlement of every vestige of the capitalist system. “Socialism is having a moment in the sun. It's a chance to push a bold, transformative vision of what a society for the many rather than the few can look like.”¹⁶⁴ While optimistic about the deepening of electoral work led by pro-socialist candidates and officials, others are concerned that “the vision of socialism risks being watered down or even falling from view.”¹⁶⁵ In the classical Marxist tradition, they don’t consider mainstream political participation as entirely counterrevolutionary, but they are also wary of becoming detached from the revolutionary vision. However, what is perhaps even more in derailing socialist movements from achieving its anti-capitalist objectives is its detachment from race consciousness.

With all the praise and recognition given to the Occupy Movement for reigniting the flame of street protest activism across the nation and for its effectiveness in amplifying the class consciousness of the masses with its lucid, succinct, and all inclusive rallying cries of “We Are the 99%,” it is often forgotten that it was the fiery indignation and mass mobilizations of angered Black residents and community organizers in Oakland, CA responding to the killing of 22 year old Oscar Grant by Johannes Mehserle, a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) police officer, that set in motion the street protest trend that would ensue throughout the 2010s. Indeed, the Occupy Movement owes a great degree of the notoriety it garnered to the early efforts of the Oscar Grant protesters who initiated the first wave of 21st century mass actions that push beyond the surface

¹⁶⁴ Desan, Mathieu and Michael A. McCarthy. “A Time to Be Bold.” *Jacobin*, July 31, 2018. Accessed May 19, 2020. <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/07/socialism-democrats-alexandria-ocasio-cortez>.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, paragraph 2.

level center-left critiques of U.S. society, delving into an unearthing of its structural flaws – starting with its racist policing practices and its fraudulent (in)justice system.

The protest demonstrations throughout the 2000s were largely of the anti-war variety, an expression of public dissent that has maintained continuous weighted legitimacy in mainstream political discourse since the Vietnam War. Since the “make love, not war” counterculture movements of the 1960s have made it fashionable to critique the excessive force and international war crimes enacted by the U.S., a large segment of U.S. Americans have been vigilantly wary of their government’s compulsion for committing atrocious war crimes. However, this awareness was largely restricted to the ways that the U.S. military mistreated people from other countries, not to the ways that domestic U.S. institutions mistreated its own citizens, how policing and judicial systems brutally mistreat Black and Brown people and how corporations and financial institutions mistreated U.S. workers.

Throughout the 2000s, the center-left were stubbornly convinced that it was the series of poor decisions of President Bush and his administration that incurred the country's economic woes and its tarnished international image. Lulled by the fresh memory of financial boom during the Clinton-era that immediately preceded President Bush and then by the charm of the “change we can believe in” promise of the Obama-era that immediately succeeded it, U.S. Americans had reason to perceive the 2000-2008 presidency as an embarrassing blip in the country’s otherwise upward trajectory towards post-racial harmony and economic prosperity. When it became immediately evident that the changing of administrative hands was not by itself going to correct the country’s societal downturn, U.S. Americans began to grow increasingly privy to the reality that there are other forces at work besides the tragic blunders of the Bush Administration that are permeating the country’s social and economic troubles.

On New Year's Day, 2009, a 22-year-old Black man named Oscar Grant was fatally shot by a white transit police officer at the Fruitvale Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) station in East Oakland, CA. His death may very well have been the first officer-involved shooting to be captured by bystanders’ cell phones in the high speed internet era. “When people tell the story of Black Lives Matter, they either start it in 2014 with Mike Brown, or they start in 2013 with Trayvon Martin,” said Alicia Garza. “But for us, for those of us who created Black Lives Matter, it really does kind of start with Oscar Grant.”¹⁶⁶ The Oscar Grant movement was the first series of mass protests since the Los Angeles uprisings in 1992 that ferociously confronted anti-Black racism in the U.S., thereby forcing a national dialogue about the systemic injustices that persist in the country despite the election of its first Black president. The devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 revealed much about ongoing racial discrepancies, particularly in how the preservation and protection of Black lives were neglected in the half-hearted rescue efforts in the aftermath of the disaster. But the center-left seemed content with regarding it only as another tragic display of the Bush Administration’s incompetence rather than a case of environmental racism. It seemed that Kanye West’s “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people” statement would suffice. The Occupy Movement and other subsequent mobilizations would ride the momentum generated by the uprisings in Oakland. It is to the detriment of Marxist organizing that proponents of the white left have neglected to rightfully acknowledge that the thrust of Black radical protests is the most potent force in the U.S. through which class consciousness can be mobilized. These tendencies have plagued Marxist movements for well over a century.

¹⁶⁶ Sandhya Dirks, “It Started With Oscar Grant: A Police Shooting in Oakland, and the Making of a Movement,” *KQED*, June 5, 2020. <https://www.kqed.org/news/11823246/it-started-with-oscar-grant-a-police-shooting-in-oakland-and-the-making-of-a-movement-2>.

The Black Radical Answer to the “Negro Question”

Marxist organizing in the U.S. began with Joseph Weydemeyer – a close associate of Marx and Engels who served as an artillery officer in the Revolution of 1848. When Weydemeyer migrated to the U.S., he imported the communist movement with the establishment of the Proletarian League in 1852. Throughout the 19th century, participation in Marxist organizing by non-white men was obscured by the reductionist proletarian focus on “class struggle.” As Angela Davis observes, while women were engaged in their own labor associations, in anti-racist work, and developing campaigns for their own rights, they were virtually absent from Marxist organizations.¹⁶⁷ The Proletarian League, the Workingmen’s National Association and the Communist Club were predominantly composed of and led by white men. It would not be until the turn of the century that the Marxist Left would significantly be reshaped by the critical interventions of women and Black radicalism.

Since 1900, Marxist movements have been plagued with the contentious negotiation of how “class struggle” is to be understood with consideration of how it is implicated with racial and gendered realities. In one regard, while Leftists have historically professed to be anti-racist and pro-feminist, European and white male centered articulations of Marxism have tended to stress the supposed urgency of prioritizing proletarian concerns above all others. In this sense, the amelioration of racism, sexism, and heteropatriarchy is contingent on the obliteration of the capitalist system. Beyond this “traditional” view, however, is the recognition that, on the contrary, the successful advancement of proletarian advocacy is in fact contingent on the Marxist movement’s ability to account for feminist, queer, and Black radical traditions of resistance. In this sense, the stagnation of proletarian mobilization is attributed to the rigidity of European and white male centeredness in Marxist movements.

Such are the theoretical dilemmas that have continuously generated debate concerning how the scope and capacity of Marxist analysis should be delineated. How can the vast web of oppressed experiences be reconciled under one totalizing “Leftist” program? Are Leftists to reduce the multifarious ways that they experience oppression into a singular “proletarian consciousness?” Are they to collapse the varying agents of oppression into a singular amalgamate conception of “the bourgeois order?” In turn, if Marxism is unable to account for the complexity of the matrix of oppression, what degree of investment can women, queer and trans identifying peoples, and Black and Brown peoples place in mobilizing Leftist projects? These interrogations have persisted well into the contemporary era.

In the early 20th century, the Communist Party (CP) opposed what it considered to be “petty Bourgeois Negro nationalism” and “racial chauvinism” such as those displayed by the Garveyite movement.¹⁶⁸ Black leftists, while professedly supporting this opposition – at times even showing themselves to be the most brutal critiques of racial nationalist programs – would often teeter between their global communist sensibilities and their recognition of the need for race-based advocacy concerning the specificity of how Black people in the U.S. are uniquely situated at the intersection of racial subordination and capitalist exploitation. Hence, regardless of whatever degree of disdain Black leftists may have expressed towards Garveyism, religious nationalism, or Black nationalism, it was impossible for Black leftist expression to avoid colliding with the call for Black racial solidarity.

¹⁶⁷ Davis, Angela Y. *Women, Race & Class*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 149.

¹⁶⁸ C. L. R., James, Cyril Lionel Robert. *A History of Pan-African Revolt*. United States: PM Press, 2012.

Collisions with Bourgeois Nationalism

By the 1920s, it became increasingly obvious that there could be no serious analysis of class struggle in the U.S. without recognizing the centrality of race and of anti-Black racism as a heavily substantial devise of social stratification that holds just as much weight – if not more – as capitalism does in purveying conditions of inequality. In 1922, the Fourth World Congress of the Comintern adopted a thesis that recognized Black people as a nationality oppressed by global imperialism. U.S. American communists were thus forced to reconsider the anti-imperialist significance within Black nationalist movements. In 1925, the Fourth National Conference of the Communist Party lauded UNIA for its anti-colonial position and for its remarkable ability to amass such a large following. The oppressive juggernaut that is U.S. American racism was not something that could be relegated as an afterthought to bourgeois oppression by Black leftists at the height of U.S. American apartheid (aka Jim Crow) and in the midst of mass lynching campaigns in the South. There needed to be a reconciliation towards an understanding that ethnic nationalism and international solidarity need not be mutually exclusive.

The mid-1920s and 30s saw an influx of African Americans join the ranks of the Communist Party, many of whom were in search of alternative platforms for organizing in lieu of the decline of the Garveyite movement. This prompted a considerable shift in the make-up of the Party, allowing for Black members to cultivate an interpretation of “proletarian realism” that understood racism and capitalism to be tightly intertwined. Black nationalist articulations would therefore increasingly become more and more comprehensible alongside proletarian liberation in the development of a revamped communist solidarity paradigm that accounted for idiosyncrasies of Black existentiality. However, while the CPUSA had come to praise UNIA in some regards, it maintained its opposition to the Garvey movement’s emphasis on race pride. The Party sought to correct this tendency towards racial nationalism by attempting to redirect the foment of Black pride of the Garveyite variety towards a mobilization for interracial collaboration. Hence, in 1925, the American Negro Labor Congress (ANLC) was formed with the specific function of cultivating interracial harmony.

The “Negro Question” was a strategic contemplation of how Western Marxists and the European Left might approach engaging the particularity of the Black experience in the U.S. and figuring out how it fits within the rubric of a global Marxist movement. Amidst the complications with Western chauvinists’ disregard for Black nationalism, even those who, to varying degrees, readily recognized the need for race-based advocacy were unclear on exactly what form Leftist solidarity would embody in support of the Black freedom struggle, particularly on the ambiguous conception of what Black “self-determination” would signify. Because of the success and influence of the Russian Revolution, U.S. American communists were forced to rethink the fallacious notion that anti-Black racism is purely and simply an economic issue that is but a part of the proletarian struggle, therefore nothing can be done about it short of a socialist revolution. They now had to grapple with the notion that Black and non-white people are indeed exploited in peculiar ways that involves the multiplicity of gender discrimination, racial subordination, *and* class exploitation. Therefore, a redeveloped theory of class solidarity across racial differences was in order.

In the Third World contexts where Indigenous, African, Asian, Central and South American peoples were waging anti-imperial warfare against European colonizers, articulations

of self-determination were comparatively less heterogeneous than was the case with the Black freedom struggle in the U.S. The anti-imperialist character of Third World independence movements readily qualified them to be woven into the global tapestry of Marxist resistance. Their objectives were more decidedly comprehensible: the expulsion of colonial forces for the establishment of a sovereign nation-state. In contrast, the conditions of racial oppression in the U.S. obfuscated the Left's ability to grasp a resoundingly clear articulation of what the achievement of Black liberation would entail. At the very least, Black self-determination has been articulated in the following ways: (1) the liberal-integrationist ideal for equal political, social, and economic rights within the existing U.S. American system, (2) the Black nationalist ideal for the secession of a sovereign territory within the U.S. designated for the establishment of an autonomous Black nation-state, (3) the alternate Black nationalist ideal for the mass migration of African Americans back to the African continent to establish an autonomous Black nation-state there, and (4) the Pan African ideal for global political solidarity and the consolidation of economic resources among African and African descended people worldwide.

Hence, the "Negro Question" was about identifying which of these Black liberation programs could the Western Marxists and the European Left feasibly find mutual compatibility with a global proletarian revolution. Yet, amidst their intellectual deliberations on what expressions of Black self-determination were acceptable or worthy of collaboration, these misguided Marxists altogether failed to understand that the Black freedom struggle did not and *does not* need to be harnessed by the supposedly more calculating and more precise programmatic guidance of the Left. The life force of Black resistance is not contingent on its subsumption into global Marxism. Long before the formation of the industrial proletariat in Europe, long before Marx and Engels developed their critique of the capitalist system, and long before there was any such thing as a Worker's International movement, there has been a Black radical tradition that has persisted since the onset of slavery and through all of the ebbs and flows of the Marxist movement. Black resistance to racial oppression will persist until the conflict between Black subjectivity and white supremacy is resolved in the same way that proletarian resistance to bourgeois oppression will persist until the conflict between workers and capitalists is resolved.

The New Left and the Revolutionary Communist Party

The Revolutionary Communist Party (Revcom) is currently one of the most prominent iteration of white Marxist organizing. They are frequent attendees at BLM rallies and actions, where they can typically be seen distributing their literature. Revcom has certainly shown its capacity to at least recognize the material realities of racial capital, but its proponents are ultimately still anchored in the reductionist orthodoxy of viewing oppression in binaristic terms. They have articulated their awareness of the racial discrepancies pertaining to employment rates, accessibility to quality housing, healthcare, and education, the comparatively higher rates of HIV infection in Black communities, the disproportionate rates at which Black people are incarcerated – as well as the tendency for them to face harsher sentences than whites who are found guilty of the same crime – and of course the disproportionate rates at which Black people are killed and brutalized by police violence. To this extent, the organization's patron saint Bob Avakian has made clear of Revcom's awareness of and opposition to the absurdity of "post-racial" discourse.

“There will never be a revolutionary movement in this country that doesn’t fully unleash and give expression to the... deeply, deeply felt desire to be rid of these long centuries of oppression [of Black people]. There’s never gonna be a revolution in this country, and there never should be, that doesn’t make that one key foundation of what it’s all about.”¹⁶⁹

Avakian has even gone so far as to declare Revcoms recognition that Black people constitute a distinct and oppressed nation within the U.S. and therefore have the right to self-determination – “up to and including the right to set up a separate [African American Republic]. The new revolutionary power will uphold the right of Black people to establish autonomous rule in the Black Belt South.”¹⁷⁰ Yet, for all of Revcom’s stress on the need for a race-conscious revolutionary program committed to the eradication of systemic racism, much of its professed support for Black self-determination is without substance and misleading considering that within the very same issue of the *Revolution* in which its support is stated, Avakian practically rescinds this gesture of support by reinforcing the staunch white Leftist opposition to Black nationalism. “All other things being equal, the separation of one nationality off into a separate state of its own is not something which will strengthen, but in fact could weaken, the new socialist state.” Revcom’s professed support for Black self-determination can therefore be interpreted as an expression of white paternalistic sarcasm. Avakian maintains that the inclination for Black people to cultivate Black *centered* and Black *exclusive* spaces for collective organizing and action – particularly in the form of Black nationalism – is misguided and maligned with his “scientific” Marxian conception of how to properly understand and transform oppressive realities. In this way, Revcom disingenuously offers an empty gesture of Black and Third World solidarity:

“The communist outlook, unlike nationalism, approaches everything from the standpoint of emancipating *all* of humanity. Coming just from within the desire to “get it together” among Black people will lead to pitting the interests of Black people against the interests of other national gatherings, which would inevitably engender inequality and perpetuate oppression.”¹⁷¹

The white-centered left therefore reveals itself as but an alternative expression of white paternalism to their right-wing counterparts. The right readily interprets the pro-socialist and economic justice elements present within BLM advocacy as glaring indications that the movement is nothing more than a front or a proxy for communist revolt. In identifying Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi as proponents of the radical Left, it is surmised that the agitation of mass protests in response to the high profile police killings of Black people are being compelled by subversive communist forces. BLM is therefore construed as “the latest and most dangerous face of a web of well-funded communist/socialist organizations that have been

¹⁶⁹ “The Oppression of Black People, The Crimes of This System and the Revolution We Need,” *Revolution*, Reprinted from #144, October 2008, 2.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 8.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 15, 17.

agitating against [U.S.] America for decades.”¹⁷² In this view, it is the insidious manipulation of communist propaganda and demagoguery that discolors the facts in the justifiable police killings of criminals (many of whom just happen to be Black), deceiving the Black masses into a false perception that the police and the judicial system are racist. In exploiting the misplaced rage and desperation of the Black masses, communists prod them into lawlessness and unrest, causing wanton violence against law enforcement officers and innocent white people.

Disturbed by BLM’s conflated opposition to racism and capitalism, the political right has reached deep into its vast arsenal of anti-communist punditry in cautioning Black people against looking to socialism as a viable approach to anti-racism. In their obstinate denial that there is anything inherently racist about capitalism, policing and the judicial system in the U.S., they have conversely argued that there is nothing inherently anti-racist about the white Left.¹⁷³ They have gone so far as to decry socialists as themselves proponents of white racial superiority in highlighting the unfortunate but accurate documentation of anti-Black sentiment expressed throughout socialist history. Eliding the heterogeneity of socialist thought and practice, the right will of course sweepingly point out the genocidal and dictatorial tendencies that have characterized communist regimes throughout the last century. Hence, surprisingly, the right is justified in their scrutiny of the Left’s history of anti-Blackness, but not for the purpose of absolving U.S. conservatism of the racism that it is flagrantly guilty of.

In this way, the white-centered proponents of the right, the center-left, and the Left all share a common underlying perception of Black political thought and Black community organizing: that Black people are incapable of accurately assessing for themselves precisely what forces are oppressing them and are incapable of correctly determining for themselves what strategies to pursue in order to effectively address and confront those oppressive forces, as though their own experiences and histories with racism does not qualify them to do so. In their contentions among one another, each is guilty of paternalism in their supposition that one of the others are the tricksters pulling the strings of Black collective thought and action. In their admonitions to the Black community, each is guilty of opportunism in their arrogant posturing as their saviors. This is not to regard the right, the center-left, and the white Left as virtually equivalent in their significance to Black people, but it is critical for organizers to be wary of the ways that white intellectualism is privileged in relation to Black and Third World experiences even across political lines.

The Communist Prime Directive¹⁷⁴

With vigilant consideration of all its shortcomings and failings, the Soviet Revolutionary tradition at least professedly recognized the need for Black and Third World sovereignty, particularly in the Leninist and Trotskyist position on the right to self-determination. As Robin

¹⁷² Simpson, James. “Reds Exploiting Blacks: The Roots of Black Lives Matter.” *Accuracy in Media*, May 23, 2016. <https://www.aim.org/special-report/reds-exploiting-blacks-the-roots-of-black-lives-matter/>.

¹⁷³ Tupy, Marian L. “Anti-Racists Should Think Twice about Allying with Socialism.” *FEE Freeman Article*. Foundation for Economic Education, November 14, 2017. <https://fee.org/articles/anti-racists-should-think-twice-about-allying-with-socialism/>.

¹⁷⁴ A reference to Gene Roddenberry’s science fiction series *Star Trek*, in which the “prime directive” is a guiding principle that prohibits Starfleet members from interfering with the internal and natural developments of indigenous societies. It recognizes the rights of sentient communities to live in accordance with its natural cultural evolution.

Kelley put it, “The white Left’s inability to understand, let alone answer the Negro Question turned out to be its Achilles’ heel. The tragedy for [U.S.] America, perhaps, is that these committed revolutionaries set out to save the Negro when they needed Black folk to save them.”¹⁷⁵ As insisting as the white Left has been in their conviction that racial nationalisms and petty bourgeois ambitions are purely counterrevolutionary detractors that will only deepen the demise of Black and Third World communities, the fate of Left movements is contingent on Black and Third World support and collaboration. Moreover, Black and Third World liberation movements can and will persist independently of the white Left. They may very well be correct in their assessment of the eventual outcomes that bourgeois nationalist movements may bring, but their paternalistic posture towards non-Marxist movements is getting them absolutely nowhere. With or without the collaboration of the white Left, Black and Third World peoples will continue their relentless confrontation with white supremacy in pursuit of liberation. Black radicalism has existed long before the emergence and struggle against the industrial bourgeois order and its neoliberal successor, and if need be, it will long outlive the relevance of a proletariat uprising. It is evident that the pulse of Black radicalism has been beating at a faster rate than its white-led Leftist counterpart.

In recent decades, the white-led Left has trailed closely behind the intrepid thrusts of Black radical action, distributing pamphlets in the midst of Black Lives Matter demonstrations, posturing as the champions of a “revolutionary” solution to the calamities of the present, and attempting to maneuver the momentum of Black radical indignation to align with their program, but to no avail. To the Black protesters fuming with rage, overwhelmed by the ongoing terror of state-sanctioned violence, these Leftist propagandists appear as tactless as the opportunistic voter-registration campaigners insisting that if you didn’t vote in the last election cycle, “you have no right to complain.” The more visceral impact of racist anti-Black violence, of modern day lynchings, has been more readily grasped by the masses as the more despicably distressing societal ailment that is in more urgent need of attention. Amidst rising unemployment and growing rates of houselessness, U.S. Americans are more apt to recognize and express indignation about racist violence than to thoroughly understand poverty as a symptom of economic injustice. The national dialogue concerning societal injustice has been overwhelmingly dominated by racial violence and inequity. Stubbornly denying the intellectual and activist leadership of BLM on the matter of anti-Black racism is only impeding the growth of leftist organizing. Forcefully insisting upon Black and Third World peoples to recognize that Marxist formulations are the only means to their salvation violates their right to determine for themselves what political and economic curriculums are in their best interest to pursue.

Towards a New Hegemony

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*¹⁷⁶ is one of the most notable attempts at deconstructing Marxism as a way to account for the plurality of hegemonic and oppressive forces under a framework that understands racism, sexism, heteropatriarchy, and other devices of social division (or stratification rather) as equivalent struggles to class oppression. Hence the development of a

¹⁷⁵ Kelley, Robin D.G. “‘The Negro Question’ Red Dreams of Black Liberation.” *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. (Beacon Press, 2002), 39.

¹⁷⁶ First published in 1985.

*post-Marxist*¹⁷⁷ viewpoint that contends: 1) that social change is not inevitable nor deterministic, 2) social complexity demands that social change can and must involve a plurality of social actors, not just the homogenized singularity that is the proletariat, and 3) social change requires the development of a conceptualization of power relations that enables activists to frame oppression as an antagonistic force against which they must cultivate and thrust an alternative hegemony to challenge it. In their abandonment of “scientific” determinism, it may initially seem as though Laclau and Mouffe are simply rehashing Bernsteinian revisionism. However, it is made clear that they are not at all vested in framing their work under the auspices of the Marxist tradition in the way that Bernstein was. Their work is not merely an alteration of Marxist theory with certain aspects of Marx and Engel’s original formulations “amputated” in order to conform to contemporary relevance. A more accurate evaluation of post-Marxism understands Marxist theory (or certain aspects of it) to be a subsumption of a qualitatively distinct analytic modality rather than the incorrect conception of it as something to be subsumed under the Marxist intellectual tradition. Without direct or explicit affiliation, this *post-Marxist* articulation towards a new hegemony is what best describes what BLM has “organically” developed in that the movement makes no assumptions of inevitability of social change, aspires to a more comprehensive program that accounts for the plurality of Black social positionalities, and develops alternative “common sense” narrations of racialized social realities.

Recognizing the plurality of social positionalities and antagonisms as equivalent struggles to class positionality and class antagonism is a theoretical practice that activists and theorists like Claudia Jones, Du Bois, Fanon, C.L.R. James, and many other Black and Third World leftists have upheld long before Laclau and Mouffe’s *post-Marxist* intervention. Women, queer and trans identifying people, and racialized and colonized subjects long been well aware of the complexities of capitalism. However, what is significant about this particular take on social reality is that, along with Robinson’s *Black Marxism*, it was conceived in the wake of the rise of neoliberalism, precisely at that pivotal point in which the confidence in the efficacy of Marxist theory and practice was greatly troubled by the failings of the socialist projects of the time. In troubleshooting the reasons as to why the prospects of a global socialist revolution were fading, they correctly identified that one of the deficiencies of the leftist approach to revolution was its aversion to the seeming indeterminacy of liberal or pluralistic democracy. For instance, the Trotskyist take on “the dictatorship of the proletariat” was one that absolutely reviled any notion of liberal democracy as a major impediment in delaying the seizure of power by the working class. Laclau and Mouffe contend that “it is important to understand that liberal democracy is not the enemy to be destroyed in order to create, through revolution, a completely new society,” they explain that “the problem with ‘actually existing’ liberal democracies is not with their constitutive values crystallized in the principles of liberty and equality for all, but with the system of power which redefines and limits the operation of those values.”¹⁷⁸ The reductionist singularity of understanding “true democracy” as a dictatorship of the proletariat fails to grasp the scope of how the masses of oppressed people are simultaneously impacted by the equivalent struggles with white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, etc. If the Left continues to fail to understand the capaciousness of how oppression operates globally and collaboratively, their efforts will always fall short of their intended revolutionary outcomes.

¹⁷⁷ Laclau and Mouffe did not coin this term. However, since it has been popularized, they have not opposed its usage as a way to describe their work on the condition that it is properly understood as: “the process of reappropriation of an intellectual tradition, as well as the process of going beyond it” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014: ix).

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, xv.

This is not however to suggest that the Marxist understanding of dialectics is to be abandoned entirely. On the contrary, Laclau and Mouffe emphasize their wariness with the neoliberal notion that the current landscape of democracy is simply a competition among a plurality of interests taking place on neutral terrain. They maintain that acknowledging plurality reveals a more dialectical assessment of power relations, which does not blur the lines of who holds political and economic power and who does not. The inclusion of a pluralistic discourse, of more perspectives and voices, and the validation of equivalent struggles does not mean a departure from the objective of revolution. They insist that the Left must “tackle issues of both ‘redistribution’ and recognition’,” this is what they mean by “radical and plural democracy.”¹⁷⁹ Viewed through this post-Marxist lens, BLM can be understood as a project in the process of envisioning and materializing a “radical” and “plural” democracy. It is not indecisiveness that has kept it from mobilizing into a revolutionary movement explicitly and precisely intent on the destruction of the bourgeois order akin to the Black Panther Party or the Bolshevik revolution. Rather, it is the careful process of expanding its capacity in accounting for the complexities of Black life and positionality that will serve to prevent the current movement from succumbing to the reductionism of its predecessors.

The Common Sense of Class Intersectionality

Trinidadian born communist activist and theorist Claudia Jones (1915-1964) cultivated an expression of Marxist thought and praxis that accounted for the intersectional web of positionalities such as gender, race, and migrancy that is intertwined with class positionality. Within the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) in the mid-20th century, she pointed out how the underutilization of Black women’s intellectual agency, perspective, and leadership was a disservice to the Party, and, moreover, how Black women’s leadership and theoretical perspectives are in fact central to the vitality and success of the Party. She states that “The bourgeoisie is fearful of the militancy of the Negro woman, and for good reason. The capitalists know, far better than many progressives seem to know, that once Negro women undertake action, the militancy of the whole Negro people, and thus of the anti-imperialist coalition, is greatly enhanced.”¹⁸⁰ In this view, revolution in the U.S. context hinges upon the recognition by the working class that the history of gendered and racialized labor exploitation suffered by Black women uniquely qualifies them to lead and approach anti-capitalist activism from a critical outlook that can only be understood at the intersection of being women and being Black. Jones understands Black women to be the subject of what she calls *super-exploitation* due to the multifaceted ways in which they experience capitalist oppression in severely more intensified ways than their white women and Black male counterparts. In calling attention to the income disparities across gender and race, she contends that this super-exploitation is “revealed not only in that she receives, as woman, less than equal pay for equal work with men, but in that the majority of Negro women get less than half the pay of white women.”¹⁸¹

The contemporary leftism may evoke the historical perspective that Marxism, as a movement and as a theory, has only begun to incorporate the plurality and multiplicity of identity

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, xviii.

¹⁸⁰ “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” reprinted in *Words of Fire* by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 1995, 108.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 110.

struggles such as gender, class, and migrancy into its analytic framework in the last quarter of the 20th century with the rise of feminist and racial justice activism. The life and legacy of Claudia Jones challenge such notions and reveal that Black women communists and others who embody a plurality of social identities (other than white, heterosexual, and male), have often sought to develop and deploy an expression of Marxist thought that accounts for those intersecting identities. Moreover, the contributions of other Black women communists such as Louise Thompson Patterson, Audley “Queen Mother” Moore, Shirley Graham Du Bois, Maude White, and the formation of the Sojourners for Truth and Justice (a Black women-led radical civil rights organization between 1951-52) show that Claudia Jones was, by no means, alone in her endeavors. In recalling their work, it becomes increasingly clear that it is not so much the case that Black women and other non-white and non-male activists and theorists had not participated in Marxist discourse until the post-civil rights era and at the onset of second-wave feminism, but rather it is that their contributions have traditionally been neglected and ignored. What BLM organizers have recognized from the onset is that not only have these histories been tragically overlooked, but that the tradition of Black radical feminism has always informed the most complete expression of liberation advocacy.

Another dimension of Claudia Jones’ significance is her experiences with migrancy and deportation. She migrated to New York from Trinidad in 1924 at the age of eight, joined the Communist Party and the Young Communist League in 1936, dedicated twenty years of service as a writer, editor, and organizer before being deported in December of 1955 under the McCarran Act¹⁸² for her involvement with CPUSA. She then continued her communist work in London, becomes affiliated with Caribbean members of Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and joins the West Indian Forum and Committee on Racism and International Affairs, and would go on to strengthen both Marxist and Pan-Africanist networks of solidarity until her untimely death in 1964. The trans-national scope of her work as a diasporic subject made her one of the truest embodiments of a global Marxist movement that was not confined to the geopolitical boundaries of a singular nation-state. There is some contention among historians in identifying her as a feminist – or *protofeminist*¹⁸³ – of her day. For instance, John McClendon challenges the notion that she can be identified as a feminist on the basis that “She consistently explained the issues of gender in terms of their connection to class struggle, anti-imperialism, and the battle for peace” rather than from a gender-centered liberation framework. One might even hesitate here to retroactively claim that her ideas were intersectional based on her understanding that “by her [the Black woman’s] active participation contribute to the entire American working class, whose historic mission is the achievement of a Socialist America -- the final and full guarantee of woman’s emancipation.”¹⁸⁴ This passage signifies that while she certainly was aware of the material conditions that impact Black women’s lives, she still believed that the resolution to gender oppression ultimately depended on ending bourgeois class domination. I contend that neither of the above readings disqualify her as a feminist or as a proponent of intersectional consciousness. Just because she understands communist advocacy to be the primary vehicle by which gender and racial justice can be realized, she was still wholly

¹⁸² *The McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950*, also known as the *Subversive Activities Control Act* to supposedly protect the United States against certain un-American and subversive activities by requiring registration of Communist organizations.

¹⁸³ A term that Joy James uses to refer to people who today by certain qualifiers, would be considered feminists in the contemporary era, albeit that they never referred to themselves as such.

¹⁸⁴ Guy-Sheftall, “An End to the Neglect...” in *Words of Fire* (1995), 120.

invested in the fight to end the subordination of women. Through her Marxist-Leninist framework of understanding, she merely idealized the revolutionary vanguard as largely composed of a cadre of exceptional Black women.

The Right to Self-Determination

Far more than the writings of Marx and Engels, what truly catapulted the popularity of Marxist philosophy throughout the global South was the success of the Russian Revolution and Lenin's appeal to incite agitation among the racialized proletariat. In 1919, the Bolsheviks established the headquarters for the Third International in Moscow and it would serve as a highly conducive force in garnering African and Third World participation. Among the Third World revolutionary scholars and activists who recognized the incontrovertible need to grasp a thorough understanding of Soviet history in order to effectively transpose Marxist ideology into an applicable framework in the colonial setting, Walter Rodney was particularly adamant on the matter. Rodney and his contemporaries knew that there was no better reference than the 1917 revolution in Russia of a successful communist revolution implemented amidst a set of circumstances that did not precisely reflect the industrial landscape from which Marx and Engels had predicted that the revolution would manifest. Rodney knew that whatever lessons could be extracted from studying the Bolshevik example would be invaluable for the anti-colonial efforts in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Third World where strategies for unifying the proletariat and the peasantry needed to be devised. He understood this to be a common sense task: "There is no need to justify the selection; understanding the Soviet Union is a priority that is self-evident."¹⁸⁵ However, for the current generation of activists who are far removed from that fervent atmosphere of Marxist and anti-colonial determinism that characterized the mid-20th century, it may be helpful here to review the context in which the postulated need to study the Russian Revolution was assumed to be obvious. Since Marx and Engels sorely underestimated the revolutionary significance of the peasantry, Lenin presented as a more formidable model on how to harness such a sizeable portion of the colonized population into a revolutionary force considering that his vision for the "dictatorship of the proletariat" was predicated on an alliance between workers and peasants. However, just as Lenin needed to adjust Marx and Engel's original iterations of the framework in order for Marxism to be applicable in the Russian context, so too must the colonized revolutionary adjust Lenin's model in order for the framework to be applicable throughout Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Americas. Therefore, Rodney's insistence on dissecting the Russian Revolution is aimed not necessarily at getting African and Third World revolutionaries to precisely replicate the Bolshevik example, but to assess its successes as well as its mistakes in order to develop more thoroughly informed decolonization strategies. He encouraged a reception of Marxism that stresses its indispensability but he also cautioned against any notions of a doctrinaire "step-by-step" dogmatism in its implementation considering that there are conditions unique to the colonial environment that neither Marx nor Lenin could have substantively taken into consideration in developing their frameworks that were, respectively, specific to the western and eastern European contexts in which they were situated. Hence the racialized and colonized revolutionary must carefully assess the peculiarities

¹⁸⁵ Walter Rodney, Jesse J. Benjamin, and Kelley Robin D G., *The Russian Revolution: a View from the Third World* (London: Verso, 2018), 3.

of the conditions in which they are situated in order to effectively craft a Marxist informed strategy that is custom fitted for that environment.

As Kelley and Prashad have observed, more contemporary evaluations of Russian history complicate many of Rodney's assertions, particularly the rather strict binaristic categorization of historians as either bourgeois or Marxist.¹⁸⁶ Indeed, in evaluating the body of Marxist literature produced throughout the mid-20th century landscape of global political and ideological contestation between capitalist and socialist forces, many reductionist tendencies can be found. Scholars today have the hindsight advantage of knowing how the outcomes of this contestation manifested with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 20th century, China's conversion to neoliberalism, and the virtual defeat of revolutionary socialist schemes and the deluge of imperialist forces seeking to countermand Third World revolutionary accomplishments going into the 21st century. Still, the work of Rodney and his leftist contemporaries provide invaluable perspectives of a time and generation in which the collapse of the capitalist system seemed imminent in the wake of the success of Soviet Russia and the fast-paced momentum in which decolonization seemed to be advancing.

It is the task of contemporary activists and historians to interrogate what fueled the leftist optimism of that epoch to assess the possibility of reigniting it in the era of Black Lives Matter; in a time in which it has seemingly been extinguished. That the recent crises suffered by the capitalist system has not largely registered as evidence of the impending need for a socialist order to arise – and therefore the need to develop socialist strategies – but rather as symptoms of the need for continuous reform, is telling of the millennial activist's general posture concerning Marxism. While many will profess a recognition of the need for socialism, the bulk of organized activist work invested in addressing police killings, the prison industrial complex, educational inequity, etc. has largely not been reinforced with the urgency or intentionality of establishing a socialist order. In a way, proponents of the current movement adhere to Marx's early admonition to "ruthlessly critique " every aspect of the bourgeois establishment, but there is a hesitancy to admit a staunch and clearly defined Marxist or socialist alternative. It is as though activists have become bombastically outspoken in declaring our anti-capitalist attitudes, but then fade away into a low unintelligible mumble when they identify as "socialist."

Perhaps this is because that era of fiery Marxist determinism seems rather obscured in the past for many who have no living memory of a time when the downfall of the capitalist system seemed imminent. There is a generational lapse – or rather a break in ideological continuity – between the anti-colonial revolutionary socialists and the millennial milieu of brash social justice activists. At some point in the developmental trajectory of Marxist and anti-capitalist thought, the ideological continuum was disrupted; the proverbial baton of the radical left was fumbled and dropped in the passing of hands. The current generation has managed to pick it up with every intention of carrying it through to the finish line, but we collectively seem to have lost our sense of which direction we're supposed to run. This is not to decry the current wave of social justice advocacy as illegitimate nor to undermine the monumental significance of how this generation of activists have profoundly reshaped the social, cultural, and political landscapes of public discourse through their interventions via street protests, social media engagement, and political work.

Despite their lack of programmatic discipline to formulate more substantive strategies for a socialist revolution, there is nonetheless an unwavering conviction of the need for systemic

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, xxiv.

change; a recognition that “business as usual” needs to be disrupted and the necessity of sustained anti-racist and anti-xenophobic movements as well as gender, queer and trans conscious movements to hold the beast of white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism at bay. This generation of activists have a keen awareness of the need to pick up a megaphone, to march on the streets, to shout and declare the right for our humanity to be recognized, to publish and circulate anti-racist and gender conscious propaganda with social media posts, hashtags, etc. These movements are currently engaged in mitigating the impact of those social and economic disparities that directly affect us, but they have yet to undergird extant resistance efforts with a working socialist platform.

The foremost task in such an undertaking is to be vigilantly wary of the reductionist pitfalls of essentializing activist or political work as strictly either bourgeois or socialist. It may be helpful to adopt a more nuanced understanding of the variance and complexity of our social justice efforts and of our consideration of their revolutionary significance. Too often, activist and political efforts are clumsily and superficially categorized as either revolutionary or reformist when the significance of how the work impacts marginalized lives resists an easily placed categorization. Those proponents of the old guard of Third World revolutionary activism operated from a historical landscape and a set of circumstances in which a global socialist revolution was perceptively within their grasp, therefore it was reasonable for them to reinforce Manichean sensibilities in turning the tide to the advantage of the proletariat. This is reflected throughout their writings during that time. Walter Rodney, for instance, went so far as to determine that “All writers who do not claim to be Marxist, or at least some form of socialist, are solidly in the bourgeois camp”.¹⁸⁷ Again, it is critically important to understand that these sentiments were written and spoken in a time when the socialist order seemed to be gaining tremendous momentum. Today, such a posture dangerously overlooks how certain efforts are necessitated simply by the need for sustenance during this prolonged period of revolutionary dormancy. To decry activist or political work and writing as “solidly” bourgeois at this juncture undermines the importance of how such efforts buoy the day-to-day quality of life through the purveyance of racial capitalism.

Marx and Engels’ anticipation of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” would mean the establishment of proletarian rule on the assumption that the working class would constitute the majority over the bourgeoisie. However, during the time of the Russian Revolution and of subsequent revolutions throughout the Third World, the working class were the minority whilst the peasantry constituted the overwhelming majority. Hence, in those parts of the world that were not highly industrialized, the implementation of proletarian democracy would only result in working class minority rule over the peasant masses. This is one of the cardinal points of contention that orthodox Marxist hold against the Bolshevik project: that revolution was precipitated prematurely by opportunistic zealots masquerading as socialists under conditions in which the working class was underdeveloped and ill prepared to seize power, thereby establishing a “dictatorship” that was far removed from what Marx and Engels would have envisioned. Kautsky and others would have us content with theoretical tinkering and intellectual dialoging as armchair revolutionaries, waiting for the perfect developmental conditions to materialize before ambitioning to mobilize against the bourgeois order. Lenin and the Third World revolutionaries who followed in his wake were innovators who, in their respective eras, sought to translate Marxism into actual policy relevant to the particular conditions of their

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 11.

countries. As Rodney poignantly observes, “it is always in the interests of bourgeois scholars to take Marxism as expressed in a rigid and dogmatic manner, because such dogma is then easily shown to be false when it is faced against experience.”¹⁸⁸

Kautsky’s intellectual critique of revolutionary undertakings that he regarded to be ill timed and sacrilege to authentic Marxist praxis would characterize what is widely recognized today as “social democracy.” Throughout the 19th century, virtually all Marxists regarded themselves as social democrats. In fact even the Second International going into the 20th century was composed of organizations that fashioned themselves as social democratic labor parties. It was precisely at that point in which the orthodox theoreticians began to express their repulsion towards the Bolshevik project that social democracy became distinguished as a critique of revolutionary action. Rodney explains this development as a result of “the improvement in the standard of living of many Western European workers, based on colonial exploitation, caused their representatives to cease talking about revolution, and instead they began to follow the path of class collaboration with the bourgeoisie by the end of the last [19th] century.”¹⁸⁹

The view that premature and coercive politico-cultural attempts at transforming society betrays Marxist theory reflects the orthodox belief that incurring revolution out of turn or in disruption of the natural sequence in which societal transformation is supposed to occur. This is based on an interpretation of the Marxist theory of base and superstructure relations to mean that historical materialism dictates that the base – that is material reality or the mode of production – unilaterally shapes and transforms the superstructure that is culture and political architecture. Therefore, Marxist orthodoxy tends to regard the Russian Revolution as an instance in which the social actors put the cart before the horse in their seizure of power through a reversal of the laws of Marxist theory in which instead of the base affecting the superstructure, it was the superstructure that transformed the base.

Rodney addresses this fallacy by pointing out that while Marx and Engels stressed that the material or economic base is the main determining force in the unfolding development of human history, this does not necessarily mean that under no circumstances can the superstructure or consciousness reciprocally affect the base or matter.¹⁹⁰ In fact, Engels himself sought to clarify that “if somebody twists this [their materialist conception of history] into saying that economic development is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase.”¹⁹¹ Moreover, under what circumstances does revolutionary consciousness emerge in the first place? Was it not under repressive material conditions of tsarist autocracy in Russia that radicalized Lenin and gave birth to the Bolsheviks? Was it not under the abhorrent material conditions of institutional racism in the U.S. from which the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was formed? With consideration to the historical evidence suggesting the non-deterministic pattern in which social, political and economic development unfolds, the need for Black revolutionary expressions of radical action becomes clear. For as much as orthodox Marxists and social democrats may tout their rigorous and disciplined adherence to theory, it is the combustion of Black radical action that propelled movement mobilization across the U.S. While Marxist theory is an essential heuristic for

¹⁸⁸ Walter Rodney, *The Russian Revolution: A View from the Third World* (2018), 110.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 169-171.

¹⁹¹ “Engels to J. Bloch, September 21, 22, 1890,” in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Selected Works*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), 488.

maintaining the structural integrity of a holistic liberation program, it is only the unique force of Black radical insurgency that can launch it out of the atmosphere of intellectual fantasy and gradual reformism.

Chapter 3

Black Proletarian Democracy in Labor Unions

If Marxism and anti-capitalism seem like abstract concepts that lack palpability in the application of advancing the movement for Black lives, it is useful to begin with a critique of material circumstances, particularly in how the U.S. labor force is organized and how it impacts Black workers. While the center-left harangues the radical left with its anxieties concerning practicality, the Black working class has always suffered the liabilities imposed by the impracticality of bourgeois structures. The BLM movement has stubbornly resisted continued attempts of reforming policing institutions to address the issue of state sanctioned violence. Its proponents have fostered the understanding that nothing short of a considerable shift in resources and power away from policing and into democratized community safety institutions would be practical. In understanding that U.S. society and its economy has always been and continues to be built and buoyed by the exploitation of Black workers, the question of practicality is burdened on the bourgeois apologists rather than the anti-capitalists. As political scientist Leon Panitch states, “Reformist politicians who think they can do away with the inherent class inequalities and recurrent crises of capitalist society are the real romantics of our day, themselves clinging to a naive utopian vision of what the world might be. If the current crisis has demonstrated one thing, it is that Marx was the greater realist.”¹⁹² Therefore, the forward push for economic and labor justice for Black workers and their families is predicated simply on the need to democratize and seize control of the ability to shape the policy decisions for the industries that they are pouring their labor power into. White bourgeois hegemony has always imposed the notion that societal transformation must be approached with a wariness of extremism, while absolving the current system of its despotic structures.

This is a premise that has been thoroughly rejected by present and past BLM organizers, many of whom either found their start in political activism with unions or were compelled to be more active in their unions through their BLM activism. For instance, Professor Abdullah and BLM Grassroots Director of Political Education, Audrena Redmond, organized with the California Faculty Association (CFA) for nearly a decade before their involvement in BLM. Many of Abdullah’s former students, members of the PASC such as Funmilola Fagbamila and the author, received their training as organizers while serving as interns with CFA. On the other hand, BLMLA core organizer Jan Williams, who has worked as a school bus driver with LAUSD since 1998, became more active in her union SEIU Local 99 as an extension of her involvement with BLM. “I’ve learned that everything we do is connected,” stated Williams. “For me, the Black Lives Matter movement got me out of my bubble and more active in my union. As a Black mother, it hurts me to see our babies killed in the streets. As a school bus driver, I see the children boarding my bus who are hungry or scared or just lost.”¹⁹³ For many BLM activists, the need for a fundamental shift in worker ownership and control is made apparent through their own working experiences.

¹⁹² Panitch 2009, 145.

¹⁹³ Wayne Huang, “LAUSD Bus Driver Jan Williams on Being a Union Member,” *SEIU Local 99, Member Voices*, August 10, 2017. <https://www.seiu99.org/2017/08/10/lausd-bus-driver-jan-williams-on-being-a-union-member/#>.

Marx and Engels defined the *Dictatorship of the Proletariat* as the seizure of state power of a majority working class from the minority capitalist owners. It is a central concept of their political theory and it has often been misinterpreted to imply the establishment of despotic one-party rule. Since the 20th century saw the prevalence of totalitarian regimes under the banner of “communism,” antidemocratic connotations have been ascribed to Marxist articulations of “dictatorship.” Marx and Engels presumed that this dictatorship would characterize the immediate post revolutionary period as the intermediary phase between socialism and communism under their materialist concept of history. Lenin was keenly aware of this Marxian precedent, even though the success of the Russian Revolution itself defied materialist orthodoxy. He famously stated that “Those who recognize only the class struggle are not yet Marxists... Only he is a Marxist who extends the recognition of the class struggle to the recognition of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”¹⁹⁴ Contrary to popular perceptions of Marxist ideology, Marx himself was not “anti-capitalist” in the sense of being only repulsed by capitalism. In fact he was fascinated by its productive capabilities. He merely understood capitalism to be necessary to launch the industrial era. This materialist concept is of little use to Black, Brown, and Third World communities whose labor, land and resources are violently exploited and upon which this process is entirely dependent on.

Capitalist society is, in various ways across different nations, ruled under a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie; its political and economic decisions are guided by the drive for capital expansion for the benefit of a plutocratic ruling elite. Karl Kautsky explained that Marx and Engels intended for the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” to mean the reorganization of the state to maintain the common ownership of the means of production, not an actual authoritarian dictatorship. For this reason, it may be helpful to alternatively refer to this concept as *proletarian democracy* to delineate it from its autocratic and totalitarian connotations. That the accomplishment of this inversion of power will likely necessitate violence and subversion has drawn the criticism that the means by which the ends are achieved makes proletarian revolution as equally unjust as capitalism. The fallacy of this moral high ground is the failure to recognize that the state under the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie is in itself a tool for the execution of institutional and structural violence. It subjects the working class into a precarious existentiality and it condemns the racialized underclass into an impoverished existentiality. This violence is also manifested in the disproportionate rates at which Black people are killed by police, in the overrepresentation of Black people in prisons, and of course, the ruthless exploitation of the Black community’s labor power. In each of these circumstances, Black workers are exploited while being denied the ability to hold decision making power for the industries that they work for. Therefore, racial justice means nothing without the seizure of power for the Black workers and the democratization of labor. Nothing short of this realization can be considered socialism in the proper sense of the term.

As we discussed in the previous chapter, the capitalist system is constituted with white supremacist and heteropatriarchal properties. Therefore, we will define *Black Proletarian Democracy* as a strategic framework for labor empowerment anchored in understanding that anti-Black racism and hetero-patriarchy are interlocked in maintaining the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. Therefore, taking control of the distribution of wealth and the means of production in the U.S. necessitates the incorporation and centering of race and gender justice frameworks. The obvious vehicle by which these ideals can be realized is of course labor union organizing. With the devastation that the COVID-19 virus wrought on the U.S. economy and the

¹⁹⁴ V.I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, August-September 1917.

unprecedented rates of unemployment and homelessness, the fallacy of neoliberal stability has never been more exposed. The country sorely lacked resources for crisis management; to provide adequate health care services, protective equipment for health service providers, relief for renters and homeowners, and for small businesses; but it seemed to be able to invest hefty bailout packages towards large corporations and financial institutions.¹⁹⁵ The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) was a 2.2 trillion dollar effort to presumably allocate federal funds to those in need, particularly underserved markets. Its actual impact was dubious at best. Many suspected that it granted luxurious tax breaks for millionaires and scantily benefited everyone else. As a result, nearly half of Black small businesses closed with a sharp 41% decline by August of 2020.¹⁹⁶ Comparatively, white businesses fell by 17%. The needs of those whose lives were at greater risk of exposure to disease laboring as essential workers were being egregiously neglected while the plutocratic elite seemed to be getting pampered. As government officials took up the slogan “We are all in this together,” the fallacy of the statement could not be made more bare.¹⁹⁷

The Impact of COVID-19 on Black Workers

The COVID-19 virus affected everyone’s lives in some way, but the magnitude of its impact varied across racial communities. Black and Brown workers suffered more severe circumstances of financial and health insecurity than white workers. The Economic Policy Institute charted the immediate impacts of the pandemic on employment rates and working conditions in comparing the data between February 2020, the month preceding the stay-at-home orders, and April 2020, after a month into the pandemic.¹⁹⁸ Overall unemployment rates immediately rose for all people across racial groups, but remained highest for Black people whose rates spiked to 16.7% from 5.8% compared to whites whose rates spiked to 14.2% from 3.1%. Black women suffered the largest loss. Their employment-to-population ratio dropped from 58.4% to 47.4% (-11) compared to 60.7% to 50.5% (-10.2) for Black men, 55.4% to 45.5% (-9.9) for white women, and 67.5% to 58.3% (-9.2) for white men. More than one in six Black workers lost their jobs in this time period.¹⁹⁹ At a glance, these figures may not seem to be too drastic, but when accounting for how Black families tend to have fewer earners in a household, have lower incomes, and lower liquid wealth than white families, the disparities are clear. Black workers are also about twice as likely to be unemployed than white workers at every level of education. Wage gap inequality is also wide at every level of education with Black workers

¹⁹⁵ Alana Anbramson, “‘No Lessons Have Been Learned.’ Why the Trillion-Dollar Coronavirus Bailout Benefited the Rich,” *TIME*, June 18, 2020. <https://time.com/5845116/coronavirus-bailout-rich-richer/>.

¹⁹⁶ Claire Kramer Mills and Jessica Battisto, “Double Jeopardy: COVID-19’s Concentrated Health and Wealth Effects in Black Communities,” Federal Reserve Bank of New York, August 2020.

¹⁹⁷ Ryan Nolan, “‘We Are All in This Together!’ Covid-19 and the Lie of Solidarity,” *Irish Journal of Sociology* 29, no. 1 (April 2021): 102–6. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0791603520940967>.

¹⁹⁸ Elise Gould and Valerie Wilson, “Black workers face two of the most lethal preexisting conditions for coronavirus—racism and economic inequality,” *Economic Policy Institute*, June 1, 2020. <https://www.epi.org/publication/black-workers-covid/>.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

being paid 73 cents to the white dollar. Black women in particular are paid only 64 cents on the white man's dollar.²⁰⁰

In the pre-pandemic economy, the real median household income for Black families was \$41,692 compared to white families whose median household income was \$70,642.²⁰¹ Half of all Black households had only one earner. Only 32.2% of Black households have two or more earners compared to 48.4% of white households. This of course means that the impact of unemployment is more dire for Black households who suffer a complete loss of income when their only earner loses their job. Black families also have considerably less cash reserves to fall back on in crisis situations compared to white families. Overall, the mean value of all transaction accounts for Black families is \$8,762 compared to white families with \$49,529.²⁰² Moreover, single working parents comprise a large subset of Black one-earner households compared to white one-earner households. Black women are more likely to be heads of households at 26.4% overall and 14.4% in households with minor children compared to white women heads of households who are only 8.6% overall and only 4% in households with minor children.²⁰³ This means that Black women are three times more likely to have to balance the multitude of demands of work, online distance learning, and child care responsibilities.

Those who did not lose their jobs were more likely than their white counterparts to be in front-line jobs categorized as “essential,” leaving them especially vulnerable to COVID-19 exposure. The considerable racial disparity in access to benefits leave Black workers less likely to have paid sick days and also less likely to be able to work from home than white workers.²⁰⁴ Before the pandemic, a 58.7% share of Black workers have paid sick leave compared to a 66.6% share of white workers; a 19.7% share of Black workers could work from home compared to a 29.9% of white workers.²⁰⁵ Black workers have also been plagued with a variety of pre-pandemic health insecurities that put them at even greater risk. Due to the collusion of environmental racism and concentrated poverty, they have far higher rates of chronic illnesses associated with greater vulnerability to COVID-19 such as asthma, diabetes, hypertension and obesity compared to whites. They are also 60% more likely to be uninsured than white workers. Since Black households are more than twice as likely to live in densely populated multigenerational housing structures, they are at greater risk of infection and fatally succumbing to the virus. As of the summer of 2021, Black Americans make up only 12.5% of the U.S. population, but accounted for 22.4% of COVID-19 deaths.²⁰⁶ More men than women lost their lives to the virus across all racial groups, but the mortality rate for Black women was three times higher than white men.

As we discussed in the previous chapter, these disparities were not created by the pandemic, they were only exacerbated by it. Considering the multitude of ways in which Black

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Valerie Wilson and Jhacova Williams, “Racial and ethnic income gaps persist amid uneven growth in household incomes,” *Economic Policy Institute*, September 11, 2019. <https://www.epi.org/blog/racial-and-ethnic-income-gaps-persist-amid-uneven-growth-in-household-incomes/>.

²⁰² EPI analysis of Federal Reserve 2016 Survey of Consumer Finances combined extract data accessed from the UC Berkeley Survey Documentation and Analysis website.

²⁰³ U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Table S0201.

²⁰⁴ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Job Flexibilities and Work Schedules, 2017 and 2018; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, American Time Use Survey microdata.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Provisional Death Counts for Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19): Weekly State-Specific Data Updates.

communities are the most severely impacted by COVID-19 and how they have long faced inequities pertaining to employment rates, income disparities, access to benefits, and access to healthcare. The effort to shift policies to address these inequities must begin with the leadership development of those who are most severely impacted by them.

The Leadership of Black Women Workers

Throughout U.S. history, a considerable majority of Black women have always worked outside of their own homes. They have been vital contributors to the country's economic growth and prosperity as enslaved unpaid workers and as undervalued and underappreciated members of the industrial workforce. Black women lead all women in labor force participation even after entering motherhood, but their earnings, their visibility, and their recognition is nowhere near commensurate with the value that they produce for the companies and industries in which they are employed. Black women have increasingly become represented in management and professional fields, but are still over-represented in low-wage and poverty level jobs.²⁰⁷ Overall, their unionization rate has plummeted from 27.4% of Black women workers in 1983 down to 13.3% in 2020,²⁰⁸ but the proportion of Black women members in relation to overall union density levels shows that they have actually been the most reliable supporters of unions throughout this time period. In turn, labor unions have continued to serve as a significant economic survival tool for Black women in keeping them from descending into abject poverty and in fighting against workplace discrimination. Black women who work under collective bargaining agreements earn higher wages and enjoy greater access to benefits than women who are not union members.²⁰⁹ For low-wage earners, being a union member has more impact than education level in determining wage and benefit increases.²¹⁰

In their groundbreaking 2007 analysis of unions, Kate Bronfenbrenner and Dorian T. Warren observed that despite having been hit the hardest by low-wage employment, workers of color, particularly Black women, were organizing successfully at disproportionate rates compared to their white counterparts, leading them to conclude that "The future of the U.S. Labor Movement hinges on Unions' ability to organize workers of color, women and most especially women of color."²¹¹ Data on union elections showed that women of color had the highest election win rates among all demographic groups: units that were majority people of color saw a 53% win rate, units that were majority women at 58% rate and units with majority

²⁰⁷ Channelle Hardy and Avis Jones-DeWeever, "Black Women in the Economy," *Black Women in the United States, 2014: Progress and Challenges Black Women's Roundtable*, National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, March 2014, 20-24. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2014/03/27/National-Politics/Stories/2FinalBlackWomenintheUS2014.pdf>.

²⁰⁸ Bureau Labor of Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor: Union Members 2020

²⁰⁹ Steven Pitts, "Black Wokrers and the Public Sector," Center for Labor Research and Education, UC Berkeley Labor Center, April 2011.

²¹⁰ Janelle Jones and John Schmitt, "Union Advantage for Black Workers," Center for Economic Policy Research, February 2014.

²¹¹ Kate Bronfenbrenner and Dorian T. Warren, "Race, Gender, and the Rebirth of Trade Unionism," *New Labor Forum* 16, no. 3/4 (2007): 142-48. Accessed June 25, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40342723>.

women of color at 82%.²¹² Units with a majority of white men saw the lowest win rates at 35%. These rates were undoubtedly attributed to the fact that new union members were primarily women workers of color, revealing the obvious advantages of unions devoting more resources to organizing women of color and prompting the need for unions to center race and gender justice frameworks. Yet, the invisibility of Black women's labor leadership has persisted. The consequences of failing to leverage Black women's labor organizing success is not only consequential to the plight of Black workers, but to the plight of all workers who stand to benefit from the strategic advantages of investing in the leadership development of Black women.

The 21st century has seen the steady emergence of more and more Black women seizing leadership roles in union labors. For many of these women, it was their familial customs of expressing care and support that guided their upward path into these leadership positions. In 2004, Clayola Brown became the first female president of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, the oldest constituency group of the AFL-CIO that has promoted racial equality and justice since it was founded in 1965. She had previously served as the education director for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union. Brown reflects on how Black women in the labor movement have "carried the culture of our families into our work. The needs of our families made [it] real clear why we had to do what we did."²¹³ She attributes Black women's ability to engage in collaborative leadership development to this culture of care and mutual support translated from Black familial practices of collective care. "I was able to meet some very strong sisters in the movement and together, we nurtured one another. Among us, the mentoring process was one of sharing as opposed to following – and of being there for each other when times got hard and hot."²¹⁴ In 2007, Arlene Hold Baker became the first Black woman to hold the post of executive vice president of the AFL-CIO in Washington D.C. She also stresses the importance of mentorship support in her ascendancy. For Baker, it is an aspect of organizing that must be strengthened in order to expand leadership opportunities for Black women. "You can't think your job is done when you have one or two examples of... black women who hold a leadership role... What we've done right is we've opened up the doors. And where we've probably got a lot of work to do is in retention and having people feel that they are totally part of the team."²¹⁵

For others, particularly those descended from Black migrant communities, unionization is a tool for building collective community power. In 2019, Roxanne Brown became the International Vice President At Large for the United Steelworkers (USW). She previously served as the Legislative Director for the USW. Her focus is on a range of policy and regulatory issues for the union's 1.2 million members. Her affinity for worker's advocacy is rooted in the values of industrious determination instilled in her by her Jamaican immigrant mother and aunts. "Looking back at my aunt's path, and the path that my mom was able to take as a registered nurse and a member of the nurses' union, I now understand what it meant for their wages. We lived in a one-bedroom apartment with five of us. Because of their union wages, one person got an apartment. Then someone else got an apartment. And then people started buying houses. That's a lot of power right there." For Roxanne Brown, unionization is critical for the collective

²¹² Kate Bronfenbrenner, "Organizing Women: The Nature and Process of Union Organizing Efforts Among US Women Workers Since the 1990s," *Work and Occupation* 32 no.4 (2005), 1-23.

²¹³ Clayola Brown, "And together we nurtured one another: the importance of mentoring in shaping young and senior leaders," *And Still I Rise: Black Women Labor Leaders' Voices | Power | Promise*, 2015, 15-17.

²¹⁴ *Ibid*, 16.

²¹⁵ Arlene Holt Baker, "The ceiling is cracking a little, but it is not fully cracked" *And Still I Rise: Black Women Labor Leaders' Voices | Power | Promise*, 2015, 30-33.

uplift of Black lives in stating that “I want young people, people of color, immigrants, and women to know that unions are about power... economic power... educational power – because those wages allow people to send their kids to school.”²¹⁶

Resisting the Expropriation of Black Labor

In understanding the workings and historical development of racial capital, the vitality of Black leadership in labor organizing is underscored by the need to reverse or disarticulate the synonymy of labor exploitation and racial oppression. The U.S. economy was founded on the exploitation of African labor and the appropriation of indigenous American land. Enslaved people established the early economic infrastructure of the colonies in the production of cotton and tobacco commodities. The slave trade also financed the Industrial Revolution in the making and expansion of the global capitalist economy.²¹⁷ The history of Black labor resistance, therefore, finds its origins at the onset of the slave trade. For instance, Black women risked their lives during slavery by organizing work slowdowns and exercising other forms of resistance in an effort to improve their working conditions. The history of Black Americans and labor unions, however, begins in the aftermath of the Civil War. From the onset of Black people’s entry into the U.S. workforce post-emancipation, it was clear that white labor interests would not readily embrace Black workers as allies. In fact, white-led unions were actually more readily inclined to regard Black workers as competitors in securing a positional advantage in relation to the elite capitalist class.²¹⁸ Here, we find no better example of the pitfalls of class reductionism: the role that racial hierarchies play in obstructing class solidarity among workers across racial groups. Therefore, Black workers have had to first develop organizing bodies among themselves before launching labor rights campaigns that *all* workers would eventually reap the benefits of.

This history of Black organized labor is telling of how (1) Black worker mobilization is at the crux of any hopes of deploying a labor movement for establishing proletarian democracy for all workers in the U.S. and (2) Black working women (along with Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian women) have always been the economic backbone of the U.S. economy and therefore play a vital leadership role in uplifting certain aspects of labor that may not be readily apparent to others. Because of the *essential* nature of their labor, U.S. industries would be rendered inoperable and bourgeois society would altogether cease to function if they collectively stopped working. This is most true of women of color, particularly of Black and Brown women because of how they dominate reproductive and domestic labor.

One of the earliest all-Black organized labor efforts was the striking washerwomen of 1866 in Jackson, Mississippi. With the abolition of slavery, the south reconfigured its economy with Black women comprising a large portion of the workforce as domestic laborers. A group of laundresses formed the Washerwomen of Jackson – an organization that some have argued was

²¹⁶ Roxanne Brown, “This is the new face of labor: an unexpected advocate for the rights of Steelworkers and all working people,” *And Still I Rise: Black Women Labor Leaders’ Voices | Power | Promise*, 2015, 19-21.

²¹⁷ Eric Williams and Colin A. Palmer, *Capitalism and Slavery*, (Chapel Hill; London: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

²¹⁸ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, And The Black Working Class*, (United Kingdom: Free Press, 1996).

the actual first Black union as well as the very first trade union in Mississippi.²¹⁹ They sent a resolution to Mayor D.N. Barrows demanding a “uniform rate for our labor” at \$1.50 per day for washing, \$15 a month for family washing, and \$10 a month for single people. Not much is documented on what became of this organization or what the results of their demands were, but their leadership did inspire other Black workers to organize such as a group of freedmen who also looked to regulate the price for wages.²²⁰ Just as with the BLM movement, these developments were reported by some editors as being agitated by “Northern” outsiders. “In reality, these forms of struggle were not the creations of outside agitators. They were a new development in a long tradition of struggle waged by [B]lack people as plantation slaves.”²²¹

Another one of the most profound and better documented historical examples of the potency of Black working women’s organizing power is the Atlanta Washerwomen Strike of 1881.²²² Atlanta was only beginning to develop in the 1880s and the city was lagging behind in terms of the technological amenities enjoyed in the North.²²³ Laundry work was dreadfully tedious because southern white women could not send their dirty clothes to commercial laundry services that utilized laundry machines. Black women worked harrowingly long hours for the meager wages of four to eight dollars a month. The only way that they could increase their earnings was by adding more clients. Not only was performing the labor itself exhausting, but they had to make their own soap from scratch, be responsible for collecting the gallons of water from wells and pumps, and they had to dry and iron the clothes after they were washed. In July of 1881, 20 laundresses formed a trade organization called the Washing Society. Their objectives were to increase their pay, demand respect, and establish a uniform rate at \$1 per dozen pounds of wash. They called a strike to achieve these objectives. These women were well aware that without their collective labor power, white southern society would not be able to function under the heap of filthy laundry. Their resolve was clear: if their demands were not met, then white women would have to wash their own laundry. Within three weeks, the Washing Society grew to 3,000 strikers. They faced intense opposition from municipal authorities. Many of them were arrested and fined, but the laundresses were not deterred. The City Council eventually conceded with granting nonprofit tax status to commercial laundry businesses. This incredible victory demonstrated what the power of labor organizing is capable of when it is driven by an unassailable resolve that U.S. businesses, industries, and society at large would collapse without a stable Black labor force.

Black Union Formations

In the immediate aftermath of emancipation, Chicago tycoon George M. Pullman began hiring thousands of African-American men, many of whom were former slaves, to serve white

²¹⁹ Ken Lawrence, “Mississippi’s First Labor Union,” *Understanding and Fighting White Supremacy: A Collection*, 1976, 24-25. <http://www.sojournertruth.net/mississippifirst.pdf>.

²²⁰ *Ibid*, 24.

²²¹ *Ibid*, 25.

²²² Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present*, Ukraine: Basic Books, 2009, 128.

²²³ Tera W. Hunter “African-American Women Workers’ Protest in the New South,” *OAH Magazine of History* 13, no. 4 (1999): 52–55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163311>.

passengers traveling across the country on his company's luxury railroad sleeping cars. Pullman exclusively hired white men as his conductors and exclusively hired only Black men to work as porters. Their duties included the grunt work of lugging baggage, shining shoes, setting up and cleaning the sleeping berths, and catering to passengers. Pullman was openly racist in his reasoning for only hiring Black porters, particularly former slaves: because he believed that they would best know how to cater to his customers' every whim for long hours and dirt wages. They were overworked, underpaid and endured racist mistreatment, but the opportunity was comparably one of the best options available at that time. Although Pullman upheld deplorable work conditions, Black porters took full advantage of what the company offered in the making of a new Black "middle class." The job even came to be regarded as a coveted career because it was comparatively less strenuous than field labor and it gave Black workers the unique ability to travel across the country. By the early 20th century, the Pullman Company became the largest single employer of Black men in the U.S. during a time when most businesses would not hire them. However much they may have been the envy of Black folks working in other industries, they were still the worst paid compared to their white employees and they were worked to exhaustion, at about over 400 hours a month, with very little time off.²²⁴

Most white Pullman employees were organized with the American Railway Union, but they refused to include Black workers. Hence, in 1925, A. Philip Randolph organized what is more popularly recognized as the very first all-Black union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP).²²⁵ They looked to increase their wages and establish limitations on their monthly working hours. After over a decade of struggling against intense opposition by the Pullman Company, the BSCP would be the first union of Black workers to come to an agreement with a major U.S. company in 1937. They secured a considerable wage increase and set a 240 hour limit to their monthly working hours.²²⁶ More than this, their historic achievement set the tone for a new era of Black worker organizing in the decades leading to the Civil Rights movement, it fueled the Great Migration, and it contributed to the growth of a Black professional class.

The legacy of the BSCP would inspire Black labor organizing efforts for generations to come. Later in 1937, 400 Black women tobacco stemmers at the Richmond, VA Tobacco Industry mobilized a spontaneous strike at the Carrington and Michaux plant in their demand for improved worker conditions.²²⁷ They succeeded in achieving a wage increase, establishing an 8-hour work day and a 40-hour work week. In 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed, but it exempted domestic and agricultural work – two labor sectors that are most populated by Black workers. Because white-led unions continued to exclude them, Black women and men sued to gain access to the AFL unions to institute "Operation Dixie" – the last attempt at organizing Southern workers. These advocates would form the organizing base of Black public sector workers that would go on to link labor activism with the forthcoming Civil Rights movement.²²⁸

²²⁴ Livia Gershon, "The Historic Achievement of the Pullman Porter's Union," *JSTOR Daily*, February 1, 2016. <https://daily.jstor.org/historic-achievement-pullman-porters-union/>.

²²⁵ Preston Valien, "The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters," *Phylon (1940-1956)* 1, no. 3 (1940): 224-38. Accessed June 23, 2021. doi:10.2307/271990.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Teresa Albano, "This month in history: 400 Black women tobacco workers strike over wages," *Medium*, May 10, 2019. <https://terriealbano.medium.com/this-month-in-history-400-black-women-tobacco-workers-strike-over-wages-f1824cab54b>

²²⁸ Barbara Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor – Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO*, (Temple University Press, 1988).

In 1941, A. Philip Randolph looked to mobilize a mass march on Washington to protest the exclusion of Black soldiers from World War II defense jobs and New Deal programs. A day before the event, President Franklin D. Roosevelt met with him and agreed to issue an Executive Order 8802 forbidding discrimination against workers in those industries by establishing the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC), so Randolph decided to cancel the march. Congress would, however, cut off funding and dissolve the FEPC by 1946. With the forward momentum of Martin Luther King Jr.'s rise to prominence and the organizing power of the NAACP, Randolph again planned another march on Washington and successfully mobilized nearly 25,000 demonstrators in 1957. This would only be a prelude to the historic 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in which 250,000 demonstrators gathered at the Lincoln Memorial. Although the march is most popularly remembered for Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, its focus was actually employment discrimination.

Black Alienated Labor

These histories of Black organized labor throughout the 20th century reveals another conceptual hazard of orthodox Marxism: the materialist acceptance or justification of slavery, segregation, and colonialism as necessary processes in the developmental trajectory towards socialism. Marx and Engels anticipated a post-capitalist phase of development to usher in a socialist and then communist future in which the social and psychological alienation created by the mundane monotony and drudgery of performing menial and uninspiring labor would be ameliorated. However, this luxurious fantasy of a technologically automated society freed from the need for human beings to labor as such may seem like a ludicrous notion for those of who have not experienced the privileges of being relatively spared from tedious labor; men who traditionally are not expected to perform the larger share of domestic and reproductive labor, whites who are not racially assigned the larger share of performing menial and manual labor, and affluent people who typically abscond "grunt work." No group in the U.S. has had to bear this burden of demeaning and soul draining labor more than Black people. Through slavery, segregation and the neoliberal era, Black people have collectively toiled and exerted the most in terms of their labor power while benefitting the least in enjoying the fruits of their own labor.

If Marx and Engels understood the process of development to be a fixed sequential inevitability, then Black, Brown, and Third world laborers are posited as mere sacrificial lambs for the terrible but necessary capitalist progression towards a socialist society. The notion that socialism can only be achieved if and only if the preconditions for its realization are met through the completion of capitalism's evolution would have the overworked and underpaid Black underclass masses in the U.S. and the brutally exploited non-western laborers idly putting their fates in the hands of white revolutionary vanguard. This has always been an unacceptable premise for Black and Third World labor activists. No one possesses a greater sense of urgency in pushing for revolutionary solutions than those who have suffered the brunt of the societal liabilities created by capitalist society. This is why Black leadership in labor activism is integral to the effort to seize democratic control of U.S. labor industries rather than continuing the cyclical and never ending haggle for better wages and benefits.

The Prospects of Labor Organizing

Despite the devastation and instability wrought by the recent waves of economic crisis, activists and intellectuals alike have largely failed to develop a cohesive large-scale movement for socialist change. Labor organizing in particular has yet to emerge as a formidable force in the 21st century. This comes as no surprise considering the stark decline of trade union participation amongst workers over the decades. Corporate profits are at an all-time high while wages in terms of percentage of the economy are nearing an all-time low. The U.S. labor movement was once a robust force. When the massive strike movements of the Great Depression successfully pressured the U.S. corporate class to legalize the right for workers to bargain collectively and form unions, it ushered in an era of union might that would thrive through the post-war decades of the 1950s and 60s. Corporations had no choice but to recognize their legitimacy. However, the “progressive” public benefits legislation such as the Social Security Act thoroughly neglected Black workers, particularly women, despite their high union participation rates. Larry DeWitt argues that the restrictive coverage policy was not inherently motivated by racial bias considering that it excluded a wide variety of labor sectors on the basis of occupation rather than race.²²⁹ But even if racial bias was not intended in its coverage, neither was racial equity and the recognition of the discriminatory practices that barred Black people from the labor sectors that the policy focused on – commerce and industry.²³⁰ Therefore the outcome of neglecting Black workers is the same regardless of whether or not the terms of the neglect were blatantly discriminatory. In terms of the labor market, 50% of Black women were in the labor force compared to only 16.5% of white women. The famous influx of women coming into the workforce in the 1970s amidst second wave feminism was significant only in that more white women were coming in. Black workers overall held the highest organization rates with 40% for Black men and nearly 25% for Black women in the private sector.²³¹ In the last quarter of the 20th century, deindustrialization and the onset of economic neoliberalism thinned the potency of union organizing.²³² For decades, Black unionization rates in the private sector have outpaced white workers. In the industrial Midwest, unionization rates of Black women in the private sector would peak at 40%. However, just as Black union membership had peaked, unionization rates overall began to plummet. And while unionization rates for the public sector have increased, private-sector union decline has exacerbated wage inequality between Black and white workers, especially among women workers. In 1865, Marx observed that under capitalism, wages were “settled by the continuous struggle between capital and labor, the capitalist constantly tending to reduce wages to their physical minimum, and to extend the working day to its physical maximum, while the working man constantly presses in the opposite direction.”²³³ A century and a half later, this tension between workers and employers continues to rage on. Under the faux

²²⁹ Which included agricultural and domestic workers, self-employed individuals, the nonprofit sector, professionals like doctors and lawyers, persons aged 65 years or older, and employees of federal, state, or local governments.

²³⁰ Larry DeWitt, “The Decision to Exclude Agricultural and Domestic Workers from the 1935 Social Security Act,” *Social Security Bulletin*, Vol. 70, No. 4, 2010. <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v70n4/v70n4p49.html>.

²³¹ Rosenfeld and Kleykamp 2012, 1461.

²³² Gunn, Dwyer. “What Caused the Decline of Unions in America?” *Pacific Standard*. April 24, 2018.

<https://psmag.com/economics/what-caused-the-decline-of-unions-in-america>.

²³³ Marx, Karl. “Value, Price and Profit,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 20 (New York: International Publishers, 1985), 146.

mantle of economic liberty, of “unfettered free market” determination, the neoliberal order has, in the last fifty years, exacerbated economic inequality. Far from producing a longstanding era of capitalist prosperity that its proponents anticipated, neoliberalism has in actuality fostered a system of corporate welfare. While the distribution of government assistance to impoverished communities has been propagated with anti-Black and xenophobic notions that U.S. American tax dollars are wasted to support the lazy and shiftless who refuse to work and “illegal” immigrants, neoliberalism seems to always welcome government assistance when it is on the corporations’ behalf. In every instance of crisis, the federal government has not only rescued the banks and corporations time and time again, it has also allowed corporate profits to skyrocket while workers wages have remained stagnant.

The Precipitous Decline of Union Density 1970-2008

High inflation in the 1970s prompted aggressive interest rate increases that decimated the manufacturing sector in the United States. By and large, neoliberalism has permeated an atmosphere of existential angst, misery and precariousness for the global working class in its decimation of labor unions. The dominance of neoliberal policy was firmly established and exemplified by the elections of Margaret Thatcher in Britain in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in 1980. The efforts of striking members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) were swiftly thwarted when Reagan summarily fired 11,700 employees, dismantling their union within months of being formed. Unemployment went up by an unprecedented rate in the 1980s: 10.8% at its peak in 1982 (the highest since the great depression) and an average rate of 7.2% throughout the decade. Black unemployment in particular reached a staggering high of 21.2% in 1982 and an average rate of 15.1% throughout that decade.²³⁴ Moreover, the “trickle-down” economics of the Reagan administration exacerbated these effects with a policy model that emphasized low taxes and market deregulation. These developments fundamentally altered the composition of the labor force, thereby changing the overall significance of union organizing for workers.

In 1990, economist Henry Farber observed that waning union density was largely attributed to (1) an increase in employer resistance to unionization in lieu of increased product market competitiveness and (2) a decrease in demand for union representation by nonunion workers due to an increase in their satisfaction with their jobs and a decline in their beliefs that unions are able to improve wages and working conditions.²³⁵ The U.S. then underwent an immense economic boom of unprecedented growth throughout the 1990s that seemingly solidified the triumph of capitalism over communism. This sharp increase in productivity generated an incredible growth in employment (by 28 million from 1990 to 2000) and a growth of earnings in finance, insurance and real estate.²³⁶ This boom saw significant improvements in Black employment rates as well. In fact, the employed share of the Black population grew faster

²³⁴ Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

²³⁵ Farber 1990, S75.

²³⁶ Marcus, Morton J. A Graphic Overview of Employment and Earnings in the 1990s. Accessed April 16, 2020. https://www.ibrc.indiana.edu/ibr/2002/fall02/fall02_art4.html.

than that of whites during this time. Black teenagers in particular experienced a much larger growth in employment rates in the service industry than white teenagers.²³⁷

Given the downward turn of the manufacturing sector, the advent of outsourcing in response to the opening of overseas markets, and the dominant impression that this period of economic prosperity would effectively purvey fair working conditions, the prospects of unionization were never more dismal. In the interest of maximizing profits, employers ardently sought to eradicate established unions and were intent on strongly discouraging nonunion workers from organizing with threats of dismissal or hiring permanent replacements for striking workers during labor disputes. The gains and growth of the 90s had effectively lulled mainstream U.S. America with the perception that the promise of capitalist prosperity was going to be kept and that the post-Civil Rights horizon would increasingly narrow the economic disparities between whites and racial minorities -- on the condition that Black and Brown people overcome their supposed cultural deficiencies which are presumed to be the only factors keeping them from experiencing success in this revitalized meritocratic bonanza.

That era of prosperity however was confined to the decade. True to the unstable nature of capitalism that Marx and Engels thoroughly emphasized, the ongoing quest for capital expansion throughout the 90s inevitably resulted in catastrophe by the turn of the century. By 2001 the economy would plummet into a recession. The stock-market bubble had burst, several corporate enterprises were mired in scandal, and the market plunged. The forceful thrust of deregulation, advanced by the corporate hubris of an unwavering faith in the markets, sent the economy into a jolting downturn. The chairman of Bill Clinton's Council of Economic Advisers, Joseph Stiglitz, observed that while there was some mismanagement on the part of the economic team under George W. Bush, the forces that were largely responsible for this downturn were set in motion long before that administration took office. He states that "If there was ever a time to *not* push deregulation further, the nineties was it."²³⁸

There was optimism that the election of Barack Obama in 2008 would ease the passage of the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) which would make it easier for workers to organize. In December 2010, he decided to extend Bush's tax cuts for the rich.²³⁹ His first term showed little resolve in supporting unions. His embrace of charter schools betrayed the teachers' unions who strongly supported him and he wholly ignored labor issues on trade and healthcare. His second term saw the implementation of pro-worker executive orders raising the federal contractor pay to at least \$10 an hour and prohibiting contractor discrimination against queer and trans workers, but his administration's latent efforts could not turn the tide of anti-unionism from the right.²⁴⁰ Overall, unions lost about half a million members during Obama's presidency even though the workforce grew by more than nine million workers. It became glaringly evident that labor justice would not thoroughly be realized without grassroots mobilization of the working masses.

²³⁷ Rogers, William M., and Richard B. Freeman. "The Fragility of the 1990's Economic Gains." Center for American Progress, April 2, 2008.

²³⁸ Stiglitz, Joseph. "The Roaring Nineties." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, October 1, 2002. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2002/10/the-roaring-nineties/302604/>.

²³⁹ Anne Marie Lofaso, "Promises, Promises: Assessing the Obama Administration's Record on Labor Reform," *New Labor Forum*, August 2011. <https://newlaborforum.cuny.edu/2011/08/04/promises-promises-assessing-the-obama-administrations-record-on-labor-reform/>.

²⁴⁰ Joseph P. Williams, "Obama and Labor's Relationship Status: It's Complicated," *U.S. News*, March 31, 2015. <https://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/washington-whispers/2015/03/31/obama-and-labors-relationship-status-its-complicated>.

The Return of the Mass Strike 2010-2020

Rosa Luxemburg understood the occurrence of the mass strike in historical materialist terms in that the strike is not just a mere tool among an arsenal of technical methods that can be utilized by organized workers, but that it is an unstoppable force birthed by the abhorrently unacceptable working conditions that the capitalist class purveys. She observed that it is a mistake on the part of the capitalist to think of the strike as something that is conjured by the demagoguery of rabble rousers preaching “revolutionary romanticism” to an otherwise content and compliant workforce. The union-busting schemes of the neoliberal era are informed by the supposition that intensified repression of workers rights to advocacy will neutralize the threat of a mass strike. Luxemburg referred to such sensibilities as a “policeman-like materialism” such as those exhibited by Robert von Puttkammer.²⁴¹ Faithful to the scientific socialist outlook, Luxemburg encouraged a class-consciousness that did not deify movement leaders as the manufacturers of resistance to bourgeois tyranny. In her view, the mass strike is not something that can be artificially propagated and therefore cannot be adequately subdued by “prisons and bayonets.” Rather, it is a phenomenon occurring from a determined set of social and material conditions that are intolerably unfavorable to the laboring producers of capitalist society.

It is not therefore by abstract speculations on the possibility or impossibility, the utility or the injuriousness of the mass strike, but only by an examination of those factors and social conditions out of which the mass strikes grows in the present phase of the class struggle—it is not by *subjective criticism* of the mass strike from the standpoint of what is desirable, but only by *objective investigation* of the sources of the mass strike from the standpoint of what is historically inevitable, that the problem can be grasped or even discussed.²⁴²

The obvious flaw in this assertion is that the mass strike has *not* been historically inevitable nor particularly prevalent throughout the neoliberal era. The last fifty years have shown just how thorough corporate forces (in collusion with the state) can be in suppressing organized labor. As union density decreased, so too did the frequency with which workers sought to implement even general strikes. In the 1980s, the U.S. corporate class had devised exceedingly efficient counter-strategies that pummeled any gesture of labor rights advocacy into submission. In addition to President Reagan allowing for businesses to hire permanent replacement workers in the event of a strike, union members had also become more hesitant to organize strikes in fear of compelling management to move operations overseas where companies could hire a lower-wage and more compliant workforce. During the Great Recession, the number of major strikes—those involving more than 1,000 workers—had dropped to a record low of a mere five in 2009.

It had seemed as though the mass strike was dwindling into obsolescence as, in 2017, the number of major strikes was reduced to just seven in the private sector. Since 2010, there have been a yearly average of only 13 major strikes. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, this

²⁴¹ Robert von Puttkammer (1828-1900) was a conservative Minister of the Interior who enforced Bismarck’s anti-socialist law and forcibly suppressed strikes in the 1870s and 1880s.

²⁴² Luxemburg, Rosa, “The Mass Strike, The Political Party, and the Trade Unions,” *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 170-171.

is one-sixth the average annual number in the 1980s, and less than one-twentieth the yearly average in the 1970s. In 1971 alone, 2.5 million private-sector workers went on strike, which is 100 times the 25,000 workers who went on strike in 2017.²⁴³ However, the year 2018 saw a remarkable upsurge of strikes in both the private and public sectors. School teachers led the way with several walk-outs of at least 20,000 teachers and school employees being organized throughout the year. 2019 saw the continuation of this upsurge with thousands of hotel workers following suit. In September, over 6,000 hotel employees went on strike against 26 Chicago hotels to demand year-round health coverage for all hotel workers. In October, 7,700 employees went on strike against 23 Marriott hotels in various U.S. cities. November then saw the uprising of 15,000 patient-care workers such as respiratory therapists, radiology technicians, and pharmacy workers who went on a three-day strike against University of California medical centers in San Francisco, San Diego, Irvine, Davis, and Los Angeles. 24,000 additional union members also struck out in a show of solidarity. Even workers in the tech industry have shown remarkable efforts. Perhaps the most startling case was the thousands of Google employees who walked out on November 1 to protest the company's mishandling of sexual harassment accusations against top managers.

Over the past decade, union organizing (as well as non-union activist efforts) have seen some significant victories, particularly in the public sector among teachers and service workers that have been able to uphold fairly sustained mobilization efforts. For instance, since 2018, a series of major teachers' strikes have been launched throughout the U.S. The largest one yet was by the United Teachers of Los Angeles in January 2019. Teachers used their strike to win the hiring of a nurse in each school, a reduction in class sizes, the extension of a program that exempts schools from administering random searches of their students, and a limit on the spread of charter schools. What was critically important about both the #RedforEd walkouts of 2018 and the 2019 Los Angeles teachers' strike was that the CTA and NEA fought not only for their members, but for the preservation and general improvement of the public institutions in which they worked. They even challenged privatization and corporate tyranny to be in solidarity with private-sector workers while critically decrying austerity politics and tax giveaways.

Bargaining for the Collective Good

The teacher's union is but one of the more prominent examples of a bargaining and alliance building strategy that emerged in 2014 known as Bargaining for the Common Good (BCG). In Los Angeles, public-sector unions and their community-based allies launched the Fix L.A. Coalition which focused their campaign work on exposing the fact that taxpayers' money has been prioritized towards covering fees of Wall Street firms that marketed the city's municipal bonds and other financial services rather than towards the maintenance of vital city programs and services that had been cut. Even unions in the private sector have shown some glimmers of mobilization in recent years. In 2016, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the Committee for Better Banks began their efforts to improve pay and benefits for the more than one million non-union bank workers across the nation. They launched a campaign based on a common good approach that exposed the Wells Fargo cheating scandals as well as the unethical selling of predatory financial products. These efforts resulted in two notable victories:

²⁴³ Greenhouse, Steven. "The Return of the Strike." *The American Prospect*, January 3, 2019. <https://prospect.org/power/return-strike/>.

the forced resignation of Tim Sloan, the CEO of Wells Fargo, and the increased minimum pay for Bank of America workers to \$20.00/hour. This was a remarkable demonstration of how bank workers can be agents in regulating their industry by preventing banks from cheating consumers and blowing the whistle on banking practices that threaten the health of the economy.

Despite these sporadic examples of worker mobilizations over the course of the last decade, unionization continues to flounder. Compounded with the corporate hostility towards unions, the internal complications of union organizing have also posed a major hurdle in the need to amass membership. The foremost challenge is that organizing is an expensive enterprise in a legal system that overwhelmingly advantages employers, creating obstacles for union leaders to organize. It is politically risky for them to shift funds from servicing existing members towards organizing new members, hence leaders tend to be more focused and responsive to the needs of dues-paying members who elect them rather than on outreach efforts to promote membership growth. For instance, as prolific as the Fight for \$15 was in catapulting the issue of wage labor into the arena of national politics and in raising the pay of millions of workers, it was an enormously expensive campaign that was spearheaded by the strong-willed determination of a remarkably hard nosed union president in Mary Kay Henry.²⁴⁴ Anything short of the stubborn resilience displayed by the SEIU's leadership would have likely withered under the pressure of anti-union forces. The organization has in fact been forced to significantly reduce its allocation of resources for the campaign.

Perhaps the steepest challenge for workers is the might of corporate monopolies. Nonetheless, the past decade has seen a budding resistance movement to confront the atrocious poverty wages of warehouse and delivery workers in corporate juggernauts like Amazon and Walmart. Amidst the pandemic, several groups of workers looked to organize for fair pay and COVID protections. Amazon became a trillion dollar corporation within the first few months of the lock-down orders while its warehouse and delivery employees saw little to no increases in their pay as they toiled as essential high risk workers. Unions representing tens of thousands of Amazon workers in Germany, Australia, Spain, and France have mobilized walkouts and other actions as part of the global Make Amazon Pay campaign to protest the company's handling of sick pay and COVID-19 precautions. However, while Amazon employees abroad are able to unionize, U.S. employees are not. The company has had a history of suppressing labor organizing efforts, to the point of hiring even collecting intelligence and monitoring collective organizing activity.²⁴⁵ In the summer of 2020, workers from a facility in Bessemer, Alabama looked to join the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU). The majority of the facility's 6,000 employees are Black. The campaign pushed Amazon to conduct a vote on the matter between February and March of 2021. The company would defeat the effort with workers voting 1,798 to 738 against unionization. Proponents of the effort have accused the company of interfering with worker's ability to participate in a fair and free election by lying to staff about the implications of the vote in mandatory anti-union meetings. That Amazon workers in various countries have succeeded in forming unions and mobilizing their causes suggests that there is

²⁴⁴ Dominic Rushe, "Hopefully it makes history: Fight for \$15 closes in on mighty win for US workers," *The Guardian*, February 13, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/feb/13/fight-for-15-minimum-wage-workers-labor-rights>.

²⁴⁵ Lauren Kaori Gurly, "Secret Amazon Reports Expose the Company's Surveillance of Labor and Environmental Groups," *VICE: Motherboard Tech*, November 23, 2020. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/5dp3yn/amazon-leaked-reports-expose-spying-warehouse-workers-labor-union-environmental-groups-social-movements>.

something particularly repressive and intimidating about the companies within the U.S. and perhaps also the U.K. in upholding the union busting legacies of Reagan and Thatcher.

Continued Faith in the Democratic Party

Over the trajectory of neoliberalism's tenure, both Republicans and Democrats have, for the most part, either enabled or supported the U.S. corporate class in its neoliberal pursuits. Both political parties have been complicit in the unrelenting attacks on the working class and the so-called Black "underclass" overall. President Barack Obama was not the ally of the working class that many hoped that he would be. For the working class, neither political party has been particularly formidable to serve as the primary vehicle for advancing their rights. Nonetheless, the Democratic Socialist contingency within the Democratic Party has been adamant in at least thrusting the issue of labor rights into a national discussion.

Workplace Democracy

Bernie Sanders' 2020 presidential campaign projected the promise of considerable improvements in workers conditions.²⁴⁶ On August 21, 2019, he unveiled his Workplace Democracy Plan (WDP),²⁴⁷ one of the most ambitious strategies to promote workers rights that has ever been proposed by a major U.S. presidential candidate. It was not quite a motion towards the sort of proletarian democracy that Marx and Engels envisioned, it was more of a motion for a return to Keynesian practices. Sanders aptly recognized that one of the major factors propelling the widening inequality in the U.S. is that the rights of workers to organize and bargain for better wages, benefits, and working conditions have been severely undermined.²⁴⁸

His plan looked to revitalize unionization with the hopes of doubling overall union membership within his first term. It would have granted workers the ability to organize through a majority sign up process, allowing the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to certify a union if it receives the consent of the majority of eligible workers. It also sought to deny federal contracts to companies that pay poverty wages, outsource jobs overseas, engage in union busting, deny good benefits, and pay CEO's outrageous compensation packages.

The WDP would have established federal protections against the firing of workers for any reason other than "just cause," putting an end to "at will" employment contracts, thereby empowering workers with the right to speak out. This would have considerably strengthened worker's right to go on strike, banning employers from using permanent replacements ("scabs") during a strike, and allowing for "secondary boycotts" in which workers can apply pressure to their employer to meet their collective bargaining demands by taking action against the company's financial partners, clients, and suppliers.

²⁴⁶ Barry Eidlin, "Bernie's Plan for Workplace Democracy is the Boldest Presidential Plan for Workers' Rights Ever," *Jacobin*, August 22, 2019. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/08/bernie-sanders-labor-unions-proposal-workplace-democracy>.

²⁴⁷ Bernie Sanders' "Workplace Democracy Plan." <https://berniesanders.com/issues/workplace-democracy/>.

²⁴⁸ Janelle Bouie, "The Necessary Radicalism of Bernie Sanders," *The Necessary Radicalism of Bernie Sanders*, September 11, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/11/opinion/sanders-labor-2020.html>.

Despite Sander's withdrawal from the presidential race, his proposed WDP provides a model for how to reorient labor policy and the function of the state towards actively promoting and enhancing worker's rights, bringing the state out of its de facto posture as a "neutral" arbitrator between worker and employer interests. If there are any prospects for politicians and government officials to effectively take up the call of acting in solidarity with workers, they must, at the very least, take heed of the issues outlined in that WDP. The pressure for politicians to address them must of course continue to be applied by worker's organizing efforts, but Sanders as well as Warren have lead the way in demonstrating the capacity to acknowledge and help validate the efforts of labor activists in their push to bring the issue of workplace democracy, or lack thereof, into the arena of national politics and public policy. On the day that he unveiled the WDP, Sanders tweeted, "If there is going to be class warfare in this country, it's about time the working class won that war."²⁴⁹

Towards Proletarian Democracy

Considering that union density has rapidly declined over the years in both private and public sectors, falling from 13.4% at the turn of the century to an all time overall low at 10.3% by 2019 (the lowest it has ever been since the Bureau of Labor Statistics began reporting the data in 1964) with an overall decline of approximately 1.8 million workers, it is clear that the life force of labor activism cannot rest solely on the shoals of union revitalization. The recent surge of strikes has not indicated a recovery of union organizing. This is not at all to disregard unions as obsolete. The significant improvements that workers enjoy under union membership are undeniable. On average, union workers earn 22% more than non-union workers. 72% of union workers have established benefit pension plans that guarantee income in retirement compared to only 14% of non-union workers. Unionized employees are also far less likely to be victims of health and safety violations or wage theft and they are 18% more likely to have health coverage. Black women earn 63% as much per week as white men overall, however, union membership boosts their earnings up to 78%. Latina women earn 60% as much as white men, but are boosted up to 83% under union membership. It is also important to note that while the raw numbers in union membership has increased in the public sector since the turn of the century, its percentage of membership in relation to the growth of employment has continued on a downward trend. For instance, the actual number of union members among health care practitioners and technical occupants rose from 693,000 to 1,076,000 between 2000 and 2019, an increase of 55%. However, employment in these fields increased even faster, hence the rate of membership declined from 12.9% and 11.8%. In the private sector, union membership has been in a bottomless freefall²⁵⁰ in both absolute and relative terms with a decline of over 1.7 million workers as well as a shrinkage in union density from 9% to 6.4% between 2000 and 2019.

²⁴⁹ Bernie Sanders (@BernieSanders), *Twitter* post, August 23, 2020, 9:18 a.m.
<https://twitter.com/berniesanders/status/1297568829992828928>.

²⁵⁰As described by Maisano, Chris, Chris Maisano, Peter Frase, Mike Beggs, Nivedita Majumdar, Alexander Billet, Sam Gindin, Meagan Day, Doug Henwood, and Chris Brooks in "Labor Union Membership Has Just Hit an All-Time Low. We Need to Reverse This Trend." *Jacobin*. January 23, 2020. Accessed April 19, 2020.
<https://jacobinmag.com/2020/01/labor-union-membership-density-bls-2019>.

In the interest of promoting proletarian democratization, it is imperative that labor organizing continues to develop an emphasis on empowering workers with increased agency rather than just the meager gains of increased wages and benefits. As labor journalist Steven Greenhouse has astutely observed, the collective endeavor to improve workers' conditions, to challenge corporate domination, or to address inequality overall must inevitably confront the realm of politics and public policy.²⁵¹ With the forward momentum of the advocacy efforts of the previous decade compounded with the latest economic disaster spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic, the current landscape of labor relations is ripe for the increased mobilization of workers and those adversely affected by that could have the potential of radically transforming the U.S. political architecture in profound ways. "The left is alive with creative energy not seen in many decades. We must exploit it to make the future of *workers*, not the future of *work*, our central concern."²⁵² Workers have a window of opportunity in the wake of social upheaval to stretch their imagination of what workplace democracy can look like outside the boundaries of the existing political and public policy frameworks. Currently, workplace democracy is, at best, defined by expanding worker's collective ability to merely air out their grievances with reduced repression. This would be a welcomed first step in the right direction, but it would not fundamentally ameliorate the conditions from which their grievances arise to begin with. But we need not conclude with a vague, lofty, and obscure sentimentalism about the obvious need for "new forms" or a "new man." There are existing practices, existing forms, and existing efforts that can be nurtured and built upon. Searching for "new forms" within a narrowly circumscribed focus on formal intellectual and political platforms will only have us plunging deeper into the abyss of institutional hegemony

²⁵¹ Greenhouse 2019.

²⁵² Gupta, Sarita, Stephen Lerner, and Joseph A. McCartin. "Why the Labor Movement Has Failed-And How to Fix It." *Boston Review*. February 18, 2020, par. 5.

Chapter 4

Intercommunal Solidarity Across Diasporas

“The black revolution has been taking place in Africa, in Asia, and in Latin America. When I say black, I mean non-white – black, brown, red, or yellow.”

— Malcolm X, 1964

In 1964, Malcolm X sought to expand the scope of his nationalist philosophy to an international concept of Black political belonging. He spent most of the final year of his life abroad; five months in Africa and the Middle East and another month in Europe. During his travels, he developed relationships with prominent anti-colonial resistance leaders as well as various heads of state. Internationalism had been introduced to him in his early childhood through his Garveyite parents, but it was his departure from the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the 1964 tour that enabled him to openly advocate for his global concept of a “worldwide Black revolution.” As a loyal disciple of Elijah Muhammad’s program, Malcolm was tethered within the boundaries of the NOI’s U.S.-focused agenda, but he maintained a quiet interest and enthusiasm for international movements. Nearly a decade before embarking on his 1964 tour, he was deeply inspired by the proceedings of a gathering of African and Asian national leaders known as the *Bandung Conference of 1955*. Representatives from 29 different countries gathered to develop a strategy for unifying their decolonization efforts to build international strength. This invigorated Malcolm’s imagination for the possibilities of global Afro-Asiatic unity. While the NOI had always traditionally regarded all non-white people as essentially “Black,” Malcolm pushed towards a global revolutionary framework in lieu of the NOI’s limited Black capitalist ambitions which were confined to the geo-singularity of U.S. America. His romanticization of non-white unity was intended to encourage a recognition of the mutual suffering experienced by racially oppressed people around the world under the rule of western imperialism. Of course there are, in actuality, very real and consequential differences between “black, brown, red, or yellow” peoples. Malcolm was very much privy to existing *inter-* and *intra-*group tensions, yet he maintained a tireless optimism for the prospects of African, Asian and Latin American unity. He was utterly convinced of the absolute necessity of building an international movement.

The contemporary movement for Black Lives has demonstrated a sustained capacity to act in solidarity with the struggles of other non-Black groups in issuing solidarity statements and mobilizing to support actions, but it has also maintained a strong assertion of the need for Black activists to hold Black-centered and Black-exclusive social and organizing spaces. This has been an essential exercise for building internal cohesion and ensuring that Black leadership and voices are prioritized at the center of Black-specific issues. For the BLM Global Network and its affiliate chapters, membership is only open to Black identifying community members. In Los Angeles, non-Black allies are welcome and encouraged to attend bi-weekly general meetings, but the meeting spaces are often separated three ways into a Black-exclusive meeting space, a non-white allies space, and a white people for Black Lives (WP4BL) space. BLM protests have been robustly attended by non-Black allies and has certainly garnered an international audience but

the movement for Black Lives has yet to pursue the sort of African, Asian, and Latin American cohesiveness that Malcolm X had ardently worked towards before his assassination. This is largely because movement activists have been occupied with vigilantly fortifying its Black centered leadership base – something that Malcolm also adamantly encouraged. As the struggle against anti-Black racism wages on, it is fought concurrently alongside the intersecting struggles against mass deportation fueled by anti-Latinx xenophobia and against the drastic rise of anti-Asian assaults which have also been fueled by xenophobic scapegoating. Each circumstance has been purveyed by the state or further intensified by the agitation of white nationalism. While solidarity has been exercised between and among racialized communities, complications persist in strengthening intercommunal bonds. There are certain segments of the Black activist and intellectual community who would dismiss Malcolm’s aspirations for international unity as naively unrealistic – not because it isn’t desired, but because they have found the condition of Blackness to be far too distinct for other racialized groups to relate to.

This more dismal view of intercommunal relations upholds the posture that *all* non-Black communities are fundamentally incapable of genuine solidarity with the Black struggle. This suspicion and distrust is rooted in the perception that all non-Black groups have stood to benefit from the forward thrust of Black freedom advocacy, yet the upward mobility and advancement of those groups have hardly ever been inherently beneficial for Black people. Historically, Black-led movements have opened doors and created new opportunities for every wave of non-white migrants.²⁵³ At the same time, there also persists an inability among non-Black people of color to recognize the ways that they benefit from anti-Blackness thereby maintaining a casual complicity with white supremacy. While there have been individuals or small pockets of individuals who have demonstrated meaningful acts of pro-Black solidarity within every community, these tend to be regarded as the exceptions and not the dominant posture of the group at large. Because anti-Blackness ubiquitously pervades Latinx, Asian, and even Indigenous communities, genuine solidarity is deemed impossible. Proponents of the framework known as *Afropessimism* further contend that there can be no meaningful analogy in the struggles and experiences between Black people and other non-whites. In their view, Black people are at all times and in all places condemned to an everlasting state of social death – a fate that cannot be ameliorated short of what Frank Wilderson III describes as “a total end to things – an apocalypse.”²⁵⁴

What this perspective overlooks is how even racially oppressed people living within the U.S. benefit from the underdevelopment of the global south as well as how those with citizenship status benefit from anti-Latinx xenophobia and the labor exploitation of undocumented migrant workers. In reviewing the *Afropessimist* premise, Vinson Cunningham observes that “life is prismatic – it’s possible to be Black and degraded in [U.S.] America while also profiting from wanton extraction of resources overseas, oppressing millions of non-Black others, and living on land stolen from indigenous people. We are always joined in our sufferings, often by somebody we can’t see through darkness.”²⁵⁵ Moreover, the notion that only the complete obliteration of society as we know it can ameliorate Blackness from the state of social death is not particularly instructive of how to navigate racial subjectivity on this premise. Jesse McCarthy questions,

²⁵³ Civil Rights legislation like the Immigration Act and Voting Rights Act of 1965 were Black-led efforts that enabled all groups of non-white people to be

²⁵⁴ Frank Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, United States: Liveright (2020).

²⁵⁵ Vinson Cunningham, “The Argument of ‘Afropessimism’,” *The New Yorker*, July 13, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/20/the-argument-of-afropessimism>.

“What evidence do we have, on the other hand, that the power behind the status quo is quaking at the thought of Black folk gathering in isolation to mourn the end of the world?”²⁵⁶

The zero-sum view that non-white communities can only truly be for themselves and no one else can only result in the preservation of existing racial hierarchies with white supremacy fixed at the very top. Without a meaningful solidarity framework, non-white communities can strive to build wealth, accrue capital, and ascend on the racial hierarchy, but they can only ever hope to land second place behind white society at the expense of other nonwhite groups. We see this with the model minority assumptions about Asian-Americans. For instance, Asian-American men, particularly those of East Asian descent, have actually overtaken white men in terms of higher income averages and higher rates of educational attainment. Yet, no matter how much money they make or how many degrees they might obtain, Asian men remain socially alienated as racialized others while their success is upheld as veritable proof of the supposed insignificance of racial discrimination and the authenticity of U.S. American meritocracy. In this way, Asian men can never seem to be fully recognized as U.S. citizens, remaining sorely underrepresented in politics, while their success is misconstrued as a false narrative to invalidate the grievances of Black and Latinx communities. No matter what, white supremacy maintains control of the dominant narrative. Therefore, the ascendancy of any one nonwhite group in terms of wealth accumulation and the obtainment of political power in the U.S. necessitates the reinforced oppression of other nonwhite groups and the intensification of Third World exploitation. Therefore, these stubborn *pessimist* tendencies must be resisted with the sobering reality that nothing short of developing a global solidarity framework can racially oppressed communities ever hope to even confront white supremacy.

The first step is recognizing the pitfalls of pursuing intercommunal unity without a discernment of the very real differences among groups and how those differences can be leveraged to strengthen solidarity. This requires an honest and thorough evaluation of the specificities with which each community is uniquely impacted by white supremacy et al. Rather than romanticizing sameness across groups or even ranking groups on a simplified oppression olympics²⁵⁷ scale of who has it worse than who, political and economic cohesion requires a complex awareness of how each group is uniquely positioned; how they are specifically harmed and exploited and also how they are privileged in certain ways relative to other groups. There can be no meaningful solidarity between and among racialized communities in the U.S. without (1) a vigilant awareness that *all* non-Indigenous communities are occupying stolen land and that they all benefit from the invisibility of extant Indigenous communities, (2) an understanding of how Black communities – particularly the descendants of enslaved Africans – have historically been impacted by racism and how all non-Black communities benefit from the ubiquity of anti-Blackness both in U.S. and abroad, (3) an understanding of how the U.S. thrives on the labor exploitation of African, Asian, and Latin American migrant communities – especially of undocumented populations – while denying them legitimacy and political power to be recognized as full members of U.S. society, and (4) an international consciousness of the global scope of how white supremacy impacts Third World communities.

The modernization model nurtures tension in pitting racialized communities against one another as political and economic competitors. Alternatively, a dependency model nurtures cohesion in creating bonds of solidarity through the practice of political and economic

²⁵⁶ Jesse McCarthy, “On Afropessimism,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 20, 2020. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/on-afropessimism/>.

²⁵⁷ Elizabeth Martinez

collaboration. The former orchestrates paranoia, distrust and resentment in the upward mobility of another nonwhite out-group community. The latter orchestrates the understanding that the political and economic empowerment of another nonwhite out-group community is mutually beneficial to all nonwhite communities. Western society presents white saviorism as the only path to politico-economic success in maintaining the perception that other non-western communities are virulent threats to the upward mobility of one's in-group in the zero-sum contest for which group can claim closest proximity to whiteness. Therefore, the notion of solidarity across groups poses an anathema to white supremacy.

Inter-Diasporic Solidarity within the Belly of the Beast

The term *diaspora* was originally used to describe the historical plight of Jewish people and the patterns of migration and dispersal that they have undergone in the face of persecution and displacement. The term would thereafter be adopted to describe the plight of other communities such as the Armenian Diaspora or the Assyrian Diaspora, both incurred by genocidal violence in their respective countries of origin. In the mid-20th century, it was adopted in naming the African Diaspora to describe the patterns of dispersal and migration of African descended people in the wake of the slave trade and colonialism.²⁵⁸ The broadest use of the term describes any phenomenon in which a community of people migrate or are dispersed to multiple locations outside of their place of origin or their "homeland." This analysis will adhere to the premise that a diaspora is distinguished from adjacent phenomena – like "migrancy," "exile," "expatriation," and "transnationality," – in that it is compelled by coercive political forces²⁵⁹ and that there is an effort by its members to maintain a collective identity. This is central in the development of a solidarity framework rooted in global consciousness.

The U.S. is a site of convergence for a multitude of racialized diasporic communities whose histories of migration and dispersal have been spurred by the coercion and imposition of western imperialism. The plight of Black people in the U.S. is rooted in the forceful displacement of their ancestors from the African continent to serve as an enslaved labor force in the colonies throughout the Americas. The plight of Indigenous people in the U.S. is rooted in the mass genocide and displacement of their ancestors in the seizure of their ancestral land by the European colonists. The plight of Latin American migrant communities in the U.S. is rooted in the economic instability created by the warmongering of U.S. corporate imperialism. The plight of many Third World migrant communities in the U.S. is rooted in the destitute economic conditions incurred by European colonization in their countries of origin. These diasporas also intersect where there are Afro-Latinx, Afro-Asian, and Afro-Indigenous identities. The erasure and marginalization of these populations is symptomatic of the ubiquity of anti-Blackness across ethnic, national, and racial communities. It not only pervades the non-Black segments of those communities, it is also internalized by the Black identifying and Black presenting members as well. In each circumstance, white supremacy is reinforced when the liberation program of any one diasporic group neglects to account for how the other groups are mutually impacted.

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²⁵⁹ Khachig Tölölyan, "Rethinking *Diaspora(s)*: Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 5, no. 1, 1996, 3-36. doi:10.1353/dsp.1996.0000.

Of course, it is reasonable and expected for one to be primarily concerned with the fate of the diasporic community to which they belong; to focus most of their energy towards the liberation struggle of their own group. In fact, the effective development of equitable remedies to the harmful effects of white supremacy requires a working knowledge of how it operates within each distinct group. For this reason, it is imperative that the liberation movements of each diasporic community are primarily – if not entirely – led by the in-group members of that community. The leadership structure of each particular anti-colonial or anti-racist movement must be comprised of those who are most severely impacted by the specific expression of racial oppression that the group faces. Although each group will contain a heterogeneity of political ideologies and strategies on how to address the conditions of their community, out-group comrades must strive to respect their right to self-determination in following their lead in addressing that specific issues of said community. However, in cultivating a broad-based solidarity framework across diasporas, we may yet see the development of a separate yet interconnected platform for all racialized diasporic groups to advocate against global white supremacist capitalism in the way that Malcolm X did before his death.

In this chapter, we will look into how the Movement for Black Lives has interacted with other race justice movements in the 21st century occurring within the U.S. We will focus on three in particular. The first is the Indigenous movement for recognition and sovereignty. The second is the Latinx and undocumented people's movement for comprehensive immigration reform and the abolition of the U.S. Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency. The third is the #StopAsianHate movement to end the surge of hate crimes targeting Asian-American and Pacific Islander communities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of course each of these movements are comprised of a multitude of overlapping diasporic communities. Anti-immigration impacts a variety of Latin American communities as well as Asian and African migrant communities, but we are acknowledging that the current epoch of mass deportation specifically targets Latinx communities in particularly inhumane ways. Xenophobia impacts a variety of migrant communities, but we recognize that the current trends of harassment and assault incidents specifically targets Asian-American communities in particularly hostile ways. We are grouping them together based on how they are mutually impacted by particular institutions of racial oppression. Before there can be solidarity between and among these communities, there must first be a thorough evaluation of how each of their respective movements are positioned in their struggles against white supremacy.

On Stolen Lands

In the wake of the killing of George Floyd, indigenous communities in settler colonial nations around the world mobilized in solidarity with the movement for Black lives. They were readily able to relate the impacts of colonization and displacement in their homelands to the impacts of anti-Black racism in the U.S. in terms of the issues of concentrated poverty, addiction, health and education inequities, and disproportionate rates of incarceration that their communities experienced. In New Zealand, a series of BLM actions in Auckland, Wellington,

and Dunedin amassed the largest protests seen in the country in a decade.²⁶⁰ Protesters were seen performing the traditional Māori ceremonial dance, the haka, to commemorate the lives of those victimized by state-sanctioned violence and white nationalism in their own country. In Australia, Floyd's death fueled long-standing police accountability movements to address the disproportionate rates at which Aboriginal communities are policed and incarcerated.²⁶¹ Indigenous Australians are only 3.3% of the overall population, but comprise 28% of the prison population. Aboriginal people are also ten times more likely to die in police custody than other Australians.²⁶² Activist Paul Silva, who was heavily involved in organizing the marches, lamented how his uncle David Dungay Jr. was 26 when he was killed in jail in 2015 with the hauntingly familiar last words "I can't breathe."²⁶³ Over the last three decades, more than 400 indigenous people have died in police custody and no officer has ever been convicted. These circumstances are rooted in the settler colonial ethos and the claiming of the continent as *terra nullius* or "empty land." In stark similarity to the history of land theft and labor exploitation in the Americas, Aboriginals and Pacific Islanders were forced to work plantations and cattle for little to no payment as well. The recent series of protests have pressured the country to confront its own history of slavery and colonialism, which has been adamantly denied by public officials.

Indigenous communities in North America have shown similar expressions of solidarity in calling attention to how their people are also disproportionately impacted by state-sanctioned violence. Between April and June 2020, Canadian police shot and killed six indigenous people, including a woman killed during a "wellness check." The head of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Commissioner Brenda Lucki, released a statement acknowledging systemic racism on the force. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau pledged to enact broad reforms to address the issue. *Anishnaabe* journalist Waubgeshig Rice acknowledged that "the Black Lives Matter movement has really catalyzed a lot of that understanding and put the spotlight on systemic racism in all realms, in all sectors here in Canada."²⁶⁴ Thousands would flood the streets of Ottawa, Toronto, Halifax, and Vancouver. The Native solidarity contingencies were mobilized from the inertia of the ongoing Idle No More (INM) grassroots movement for indigenous sovereignty which was founded by three First Nations women and one non-Native ally in 2012. Upon reflecting on the interconnectedness between BLM and INM, *Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg* scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson situates both in what she calls "Constellations of Co-Resistance,"²⁶⁵ an anti-colonial spatial framing that resists the hazards of "replicating anti-Blackness without solid, reciprocal relationships with Black visionaries who are co-creating alternatives under the lens of abolition, decolonization, and anti-capitalism."²⁶⁶

²⁶⁰ Billy Perrigo, "Crowds Protest in New Zealand Against George Floyd's Death and Police Brutality Against Indigenous Communities," *TIME*, June 1, 2020. <https://time.com/5845981/new-zealand-george-floyd/>.

²⁶¹ Amy Gunia, "How George Floyd Is Sparking New Awareness in Australia of Aboriginal Deaths in Custody," *TIME*, June 6, 2020. <https://time.com/5853380/george-floyd-australia-aboriginal-deaths/>.

²⁶² Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

²⁶³ David Dungay, "The story of David Dungay and an Indigenous death in custody," *The Guardian*, June 11, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/11/the-story-of-david-dungay-and-an-indigenous-death-in-custody>.

²⁶⁴ Amna Nawaz, "Indigenous peoples echo Black Lives Matter's call for justice," *PBS News Hour*, October 12, 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/indigenous-peoples-echo-black-lives-matters-call-for-justice#transcript>.

²⁶⁵ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Rinaldo Walcott, and Glen Coulthard, "Idle No More and Black Lives Matter: An Exchange," *Studies in Social Justice, Volume 12, Issue 1*, 2018, 75-89.

²⁶⁶ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 228-229.

In the U.S., indigenous people are actually killed by police and incarcerated at the highest rates compared to other groups including Black people. Between 1999 and 2015, the average annual death rate of Native Americans per one million people is 2.9, followed closely by Black deaths at 2.6, then Latinx deaths at 1.7, white deaths at 0.9, and Asian deaths with the lowest rates at 0.6.²⁶⁷ Of course, while the rate of killings are higher, the absolute number of Indigenous deaths is comparatively small given that they comprise only 0.8% of the U.S. population. “Our histories are very intimately tied,” says Charise Cheney, a Black woman associate professor of Indigenous, Race, and Ethnic Studies at the University of Oregon. “The connections that people are making between white supremacy and anti-Blackness on the one hand, and white settler colonialism on the other hand, has been a breakthrough moment in American history.”²⁶⁸

Abolish ICE

In 2017, Sheriff Joe Arpaio was convicted of criminal contempt for defying court orders to stop immigration arrests. He was found guilty of federal criminal contempt for racial profiling while in office. Notorious for his extreme and unusual punitive practices on the Latinx community, Arpaio had come to be known as “America’s Toughest Sheriff” during his 24 years serving as the 36th Sheriff of Maricopa County in Arizona from 1993 to 2017. Among the myriad of his draconian prison policies, he had inmates sleeping in cots in old canvas tents that came to be known as “Tent City,” even in the scorching summer heat reaching up to 141 degrees or the cold of the desert winters. He bragged about serving them rotten bologna, having them walk around the premises in chain-gangs, and forcing them to wear striped prison garb and pink underwear as a way of humiliating them.²⁶⁹ He also subjected Latina detainees to unsanitary conditions in which they were routinely denied clean sheets or pants to replace those soiled from menstruation. He has been accused of intimidating his enemies (political rivals and reporters), staging an assassination attempt to boost his popularity, and misappropriating millions of tax payers’ dollars to conduct immigration sweeps and pay for personal travel.²⁷⁰ Despite these atrocious acts of misconduct, Donald Trump heralded the legacy of his work in stating “Was Sheriff Joe convicted for doing his job?” In actuality, Arpaio violated federal orders specifying that he could not detain undocumented immigrants in his capacity as County Sheriff – that he needed to leave that job for federal agents to enforce. Nevertheless, on August 25, 2017, Trump granted a full pardon, sparing Arpaio from a jail sentence. The decision was met with criticism from civil rights groups and even right-wing politicians who noted the hypocrisy in allowing Arpaio to elude accountability for breaking the law. “Mr. Arpaio was found guilty of criminal contempt for continuing to illegally profile Latinos living in Arizona based on their perceived

²⁶⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

²⁶⁸ Brian Bull, “Indigenous and Black Lives Matter activists join forces in Oregon,” *High Country News*, August 14, 2020. <https://www.hcn.org/articles/race-and-racism-native-americans-and-black-lives-matter-activists-join-forces-in-oregon>.

²⁶⁹ Ted Robbins, “‘America’s Toughest Sheriff’ Takes on Immigration,” *NPR*, March 10, 2008.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ed6eECjXC7sVUjDDVrPU0saKCOqlxAaFklqk7z5dzWs/edit>.

²⁷⁰ Brain Tashman, “Five Reasons Racist Sheriff Joe Arpaio Should Not Receive a Presidential Pardon,” *ACLU*, August 22, 2017. <https://www.aclu.org/blog/immigrants-rights/five-reasons-racist-sheriff-joe-arpaio-should-not-receive-presidential-pardon>.

immigration status in violation of a judge's orders," said former Senator John McCain. "The President has the authority to make this pardon, but doing so at this time undermines his claim for the respect of rule of law as Mr. Arpaio has shown no remorse for his actions."²⁷¹ Pardoning Arpaio set the precedent for ICE agents to aggressively arrest and detain undocumented migrants with impunity.

In 2015, Trump launched his presidential campaign with an indictment of foreign countries for the malignant interests that they supposedly impose on the U.S. To no small degree, his bid for presidency was predicated on a xenophobic mischaracterization of migrants, particularly those who are undocumented, and on the notion that they are largely to blame for the country's economic woes in having migrants who not only entered the country with no regard for U.S. border laws, but have presumably done so with harmful intentions. These assumptions efface the difficulties and the myriad of complications that can arise in obtaining legal entry. Trump's rhetoric obscures the traumas of immigration that makes entry into the U.S. anything but a linear and straightforward process. He certainly builds on the long racist xenophobic history of excluding nonwhite people from entry. From the very first immigration law passed, the Naturalization Act of 1790, – which limited U.S. citizenship to people of European descent – to the Immigration Restriction Acts of 1921 and 1924 – which established immigration quotas that severely limited the number of non-European migrants allowed to enter the country – the U.S. has historically strived to "preserve the ideal of U.S. homogeneity."²⁷² While nonwhite people were of course forced and coerced into the country as slaves and cheap laborers to build the economy, their right to full citizenship and dignity has long been denied. The primary issue being that while nonwhite workers are essential to U.S. industries, their desire to bring their families and loved ones with them poses too much of an imposition on white society. This is what Trump has derisively called "chain migration," a pattern that has historically been welcomed for Western European migrants but discouraged for everyone else. The presence of Asian, African and Latin American migrants in the U.S. has therefore been paradoxically relied upon and abhorred at the same time. The Immigration Act of 1965 legally abolished discriminatory quotas, but xenophobic attitudes and policies have persisted well into the 21st century.

In Trump's announcement of his plans to build a border wall between the U.S. and Mexico, he infamously stated "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best... They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists."²⁷³ During his presidency, Congress had been gridlocked in its ability to advance immigration reform legislation to ameliorate the crisis of mass deportation. While President Obama was famously labeled as "deporter in chief" by immigration rights critics for the exponential rise of deportations under his administration, Trump looked to broaden the criteria for arrests and detention to include all undocumented persons, regardless of how long they had been living in the U.S. With the former head of the Department of Justice Jeff Sessions and Trump upholding a zero tolerance approach to immigration, travelling to the U.S. became exponentially more precariously perilous for undocumented migrants. "We are a nation of laws" is the slogan with which the xenophobic anti-

²⁷¹ Katie Reilly, "'No One Is Above the Law.' John McCain and Others Slam President Trump for Pardoning Joe Arpaio," *TIME*, August 26 2017. <https://time.com/4917014/joe-arpaio-pardon-reaction-john-mccain-jeff-flake/>.

²⁷² The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act), *U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian*, Accessed on July 5, 2021. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/immigration-act>.

²⁷³ Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech, *TIME*, June 16, 2015. <https://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/>.

immigration ethos has been promulgated. Such a position ignores the myriad of ways that the U.S. has violated a number of international laws in its destabilization of Central American countries. The U.S. enforces a closed border policy for migrants seeking to enter from Central American countries, but practices an open border policy in its military intervention and corporate enterprises throughout Central America. In this way, the U.S. military and corporations freely wreak havoc from its cultivation of “dirty wars” in the 1980s, deposing elected officials and installing undemocratic leaders, cultivating rampant crime, corruption, violence, and widespread poverty, thereby creating the massive refugee crisis from Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. This history of intervention and manipulation extends even further back into the early 20th century. In a speech delivered by Major Smedley Butler – which he later transcribed into a book *War is a Racket* in 1935 – the retired U.S. Marine Corps General laments his involvement in U.S. imperialism throughout Central America and the Caribbean:

“I was a racketeer – a gangster for capitalism... I helped make Mexico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped in raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street. I helped purify Nicaragua for the international banking house of Brown Brothers. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for the American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Honduras right for the American fruit companies.”²⁷⁴

It is clear that the Trump Administration did not create the immigration crisis, it was created by a century-long colonial project admittedly cultivated by U.S. militarism and inhumane policies. Trump inherited this project and exacerbated the contradiction of criminalizing the refugee victims of U.S. America’s criminal acts with renewed jingoist vigor. As women, children, and elderly refugees were tear-gassed by border patrol officers as they approached the U.S. border, Trump maintained the exceptionalist narrative that as generous as the U.S. supposedly is, it cannot afford to condone the criminal acts of those who ignore the legal processes required to enter. Building on Joe Arpaio’s racist “tough on crime” legacy, Trump would go on to implement the same inhumane practices nationwide.

The Horrors of Mass Deportation

The Obama administration directed ICE to focus on migrants with prior criminal convictions and recent arrivals. Trump’s directives widened the criteria for arrests to all undocumented persons including those with no prior criminal convictions. Targeted enforcements were therefore expanded to not only apprehend individuals with criminal records, but also any undocumented persons who may be accompanying them. ICE agents had the discretion to seize and detain at will, including individuals and whole families who have lived in the U.S. for decades. This has resulted in the rates of arrest to surge dramatically. More than 11 million undocumented immigrants faced an imminent threat of deportation and more than 4 million U.S. born children were in danger of losing at least one or both of their parents. Everyday life therefore became immensely precarious for those avoiding being overexposed in fear of being identified and arrested by ICE, but could not financially support their families without

²⁷⁴ Smedley D. Butler, *War Is A Racket: Original Edition*. United States: Dauphin Publications, 2018. Originally published in 1935.

going out of the house to work. Fearful of losing their children forever to the foster care system, many parents sought to appoint a “guardian” to whom they actually gave legal guardianship²⁷⁵ over their children in the event that they are seized and deported. When the children are able to either follow or reconnect with their parents, they must undergo the jarring experience of having to leave the country themselves. This has resulted in 597,000 children with U.S. citizenship living in Mexico.²⁷⁶ Many of them continue to attend school in the U.S. while living with their parents in Mexico in cities near the border like Puerto Palomas De Villa. For instance, nearly a thousand students cross the U.S.-Mexico border on a daily basis just to attend school in New Mexico and then go home to Puerto Palomas. Conversely, those who were mostly raised in the U.S. but not born in the U.S. now face an even more uncertain future between the ever-growing likelihood of being deported to a country they have little to no memory of or remaining in the U.S. only to struggle with limited academic and career prospects.

On September 5, 2017, it was announced that the Trump Administration would be rescinding the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, ending deportation protections and legal employment for undocumented immigrants who arrived in the U.S. as children. Enacted by Obama in 2012, the program prevented the deportation of nearly 800,000 migrants who came into the country when they were under 16 years of age with a spotless criminal record. Its realization was the outgrowth of political pressure applied by undocumented youth activists known as the DREAMers.²⁷⁷ The idea was to create a pathway for undocumented immigrants to gain legal status and eventually apply for citizenship as a start to a long term plan for comprehensive immigration reform. At the time that DACA was passed, it had bipartisan support with former senator McCain expressing that “We cannot forever have children who were brought here by their parents when they were small children to live in the shadows.”²⁷⁸ In 2014, Obama put forth a proposal to expand the program in creating protections against deportations for 4.5 million undocumented parents with children who are U.S. citizens.²⁷⁹ This is where Republicans drew the line with 26 states filing lawsuits against the Obama Administration to stop the proposed expansion. A federal judge in Texas sided with the states and the Fifth Circuit upheld the ruling. This bolstered the right-wing to declare that the existing DACA program is altogether “unconstitutional” to begin with.²⁸⁰ When Trump came into office, the fate of the program was sealed. A survey of DACA recipients found that 69% were able to obtain employment for better pay, 61% opened their first bank account, 65% reported being able to pursue educational opportunities that they were previously barred from. Now that the protections have expired, those recipients are again at risk of deportation.

In 1996, the Immigrant Responsibility Act was passed under the Clinton Administration to strengthen enforcement by adding penalties for undocumented immigrants. The detention

²⁷⁵ Power of attorney...

²⁷⁶ Wilson Center...

²⁷⁷ Walter Nicholls, *The DREAMers: How the Undocumented Youth Movement Transformed the Immigrant Rights Debate*, United States: Stanford University Press, 2013.

²⁷⁸ ABC News, “Sen. McCain discusses immigration reform and foreign policy challenges,” *YouTube* Video, 4:57, January 27, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VoFVDv5Uik>.

²⁷⁹ Dara Lind, “Obama’s huge new immigration plan, explained,” *VOX*, November 21, 2014. <https://www.vox.com/2014/11/20/7250255/immigration-reform-obama-executive-action/in/7019390>.

²⁸⁰ Hans A. von Spakovsky, “It’s Time to End DACA – It’s Unconstitutional Unless Approved by Congress,” *The Heritage Foundation*, January 25, 2019. <https://www.heritage.org/courts/commentary/its-time-end-daca-its-unconstitutional-unless-approved-congress>.

population averaged below 10,000 prior to the bill and it would double by the end of Clinton's second term towards 20,000. It remained steady until George W. Bush's second term when it spiked again up to 30,000 between 2006 and 2008. The Obama administration would maintain those detention rates until the very end of the second term when the population actually drops significantly in 2015. However, within the first two years of the Trump administration, the detention population would skyrocket to well over 50,000 per day.²⁸¹ Now, the U.S. is home to the largest immigration detention system in the world with at least 200 facilities across the country. Moreover, thousands of migrants are being detained for prolonged periods of time. The former acting director of ICE, John Sandweg laments the inhumanity of the U.S. detention system in stating "there are safer and more humane ways of doing this that are no less tough... We detain lots of people who are not dangerous and who aren't a flight risk and it makes no sense to me."²⁸² Even someone like Sandweg, an agent of the system who ultimately believes in the execution of border enforcement, is at least able to acknowledge the inhumanity by which it is currently practiced. "We have new technology [like] ankle bracelets... for two dollars a day, we can let someone stay at home [un]til their hearing is done and it wouldn't weaken our law enforcement system one bit." Yet, even more so than the heightened rates and extended periods of detention, what clearly distinguished the era of Trump was the separation of families.

The Obama Administration tended to detain families together, but it was also guilty of separating children from their parents on some occasions, such as when a parent was in possession of illegal drugs at the time of apprehension. However, it was not a widespread or standard practice until the Trump Administration launched a "pilot program" in 2017 prior to the introduction of zero tolerance.²⁸³ Dozens of children were being split from their parents on a daily basis. Between October 1, 2017 and May 31, 2018, at least 2,700 children were split from their parents. A distraught Honduran man suffered a nervous breakdown after being separated from his wife and child and died by suicide in a padded cell in a Texas facility.²⁸⁴ When journalists and human rights advocates toured a facility where hundreds of children were being kept in cages made of metal fencing, they reported that the children were sleeping under "large foil sheets," they had no access to books or toys, and older children were made responsible for changing the diapers of toddlers.²⁸⁵ On June 18, 2020, *ProPublica* published an audio clip of detained Central American children sobbing so strenuously to the point of labored breathing. They screamed "Mama!" and "Papá!" repeatedly while Border Patrol agents can be heard taunting them. One can be heard joking "Well we have an orchestra here. What's missing is a

²⁸¹ Immigration Customs Enforcement, National Immigrant Justice Center.

²⁸² The Atlantic, "Deportation Nation," *YouTube* Video, 8:45, February 23, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zs-ljkB1TJE>.

²⁸³ Lisa Riordan Seville and Hannah Rappleye, "Trump admin ran 'pilot program' for separating migrant families in 2017," *NBC News*, June 29, 2018. <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/immigration-border-crisis/trump-admin-ran-pilot-program-separating-migrant-families-2017-n887616>.

²⁸⁴ Nick Miroff, "A family was separated at the border and this distraught father took his own life," *The Washington Post: Democracy Dies in Darkness*, June 9, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/a-family-was-separated-at-the-border-and-this-distraught-father-took-his-own-life/2018/06/08/24e40b70-6b5d-11e8-9e38-24e693b38637_story.html.

²⁸⁵ Nomaan Merchant, "Hundreds of children wait in Border Patrol facilities in Texas," *Associated Press*, June 17, 2018. <https://apnews.com/article/north-america-tx-state-wire-us-news-ap-top-news-border-patrols-9794de32d39d4c6f89fbefaea3780769>.

conductor.”²⁸⁶ In response to the surmounting public outrage, Trump signed an executive order on June 20, 2018 directing DHS to end the separation of families except in cases where the parent may represent a risk to the child. Lawyers appointed by a federal judge to identify migrant families report that they have yet to track down the parents of more than 500 children.²⁸⁷

The harsh punitive practices of detention centers are very much executed with the intention of presumably deterring and discouraging migration into the country. Fueled by Trump’s fear mongering, his xenophobic rhetoric and characterization of Latinx migrants as “rapists” and “criminals,” the right has been emboldened to take drastic measures. Arpaio asserts that “You have to send a message out. One thing I like about the President [is that] he said, to anybody coming across, ‘you’re going to jail.’ That keeps people from coming across.”²⁸⁸ Jessica Vaughn from the Center for Immigration Studies echoes this sentiment in stating “When people know that they’re not going to be released, they’re going to think twice about coming to the United States... Its’ not an attractive option anymore.”²⁸⁹ Arpaio had been as brazen as a peacock with his fascist posture long before Trump’s presidency. In 2008, when he was questioned about whether or not he was willing to implement “concentration camps” to deter the migrant allure of entering the country, he responded “I already have a concentration camp, it’s called ‘tent city’.”²⁹⁰ The detention system is therefore predicated on the narrow evaluation that anyone coming into the country without documentation is breaking the law and deserves to suffer the consequences of their criminal actions. This does not account for the destitute and often war torn environments that many migrants are escaping from. Seeking asylum is a harrowingly difficult and complex process with a small window of hope for admittance in which 90% of cases are denied.²⁹¹ However, the violent circumstances of their home countries are often so severe that many migrants are actually more willing to risk facing the consequences of arrest and detention than to remain in their home countries. Many migrants have reason to believe that they will face certain death upon their return. Still, the detention centers have been anything but safe and they would become some of the most dangerous places in the country upon the COVID-19 outbreaks.

Because migrant families are more likely to live in multigenerational households in close quarter spaces and because they are more likely to work in essential front-line jobs, they are at higher risk of infection. Moreover, the virus was spreading in facilities across the country, prompting immigration attorneys to sue ICE to release at-risk detainees. The crowded conditions of the detention centers which are often plagued with poor hygiene and inadequate ventilation

²⁸⁶ Ginger Thompson, “Listen to Children Who’ve Just Been Separated From Their Parents at the Border,” *ProPublica*, June 18, 2020. <https://www.propublica.org/article/children-separated-from-parents-border-patrol-cbp-trump-immigration-policy>.

²⁸⁷ Julia Ainsley and Jacob Soboroff, “Lawyers say they can’t find the parents of 545 migrant children separated by Trump administration,” *NBC News*, October 20, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/lawyers-say-they-can-t-find-parents-545-migrant-children-n1244066>.

²⁸⁸ The Atlantic, “Deportation Nation,” *YouTube* Video, 9:36.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 9:50.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 12:05.

²⁹¹ Human Rights *First*: Fact Sheet, “Grant Rates Plummet as Trump Administration Dismantles U.S. Asylum System, Blocks and Deports Refugees,” June 2020. <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/AdministrationDismantlingUSAsylumSystem.pdf>.

makes them particularly vulnerable to contagious diseases.²⁹² For instance, in the La Palma Correctional Center in Arizona, a government inspection report²⁹³ found constant violations of mask-wearing and social-distancing protocols. Moreover, the report also found that various grievances concerning excessive use of force and verbal abuse had been filed. When detainees peacefully protested to call attention to these conditions, they were reportedly pepper sprayed by the jail staff. In another detention center in Farmville, Virginia, ICE's failure to routinely test for coronavirus led to an outbreak of 250 cases out of approximately 300 detainees in the facility with one 72-year-old dying from the virus.²⁹⁴ As of December 2, 2020, there had been over 7,500 confirmed positive COVID-19 cases among detained noncitizens. As of April 2021, at the decline of the overall rate of infection, the average rate of infection inside ICE detention facilities remained about 20 times that of the general U.S. population.²⁹⁵

Towards Black and Latinx Solidarity

*"It wouldn't be the USA without Mexicans and if it's time to team up... let's begin. Black love, Brown pride in the sets again."*²⁹⁶ — Nipsey Hussle

As previously mentioned, the first task in strengthening bonds of solidarity between groups is to maintain a consciousness of the differences between them, particularly in how each group is positioned in relation to white supremacy and the specificities of their experiences with racialized class oppression. The second task is to acknowledge the vast degree of heterogeneity within each group. For instance, the experiences of Chicana/o people in Los Angeles are vastly different from the experiences of Puerto Rican or Dominican people in Chicago and New York. Moreover, the cultures of Latinx communities differ in accordance with their histories with colonialism. Lastly, the prevalence of Afro-Latinx as well as white Latinx people add another layer of complexity to racial politics within the U.S. Afro-Latinx people experience the duality of being visibly legible as Black and culturally legible as Latinx. Conversely, white or white passing Latinx people experience the duality of being visibly legible as white, but culturally legible as Latinx. The former is subject to the racialized experiences of being both Black and Latinx, while the latter experiences the privilege of being saliently white, but the racialized experience of being Latinx upon being discovered as non-Anglo. All of these socio-cultural complexities of identity oscillate within the larger frameworks of identifying as Black U.S. American and/or Latinx – or being Black and/or Brown in the U.S. Concerning the prospects of solidarity between these two distinct but intersecting groups, both contemporary developments in

²⁹² Jaimie P Meyer, Carlos Franco-Paredes, Parveen Parmar, Faiza Yasin, and Matthew Gartland, "COVID-19 and the coming epidemic in US immigration detention centres," *Lancet Infectious Diseases Vol.20, #6*, (2020), 646-648. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099\(20\)30295-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(20)30295-4).

²⁹³ Homeland Security: Office of Inspector General, "Violations of Detention Standards amid COVID-19 Outbreak at La Palma Correctional Center in Eloy, AZ," March 20, 2021. <https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/2021-04/OIG-21-30-Mar21.pdf>.

²⁹⁴ Antonio Olivo and Nick Miroff, "ICE flew detainees to Virginia so the planes could transport agents to D.C. protests. A huge coronavirus outbreak followed," *The Washington Post: Democracy Dies in Darkness*, September 11, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/coronavirus/ice-air-farmville-protests-covid/2020/09/11/f70ebe1e-e861-11ea-bc79-834454439a44_story.html.

²⁹⁵ UCLA Law Behind Bars Data Project: COVID-19 in ICE Detention. <https://uclacovidbehindbars.org/ice>.

²⁹⁶ YG featuring Nipsey Hussle, "F—k Donald Trump," *Still Brazy*, 2016.

grassroots advocacy and the historical record of co-resistance between the two groups have shown great promise in building momentum towards an international solidarity framework of community organizing.

While the two groups have also been plagued by long histories of tension and violent animosity under the modernization model of community development, radical politicization through community-based organizing has been an effective treatment against identity reductionism. In the 1960s, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense and the Brown Berets emerged amidst the Black Power and Chicano movements in California as parallel collaborating organizations for community self-determination, self-defense, self-reliance, and self-respect. Guided by a dependency outlook undergirded by international collaboration, the two groups developed a relationship of mutual support. They both understood the need for each to focus primarily on issues specific to their respective racialized experiences, but they uplifted one another in pursuit of their shared goals for community uplift. Each mobilized to support the others' rallies and demonstrations and each reported on the others' struggles in their newspapers *The Panther* and *La Causa*. When both organizations flailed under the surveillance, infiltration, and repression of COINTELPRO throughout the 1970s, this practice of organized solidarity largely dissipated. Throughout the decades that followed, tensions between Black and Latinx communities would flare in rhythm with the economic hardships that befell both groups through the crack epidemic and the Central American dirty wars incurred by the Reagan Administration. There were times when it seemed as though the era of the Black and Brown unity of the movements of old was becoming a distant idealistic memory.²⁹⁷ Yet, there were also times of unorganized cohesion developing amidst periods of turmoil such as the LA uprisings of 1992 when both groups coalesced in the heat of indignation over their shared plight in poverty, isolation, and unemployment in South Central.²⁹⁸ With the 21st century mobilizations for race justice, solidarity between the two communities have been revitalized by the growth in consciousness of how they are mutually impacted by state sanctioned violence and the recognition of how momentum for either group is mutually beneficial.

While the abuse of Latinx communities by ICE has spurred widespread public outrage, the extrajudicial killings of Latinx people by police have not seen the same level of media coverage or mass mobilization. This is partly attributed to the false perception within certain segments of the Latinx community that police violence is not a Latinx issue despite the statistical trends. "The narrative with too many Latinos is, 'It's not us, it's [Black people]," says Roberto Cintli Rodriguez, a professor at University of Arizona. "*They* have a problem. People call all these cases [against Latinos] anecdotal. [They] need to see the numbers... the numbers are outrageous."²⁹⁹ From the "Zoot Suit Riots" of 1943, when white military servicemen terrorized Mexican-Americans for days while the police ignored the issue and arrested mostly Latinos, to the "Bloody Christmas" of 1953, when Latino prisoners were brutally beaten by LAPD officers, police injustice is hardly a new development of the Latinx community. Many Black-led community organizations have, for years, urged the public to understand that police violence is

²⁹⁷ Nicolas C. Vaca, *The Presumed Alliance: The Unspoken Conflict Between Latinos and Blacks and What It Means for America*, United States: HarperCollins, 2004.

²⁹⁸ David E. Hayes-Bautista, Werner O. Schink, and Maria Hayes-Bautista, "Latinos and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots: A Behavioral Sciences Perspective," *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 15, no. 4 (November 1993): 427–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07399863930154001>.

²⁹⁹ Gustavo Arellano, "Column: What will make people care about police shootings of Latinos?" *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-04-20/latinos-police-shootings>.

as much an issue for Black people as it is for Brown people. For instance, BLMLA maintains a Black-centered leadership structure and its advocacy efforts focus primarily on demanding justice for the state-sanctioned killings of Black victims, but the organization has always uplifted the Latinx lives lost to LAPD and LA County Sheriffs. They have raised awareness that Latinx victims make up 67% of all people fatally shot by LAPD despite being only 49% of the city's population.³⁰⁰ Since October 2017 until now, BLMLA has always invited the families of Latinx victims of police violence to share space and give testimony at their weekly 3pm Wednesday actions. Moreover, core members actively work to coordinate and build relationships with the families by consistently inviting them to use the BLM platform to honor the memories of their slain loved ones and to advocate for justice for them. Professor Melina Abdullah has always welcomed the family members of Anthony Vargas, Eric Rivera, Jesse Romero, and Cesar Rodriguez – Latino men who were fatally shot by police in the last four years. BLMLA and the ACLU have been instrumental in building a community of support among grieving families, particularly mothers both Black and Brown,³⁰¹ and in facilitating their ability to translate their grief into empowerment through unrelenting grassroots community action on a weekly basis.

In turn, Latinx community organizers have mobilized en masse to support BLM. When the George Floyd protests began in late May, 28-year-old Rene Molina, the Latino pastor of Iglesia Restauración in West Adams, gave a sermon on how the Bible supports the oppressed and read from the writings of Black theologians James Cone and Cornel West. “I think a lot of Hispanic activists, we view the Black community... as trailblazers,” said Molena. “We see them when they speak out. We find ourselves in their voice. When they express their anger, we can relate to that. When they express the pain, we can relate to that.”³⁰² He also lamented that despite his best efforts, there remains a disconnect with his parents and clergy elders in struggling to view police violence on Black people as a systematic issue. They did not admonish him to stop his efforts, but they certainly held their reservations about a full fledged support for the BLM movement. Despite the rich history of Black and Brown solidarity of the past, it is clear that a significant segment of Latinx elders have tended to maintain their siloed anti-Black sensibilities – particularly many first-generation adult immigrants. This is partly due to the fact that many of them were part of the waves of migrations that came after that era of activism and were therefore not present to either participate or witness the collaboration between the Panthers and Berets of old. Alternatively, there are Chicano activists like Carlos Montes – one of the co-founder of the Brown Berets and one of the leaders of the 1968 East L.A. student walkouts – who have always sought to partner with Black organizations. Montes continues his activism today, but the forward thrust of the solidarity efforts is being pushed by a fresh crop of youth organizers such as the Roosevelt High School Alumni for Black Lives Collective who organized a week of action in June 2020 in solidarity with the BLM movement. With more and more community organizations shedding away the modernization perspective of life in the U.S., Black and Brown community members are increasingly gravitating towards one another for support.

³⁰⁰ Cindy Chang, “Fatal shootings by the LAPD are down, but officials find major problems in many incidents,” *The Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-03-14/lapd-fatal-shootings-flaws>.

³⁰¹ Esmeralda Bermudez, “As protests against police brutality go global, these Latina moms fight in memory of their sons,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-07-07/police-protests-latina-moms-sons-eastside>.

³⁰² Leila Miller, “Latino activists push for solidarity with Black community as they confront racism,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 14, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-07-14/la-me-latino-support-george-floyd-protests>.

Stop AAPI Hate

On the night of March 16, 2021, eight people were brutally killed in a series of terrorist shootings in three different massage parlors across the Atlanta area by a single gunman. Six of the victims were Asian women. This was the tragedy that catapulted the #StopAsianHate movement to drive a heightened national awareness of the racial prejudice, bigotry, and violence that Asian Americans have endured not only in the wake of the Covid virus, but through centuries of ongoing xenophobia, misogyny, and scapegoating in the U.S. Since the onset of the pandemic, there were a dramatic upsurge of violent attacks, acts of harassment, and murder specifically targeting Asian-American people, particularly Asian elders and women. From being verbally harassed, being spat on, and barred from establishments to brutal assault and murder, Asian Americans have suffered an array of discriminatory acts and violence which have dramatically been amplified by the xenophobic scapegoating that white supremacists have goaded. Stop AAPI Hate received reports of 3,292 incidents that occurred between March 19 and December 31, 2020 – over a 200% rise since 2019.³⁰³ The number of reported incidents increased significantly from 3,795 to 6,603 in March of 2021. Approximately 8% of these incidents were violent attacks. In a survey conducted by the Center for Public Integrity, 32% of respondents reported witnessing someone blaming Asian people for the pandemic, 44% of respondents reported that they believe that a specific group or organization is responsible for the spread of the virus with 66% of those respondents generally naming China or Chinese people.³⁰⁴ The various attacks on Asian Elders have been particularly disturbing. A 61-year-old Filipino man was slashed across his face while riding on the subway in New York, a 64-year-old Vietnamese woman was robbed in a San Jose parking lot, and an 81-year-old Thai man was shoved to the ground in San Francisco resulting in his death. In July 2020, an 89-year-old Chinese woman was slapped in the face and then set on fire in Brooklyn by two men. The assault of a 64-year-old Vietnamese grandmother who was assaulted and robbed in San Jose CA.

Moreover, the disproportionate attacks on Asian women are telling of the misogynist tendencies of racial violence and xenophobia. With the Atlanta shooting, authorities tried to claim that the attack “was not racially motivated” because the shooter reportedly confessed that he was trying to address his “sexual addiction,” endorsing the presumption that misogyny and sexual entitlement can be distinguished from racist perceptions of Asian women as disposable hypersexual objects. The Stop AAPI Report found that women reported hate incidents 2.3 times more than men. Rather than strictly condemning the shooter, one of the authorities that apprehended him explained that “he was having a bad day,” as a gesture of sympathy for his motives. With former president Donald Trump propagating racist anti-Asian rhetoric by blaming China for the outbreak and crudely describing COVID-19 as the “kung flu” or “China” virus³⁰⁵, it is difficult to consider that this heightened atmosphere of anti-Asian violence can be attributed to anything other than the emboldenment of white supremacy. In fact, the initial rise of hate

³⁰³ Russell Jeung, Aggie Yellow Horse, Tara Popovic, and Richard Lim, “Stop AAPI Hate National Report,” *Stop AAPI Hate*, May 2, 2021. <https://stopaapihate.org/2020-2021-national-report/>.

³⁰⁴ Alex Ellerbeck, “Survey: More Than 30 Percent of Americans Have Witnessed COVID-19 Bias Against Asians,” *Center for Public Integrity*, April 28, 2020. <https://publicintegrity.org/health/coronavirus-and-inequality/survey-majority-of-asian-americans-have-witnessed-covid-19-bias/>.

³⁰⁵ Kimmy Yam, “Trump can’t claim ‘Kung Flu’ doesn’t affect Asian Americans, experts say,” *NBC News*, June 22, 2020, “<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/trump-can-t-claim-kung-flu-doesn-t-affect-asian-n1231812>”

incident reports and hospitalizations of Asian victims coincided with the rising frequency of stigmatizing rhetoric propagated by right-wing politicians throughout March of 2020.

Many of the perpetrators of the attacks have reportedly mimicked these sentiments. According to a report by the American Psychological Association, fear mongering has been known to be a powerful motivating influence in elections.³⁰⁶ Therefore, it would not be unreasonable to suspect that right-wing officials propagated anti-Asian narratives in anticipation of the 2020 elections to boost their relevance in the likeness of Trump. In a study conducted by the American Journal of Public Health, researchers analyzed 1,227 tweets about Asian Americans over an eight month period and found that 1 in 10 included racist or stigmatizing language.³⁰⁷ All of them came from Republican politicians. Well beyond the 2020 elections, these tendencies have ensued with the undermining of political efforts to address the attacks. In mid-April 2021, a rare bipartisan effort, led by Senator Mazie Hirono of Hawaii and Representative Grace Meng of New York, pushed for the advancement of the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act, a bill intended to make the ability to report hate incidents more accessible. Overwhelmingly, 92 senators voted in favor of the motion to advance the bill, but six Republicans including Ted Cruz, Josh Hawley and Rand Paul voted against it. This is not to suggest that anti-Asian racism was recently created by the political right, but it is evident that white supremacist scapegoating has very much catalyzed this exacerbated surge of attacks.

Although political geography includes South Asian or Indian, Arabic, and Middle-Eastern communities under the continental category of “Asian,” its usage as a racial category in the U.S. differs. For westerners “Asian” is primarily assigned to those who are readily perceived as East Asian through the crude prism of the western gaze. Although virtually all Asian groups have undergone harrowing periods of targeted violence in the U.S., it is important to acknowledge that there are significant historical nuances in their respective experiences with xenophobia. In the post-9/11 era, South Asian and Middle-Eastern communities have certainly experienced intensified bigotry, harassment, and violence spurred by Islamophobia. The number of anti-Muslim hate crime incidents spiked up from 28 in 2000 to 481 in 2001. Over the course of two decades, the rates of anti-Muslim hate incidents have steadily averaged between 150 to over 200 every year, well above pre-9/11 averages. Discriminatory policies have also ensued with former president Trump enforcing travel bans on seven Islamic countries in 2017. However, this form of racialized terror is not the same as the mode of terror that a particular segment of the Asian-American community has undergone throughout the pandemic. It is important to distinguish that this current wave of violent anti-Asian hatred is focused primarily on East Asian communities – specifically those who are readily legible as Chinese, which, in the crude logic of U.S. American racialization often includes Japanese, Koreans, and other nationalities. This is a critical detail in not only formulating effective resistance strategies, but also assessing the particularities of intergroup dissent on the issue.

³⁰⁶ Kirk Waldroff, “Fear: A powerful motivator in elections,” *American Psychological Association*, October 13, 2020. <https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2020/fear-motivator-elections>.

³⁰⁷ Yulin Hswen, Xiang Xu, Anna Hing, Jared B. Hawkins, John S. Brownstein and Gilbert C. Gee, “Association of ‘#covid19’ Versus ‘#chinesevirus’ With Anti-Asian Sentiments on Twitter: March 9-23,” *American Journal of Public Health* 111, 956-964. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306154>.

Divided Opinions on Policing

In Oakland, where the attacks on Asian elders have been particularly prevalent, the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce documented nearly two dozen assaults over the course of the winter of 2020-21. Carl Chan, the president of the Chamber of Commerce, stated that he suspected that the number of attacks were actually higher and that many victims are unwilling to report.³⁰⁸ Local organizer Joanna Au started a crowdfunding campaign to hire armed private security guards from the Goliath Protection Group to prevent more attacks. She successfully raised well over \$100,000 from over 1,500 donors and the Goliath armed guards began their patrols. Volunteer-led patrol groups have also participated in ramping up the security detail efforts by routinely walking around Chinatown and escorting elders to and from grocery stores and other places that they frequent. Many community members, particularly Asian seniors, have expressed that they actually want increased police presence in the area to deter these violent crimes.³⁰⁹ Some, like Weng Kee Fu, who has operated Ruby King Bakery since the 1980s, have expressed sympathy for the movement for Black Lives and their grievances with policing, but he ultimately believes that reforming police institutions and replacing corrupt officers is the solution rather than defunding. The president of the Oakland Chinatown Chamber of Commerce stated that “When there are actually working solutions, we don’t need the police... and we wouldn’t mind to explore the option. But they are talking about the future and I’m talking about today, tonight, and tomorrow.” Asian activists have adamantly challenged these notions, emphasizing that relying on policing is not a tenable long-term solution. Education scholar and women’s empowerment advocate [Connie Wun tweeted](#) that “Responses to violence against Asians + Asian Americans can’t be to create a police state in Chinatown. There are now private security guards, vigilantes, + mobile police stations in our neighborhood. That doesn’t make us safe. Our communities working in solidarity keep us safe.”³¹⁰ During a solidarity rally for Black and Asian unity at Madison Park, the speakers resoundingly denounced the call for increased policing as a “lazy” solution. “It escalates the tension that makes violence against people and property more likely. And it makes all of us less safe” exclaimed Ener Chui, who organizes with the East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation (EBALDC).³¹¹ Amidst these conflicting sensibilities, there have been efforts to foster understanding and empathy rather than exacerbating racial and ideological polarizations between Black and Asian communities. “It’s the same with the Black community, right?” said Chaney Turner, an Oakland business owner. “Our older community have been conditioned that police keep them safe.” She mentioned that she was not upset by those in Chinatown who feel like more police would help keep them safe. “We need to have conversations with our loved ones and , you know, in communities to really explain why the

³⁰⁸ Kiara Brantley-Jones and Stacy Chen, “Violent attacks on elderly Asian Americans in Bay Area leaves community members ‘traumatized’,” *ABCNews*, February 11, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/violent-attacks-elderly>.

-asian-americans-bay-area-leaves/story?id=75759713

³⁰⁹ Julie Chang, “Does Oakland Chinatown Need More Police? After Assaults, a Generational Divide,” *KQED*, March 4, 2021, <https://www.kqed.org/news/11862544/does-oakland-chinatown-need-more-police-after-assaults-a-generational-divide>.

³¹⁰ Wun, Connie. *Twitter* Post. February 9, 2021, 1:04 PM.

<https://twitter.com/conniewunphd/status/1359246821353168897>

³¹¹ Julie Chang, “Does Oakland Chinatown Need More Police? After Assaults, a Generational Divide,” *KQED*, March 4, 2021. <https://www.kqed.org/news/11862544/does-oakland-chinatown-need-more-police-after-assaults-a-generational-divide>.

police isn't and has not kept us safe.”³¹² Similar to the Latinx community, there is an evident generational divide in the Asian-American community's view of the movement for Black Lives and BLM.

It is also markedly important to note that not all Asian identifying communities and individuals reap the benefits of white adjacency. The Brown Asiatic communities, the Southeast Asian population who identify as Cambodian, Vietnamese, Laotian and Filipino. Afro-Pinay actress and content creator Asia Jackson notes that “jails, prisons, and juvenile detention centers are packed with Brown Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders, so more policing will actually affect Asian and Pacific communities as well.” She emphasized that the model monolithic narrative is “erasing Asian communities that aren't going to benefit from more policing.”³¹³ Disaggregated data on the specificity of how SE Asian communities are impacted by policing is sparse, but available resources strongly indicate that they are disproportionately harmed and impacted in ways similar to Black and Latinx communities. The prison boom of the 1990s saw a 250% increase of the AAPI prison population.³¹⁴ One study of the California Youth Authority (CYA) in 2002 found that Cambodian and Laotian youth were incarcerated at 4 and 9 times the rate expected by their respective populations. Vietnamese and Laotian youth had the second and third highest arrest rates in Richmond in 2000 after Black youth.³¹⁵

Divesting from the Model Minority Myth

Asian communities occupy a peculiar place in the hierarchy of racial politics in the U.S. They teeter between being favored and detested at the whims of white supremacy. They are often celebrated as the exemplary race among non-whites who have supposedly proven that economic success and assimilation into the American mainstream are possible through grit, discipline, and a quiet determination – qualities that have historically been juxtaposed to the cries for justice and equality and the accusations of racism by Black activists and community organizers in the post-Civil Rights era. However, for all of white society's congratulatory rhetoric, Asian people can never seem to get from behind the curtain of American authenticity that keeps them relegated behind the scenes of U.S. American life. In the rare moments that they are able to make it onto the main stage, they are either ridiculed and humiliated for their otherness or they are cast as detestable villains – as an existential danger. They are somehow the most highly revered and the most reviled depending on whichever direction white America's mood swings may sway at a given time. This stark contradiction posits Asians as a wedge between Black and white people. On the one hand, they are propagated as proof that race is an irrelevant factor in the pursuit of upward mobility in the U.S., thereby invalidating the Black community's advocacy efforts for racial equity and justice. On the other hand, they are untrustworthy perpetual foreigners. This

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ The Try Guys, “We Need To Talk About Anti-Asian Hate,” *YouTube* Video, 35:05/1:10:08, March 24, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14WUuya94QE&t=2442s>.

³¹⁴ Angela E. Oh and Karen Umemoto, “Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders: From Incarceration to Re-Entry,” *Amerasia Journal* 31(3), January 2005, 43-60. doi:10.17953/amer.31.3.g01428017553275j.

³¹⁵ Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders Behind Bars, “Exposing the School to Prison to Deportation Pipeline,” December 2015. https://www.searac.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/18877-AAPIs-Behind-Bars_web.pdf

dynamic creates a particularly frustrating set of challenges in the efforts to develop meaningful bonds of solidarity with other nonwhite groups. Claire Jean Kim describes this phenomenon as *racial triangulation*.³¹⁶ This concept drives the false right-wing narrative that the plight of any non-white group would be overcome if they would only reference the Asian-American example and strive to follow it. Ultimately, the model minority myth shrouds the actual hardship and suffering that Asian communities experience as racialized subjects. It projects a myopic Asian-American experience characterized by wealth achieved through high income earning and academic success, erasing the complexities of Asian life in the U.S. In turn, it develops a hesitancy among Asian-Americans to admit that they are impacted by racism in fear of jeopardizing their ability to access the currency of the model monolithic narrative.

The model monolithic narrative does not account for how Asians have the widest income disparity than any other racial group in the U.S. While they are, on average, known to be the highest income earners, Asians are also the lowest income earners at the lowest point of the scale.³¹⁷ A 2016 report from NYC Mayor's Office of Operations found that Asian immigrants have the highest poverty rates in the city. While Asians also hold the highest levels of educational attainment overall, there is considerable variation across ethnic subgroups. For instance, 73.2% of Koreans between the ages of 18-24 are enrolled in college, but only 44.3% of Filipino Americans of the same age group are enrolled.³¹⁸ Recent media representations of Asians have perhaps augmented the limited and flawed portrayals of the Asian American experience like the film *Crazy Rich Asians* and the series *Bling Empire*. Model minority myths strike an appeal for an attempt to assimilate into white society in hopes of safety and stability in the U.S. This endeavor can only perpetuate and lend validation to the harm done to other communities of color as well certain Asian subgroups, particularly those of SE Asian descent, who are, in contrast, situated adjacent to Black and Latinx people. Divesting from the model minority myth enables Asian-Americans to demand U.S. society to confront the material hardships that racial capitalism imposes on them and the socio-emotional trauma that it has incurred.

Revitalization of Asian-American Indignation

The extrajudicial killing of Vincent Chin in 1982 forced many in the Asian American community, particularly those most invested in model minority assumptions to adjust their perspectives on racial justice in the U.S. Chin was murdered by two white men autoworkers Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz amidst the Detroit auto worker crisis. Japanese automotive enterprises were beginning to thrive to the perceived detriment of American companies that plummeted, thereby resulting in the loss of jobs, which was actually more as a result of the ongoing deindustrialization of the U.S. labor. Although Chin was of Chinese descent, Ebens and

³¹⁶ Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1, (March 1999): 105–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329299027001005>.

³¹⁷ Rakesh Kochhar and Anthony Cilluffo, "Income Inequality in the U.S. Is Rising Most Rapidly Among Asians: Asians displace blacks as the most economically divided group in the U.S.," *Pew Research Center*, (2018). https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/07/Pew_Research_Center_Inequality-Report_FINAL.pdf.

³¹⁸ Julie K Park, "An Uneven Playing Field: The Complex Educational Experiences of Asian Americans," *American Council on Education*, Washington, DC, 2019. <https://www.higheredtoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Julie-Park-Uneven-Playing-Field.pdf>.

Nitz identified him as a salient target and proponent of their frustrations as working class whites. The two men targeted and harassed Chin then proceeded to beat him to death with a baseball bat before dozens of onlookers. Neither Ebens nor Nitz were convicted of the killing of Chin, they were given three years probation and a \$3,000 fine. The white judge, Charles Kaufman, who sympathized with the killers stated that “these are not the kind of men you send to jail.” These words moved Asian Americans to pivot into race conscious mobilization.

That Chin was a Chinese-American man who suffered a fatal beating spurred by white terrorist rage aimed at the Japanese revealed to many Asian Americans that despite their ethnic and national differences, their fates as racialized subjects in the U.S. were inextricably linked because the lens of white supremacy views them as an aggregated threat. To the assailants, it did not matter that Chin was not Japanese. In their view, all Asians represent the same threat. Until 2020, the killing of Vincent Chin was the most high profile AAPI hate incident. It demonstrated that even though he was a member of the supposed model minority, he and all Asians in the U.S. were still viewed as foreign threats, revealing that the protection that situating oneself in close proximity to white society is ultimately non-existent. Hence, a pan-Asiatic movement for justice was born, but its intensity and the disillusionment from deceptive protection was not sustained.

The 21st century has seen a substantial increase of Asian American involvement and participation in race justice activism. Asian youth have been particularly adamant in their call to divest from model minority frameworks and the positioning for proximity to whiteness. This means becoming more vocal about the multitude of ways that Asian people experience racial oppression and refusing to adhere to the invisibility of their experiences and their suffering. Many of them have avidly supported and participated in Black Lives Matter actions over the past decade, but especially so in the summer uprisings of 2020. With the heightened atmosphere of anti-Asian violence and with the forward momentum of their race justice allyship with the Movement for Black Lives, the AAPI community has moved to vocalize and mobilize in more uncompromising ways. In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Cathy Park Hong observes that “[this] younger generation is so much fiercer, so much more involved, and so much prouder of being Asian American.” She reflects on how Asian millennial and generation z advocates are... “It’s not just about representational politics. It’s also about confronting class inequity among Asian Americans and trying to build solidarity with other people of color.”³¹⁹

Towards Black and Asian Solidarity

White terrorists have not been solely responsible for many of the proliferation of attacks on the Asian community. The reports and optics of Black American individuals perpetrating many of the attacks have compelled the need to address the long standing tensions between Black and Asian communities in the U.S. in anticipation of the inflammation of existing tensions rooted in immigration and economic histories and policies that have pitted these communities against one another. In the wake of the recent string of anti-Asian attacks amidst the ongoing campaigns to defund police, many of the assailants have been reported to echo Trump’s hateful sentiments. Native-born Black Americans, like their white native-born counterparts, are susceptible to subscribing to xenophobic and jingoistic sensibilities especially for those who suffer the brunt of institutional racism and economic oppression. They become steeply invested

³¹⁹Morgan Ome, “Why This Wave of Anti-Asian Racism Feels Different,” *The Atlantic*, March 17, 2021 <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/03/cathy-park-hong-anti-asian-racism/618310/>

in their claim to U.S. citizenship and their ancestral longevity in America as an attempt to leverage their birth status to secure economic and political priority above those who they perceive as foreigners – or invaders rather – who are presumably looking to steal away those political and economic opportunities from them. These perceptions are exacerbated by the prevalence of Asian-owned businesses in Black communities.

In Los Angeles, the longstanding conflicts between Korean and Black Americans are one of the most notorious examples of this. In 1991, Latasha Harlins, a 15-year-old Black youth was shot in the back and killed by Korean store-owner Soon Ja Du, who assumed that Harlins was stealing a bottle of orange juice. Although Du would later be convicted of voluntary manslaughter, she was initially given a light sentence of six months probation. Compounded with the “not guilty” verdict of the officers involved in the Rodney King beating, the Black community in South Central would smolder. Their frustrations would also be conflated with the resentment towards Korean store-owners who were granted the ability to profit in Black neighborhoods, while the Black residents have largely been denied the small business loans to pursue entrepreneurship. Conversely, Korean immigrants were frustrated with the barriers that they faced in participation in the mainstream labor market due to language discrimination and non-U.S. credentials.³²⁰ These frustrations and resentments reached an apex and the two communities clashed in what became the 1992 LA Uprisings. The chaos incurred the widespread destruction of Korean stores by Black and Latinx protesters. In turn, Korean owners and their families sought to protect their assets by organizing armed patrols to guard their stores. While the Black community grieved Latasha Harlins, the Korean community was also grieving 25 of their merchants who had been fatally shot by Black and Latinx gunmen in the same period of 1990-92.³²¹ In the end, over 2000 Korean-owned businesses were burned in the wake of the uprisings. What was lost amidst the news coverage that overwhelmingly focused on the destruction and inter-communal animosity were the valiant attempts from both Black and Korean community members for conflict resolution and solidarity.³²² In the aftermath of the uprisings, both communities came to a mutual recognition that the U.S. state completely abandoned both of them. Progressive Korean small business associations and churches looked to show their support of the plight of Black South Central Residents.

The work of activists Yuri Kochiyama and Grace Lee Boggs are two of the most notable examples of Asian activists who invested deeply in Black radical frameworks to both advance the Black freedom struggle and shape alternate visions for Asian American liberation. Kochiyama was a member of Malcolm X’s OAAU and Grace Lee Boggs was a leftist writer and organizer who was a longtime collaborator with C.L.R. James. However, as remarkable as they were, they did not necessarily reflect the vast majority of attitudes held by the Asian American community. Sociologist Tamara K. Nopper points out that this history of solidarity is very limited and has not been as prevalent as many would like to think and that the larger history of interaction has been one plagued by tension, resentment, misunderstanding, and animosity.³²³ “We look at exceptions to think about possibilities, but we have to deal with what’s there,” she

³²⁰Pyong Gap Min, *Caught in the Middle: Korean Communities in New York And Los Angeles*, United States: University of California Press, 1996.

³²¹ Robert Gooding-Williams, *Reading Rodney King/reading Urban Uprising*. United Kingdom: Routledge, 1993.

³²² Nadia Y. Kim, “The unexpected alliance forged after the Rodney King verdict,” *The Washington Post*, April 21, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/04/21/unexpected-alliance-forged-after-rodney-king-verdict/>.

³²³ Kat Moon, “How a Shared Goal to Dismantle White Supremacy Is Fueling Black-Asian Solidarity,” *TIME*, March 25, 2021. <https://time.com/5949926/black-asian-solidarity-white-supremacy/>

says. It is imperative that Asians recognize that overall, Asian-Americans experience better treatment than Black people. “It’s not to say that we can’t experience racial violence. We do. It’s not to say that there aren’t specific ways that we get targeted. There are. But we’re not the basis of how people organize punishment through society in general.” To this point, with the growing realization that white supremacy is ultimately the culprit, Nopper calls attention to the need for Asian communities to take a serious and honest evaluation of power relations between people of color. The BLM Global Network issued a statement declaring that “When we call for the eradication of white supremacy, we are saying that Asian-Americans, and every other marginalized racial group, deserves to be freed from the violence, intimidation and fear. None of us are free until we all are.”³²⁴ Across the nation, Asian American organizers voiced similar sentiments. Dao-Yi Chow, a Chinese American activist from New York, exclaimed that “We’re not safe until all people of color are safe. Safety doesn’t come in the form of heavier policing calls or of carceral state oppression of poor communities.” As an organizer who led Black & Asian solidarity efforts, she emphasized that calling for increased policing is “only continuing to align ourselves with white supremacy. And if we continue to do that, those are anti-Black acts that’s only going to continue to drive divisions in between our communities”³²⁵

In the efforts to strengthen bonds of solidarity across racialized communities and to build meaningful multi-racial coalitions, it is imperative that the collective response to the recent waves of anti-Asian hate is guided by an understanding that there is no body of evidence that suggests that expanding and reinvesting in policing will be an effective long term solution to preventing further attacks. Oakland City Council member Carroll Fife, observes that “AAPI folks have been here for hundreds of years, but the reality for Black folks is [that] we’ve been here twice as long and [have] experienced oppression for twice as long and [we] have different experiences, but the source is the same.” The fight against anti-Asian misogyny and xenophobia must be pursued alongside the Movement for Black Lives, not in contradiction to it. Any expression of “#StopAsianHate” that looks to invalidate or undo the imperatives to defund the police established by the Movement for Black Lives increases the risks of state-sanctioned violence for all groups. Anti-Blackness plagues the Asian American community. Anti-Asian xenophobia plagues the Black American community. Both are orchestrated by white supremacy. It is also important to uplift that just as the racial oppression experienced by Asian communities is not a new or emerging development in the wake of the pandemic, neither is the Asian-led anti-racist activism. The circumstances are as ripe as ever for Asian American activists to build a mass movement in the tradition of Yuri Kochiyama and Grace Lee Boggs and in the tradition of the pan-Asiatic movement that was birthed in the wake of the murder of Vincent Chin.

The African Connection

On the issue of immigration, an obvious common ground upon which solidarity can be developed is the ways in which African, Afro-Latinx, Afro-Asian, and Afro-Caribbean migrant communities are impacted by mass deportation at the intersection of anti-Blackness and xenophobia. Various advocacy groups such as UndocuBlack, the Black LGBTQ Migrant Project,

³²⁴ blkivesmatter, *Instagram* Post, March 17, 2021. Accessed on March 26, 2021.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CMiO3YuJBCK/>

³²⁵ Kat Moon, “How a Shared Goal...” 2021.

African Communities Together, and the Haitian Bridge Alliance have worked to raise awareness on the specificity of the Black migrant experience. The most prominent of them, The Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI), was founded in April 2006 in response to repressive immigration bills that would lead to the upsurge in overall deportation rates thereafter. In a report documenting the rates of detention and deportation of Black immigrants, BAJI found that while Black migrants represent only 5.4% of the unauthorized immigrant population in the U.S., they represent 20.3% of those facing deportation on criminal grounds.³²⁶ This is largely because of the disproportionate rates at which Black people in the U.S. are stopped, harassed, arrested, and convicted by law enforcement. Yet, the notion of “Black immigrants” is an unfamiliar concept and therefore invisible in mainstream media representations of immigrants.

The foremost obstacle to increasing the urgency of addressing the Black immigrant experience is the intercommunal tensions between Black U.S. American citizens and African, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-Latinx communities. Within the siloed perspective of the capitalist model, Black migrant communities are compelled to distinguish themselves from Black U.S. Americans to avoid being legible with the same anti-Black tropes specific to the descendants of enslaved people. Because many continental African migrants who come to the U.S. tend to be of the professional elite class of their countries of origin, there is a compulsion for many of them to subscribe to *model minority* notions of differentiation as a way to separate themselves from their Black U.S. American counterparts. African immigrants have the highest levels of academic achievement compared to U.S. citizens and other immigrant communities overall.³²⁷ 40% of sub-Saharan Africans over the age of 25 hold a bachelor degree or higher compared to 31% of the total foreign born population and 32% of the U.S.-born population with Nigerians, South Africans, and Kenyans holding the highest rates.³²⁸ African immigrants also participate in the civilian labor force at higher rates at 75% compared to U.S. citizens at 62% and other immigrant communities overall at 66%. Moreover, they are also much more likely to be employed in management, business, and science at 32% than in maintenance occupations. Because of their high academic and professional success, African immigrants are able to become naturalized U.S. citizens or obtain lawful permanent residence at relatively high rates. Of course, there is a great degree of socioeconomic variation among African migrant communities, which is reflected in that 19% lived in poverty in 2017 compared to 13% of U.S. citizens. Refugee communities from conflict ridden areas like Somalia are particularly impacted with 42% living in poverty.

³²⁶ Juliana Morgan-Trostle and Kexin Zheng, “The State of Black Immigrants,” *Black Alliance for Just Immigration*, 19. <https://www.sccgov.org/sites/oir/Documents/sobi-deprt-blk-immig-crim-sys.pdf>.

³²⁷ Carlon Echeverria-Estrada and Jeanne Batalova, “Sub-Saharan African Immigrants in the United States,” *Migration Policy Institute*, November 6, 2019. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/sub-saharan-african-immigrants-united-states-2018>.

³²⁸ Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 ACS.

Return to the Bandung Conference

*“I am against politics rooted in identity as opposed to identity rooted in politics. I am against identity reductionism and intersectional imperialism”*³²⁹

— Charisse Burden Stelley, 2021

In the second chapter of this dissertation, we surveyed the historical pitfalls of class reductionism – the assumption that societal oppression can essentially be collapsed into the binaristic antagonism between capitalist and proletarian forces. This tendency not only underestimates the significance of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, it also neglects to account for the centrality of race justice and gender justice frameworks in building a comprehensive anti-capitalist movement. On the other hand, *race*-reductionist trends have also failed to account for the totality of how white supremacy operates. The notion that western society is constituted by anti-Blackness alone also fails to grasp the complexity of racial oppression especially with consideration of how existing modalities of oppression originated with inter-European processes of racialization. In *Black Marxism*, Cedric J. Robinson begins his analysis of racial capital with the formation of racial hierarchies within Europe, emphasizing the historical process by which the logic of racial oppression originated with the pre-capitalist conflicts internal to Europe.³³⁰ That anti-Black racism has – through the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade – been established as the de facto standard for organizing labor exploitation in the U.S. signals the immense importance of addressing the specificity of anti-Black racism, it does not signal that societal oppression in its totality can be reduced to the singularity of anti-Blackness. U.S. based race justice scholarship and activism are not inherently absolved from the nearsightedness of U.S. American exceptionalism. On one hand, non-Black racialized subjects – particularly those who enjoy white passing and light skinned privileges – must maintain a vigilant awareness of how they benefit from anti-Black racism in their relative proximity to whiteness. On the other hand, racialized subjects living in the U.S. – particularly those who enjoy “middle class” privileges – must maintain a vigilant awareness of how they benefit from Third World underdevelopment and xenophobia towards exploited undocumented communities and other nonwhite migrant groups deemed “un-American” in their relative proximity to western modernity.

While Malcolm X’s exaltation of the Bandung Conference proceedings may very well have oversimplified the prospects for comprehensive unity throughout the Global South and elided the challenge of managing the real ideological and positional differences across a vast plurality of ethno-national groups, the Conference itself presented a palpable set of broad political idealisms through which solidarity can be nourished and exercised. Its delegates aptly recognized the need for international political cohesion in resisting western imperialism and white supremacy. Frustrated by the laborious process of working through positional differences and by having to repeatedly untangle themselves from the pitfalls of romanticized unity, race-reductionists have tended to develop an embittered resentment of intercommunal solidarity,

³²⁹ Black Alliance for Peace, “Malcolm X and the Black Internationalist Struggle for Peace and People(s)-Centered Human Rights,” *YouTube* Video, 1:00:00/1:35:01, February 26, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DOQOqBnDmso>.

³³⁰ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism*

stubbornly resisting the inevitability of having to grapple with it. The Bandung Conference reminds us that operationalizing intercommunal solidarity in the U.S. among Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian-American communities demands an international concept of anti-colonial liberation praxis that accounts for how non-white ethnic communities in the U.S. are historically and politically connected with a multiplex of global diasporas. No racial liberation curriculum can be considered comprehensive without a global consideration of how groups are historically, politically, and economically linked. In understanding the globality of white supremacist capitalism, in the likeness of the Bandung proceedings, intercommunal solidarity becomes less of an idealistic romanticism and more of a inevitable undertaking that will require a disciplined commitment to global consciousness.

Chapter 5

Youth Leadership Theory of Movement Sustainability

Youth and student activism have been vital forces in not only igniting the start of the BLM movement but in sustaining its longevity. Youth and student leaders bring unique assets to movement-building work that have too often been overlooked and undervalued in past iterations of the Black freedom struggle in its Civil Rights and Black nationalist forms. The BLM movement began with a resistance to dogmatic leadership paradigms and it is continued by the innovative and cutting-edge interventions of each successive wave of young organizers entering into the movement. However, even the current landscape of youth participation is vastly different from what it was a decade ago when the activists of J4TMLA and other youth activists across the country forcefully interjected Black Lives Matter into the mainstream dialogue on state-sanctioned violence and institutional racism. That generation was tasked with the tall order of pulling the deceptive curtain of post-racialism and neoliberal positivity to reveal the naked truth that white supremacy and plutocracy have remained fixed in the heart of U.S. American life all along despite the election of its first Black president and despite the momentary bursts of economic growth seen in the 1990s. The J4TMLA generation of activists were faced with the arduous struggle of cutting through the thick web of dominant anti-Black and neoliberal narratives that placed the blame of financial insecurity and the abusive and fatal confrontations with law enforcement squarely on the individual's presumed inability to take personal responsibility and their refusal to present themselves in a respectable manner. As economic crisis began to affect a wider segment of white "middle-class" life and as social media, smart phones, and high speed internet allowed for a more thorough documentation and viral distribution of the realities of police violence, youth activists succeeded in elevating race, class, and intersectional consciousness and the urgent need to develop equity and justice frameworks.

Thereafter, each successive wave of youth and student activists throughout the past decade would build on the momentum of their predecessors and come into the movement with more sharpened analyses of the social, cultural, political, and economic dynamics of U.S. society and how Black and Brown communities are impacted by them. The 2020s has opened with a fresh crop of youth and student activists who have little to no memory of a time before Black Lives Matter; before the modern era of race, class, and gender justice and equity movements and of intersectional consciousness. This emerging contingency tends to be more disillusioned from the discourses of post-racialism and neoliberal positivity. They were not as beguiled by those narratives to begin with. They came of age amidst the intensification of populist critiques of white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism. Unlike the J4TMLA millennial generation, whose radical politics were quietly developed under unique circumstances; in college classrooms or through independent critical readings of society,³³¹ "Generation Z" or Gen Z³³² grew up hyper exposed to mass movement resistance from BLM and the Occupy Movement to the #MeToo,

³³¹ Which included non academic expressions of political thought such as underground Hip-Hop. Groups and artists like Dead Prez, Immortal Technique, Black Star, and various others.

³³² Defined by Pew Research as those born after 1996. Michael Dimock, "Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins," Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>.

anti-fascist, pro-immigration, pro-queer and pro-trans movements.³³³ Their worldviews were shaped in a sociocultural atmosphere in which anti-racism, anti-capitalism, and intersectionality have become common-sense themes in national dialogues of mainstream U.S. American politics rather than the fringe conspiracy notions that they were in the mid-to-late 2000s.³³⁴

Their foray into activism therefore presents the prospects of a promising future in the strengthening of the BLM movement instead of the waning derailment that has been typical of many Black-led movements in the U.S. approaching a decade of mobilization. From the nationalist Garveyite and Elijah Muhammad-led NOI movements to the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, rarely have these Black freedom projects been sustained at a high level – in garnering ongoing national relevance – beyond a decade of mobilization.³³⁵ This has largely been due to the fragility of centralized leadership structures that tend to implode in the face of prolonged duress imposed by both external forces of disruption and by the strain of rapid movement expansion. When the life force of the movement rests heavily on the shoals of its messianic leaders, its survival becomes fragile when that leader begins to succumb to the pressures of disruption and expansion. Moreover, when the leadership structures of those movements did not account for intersectional, pro-feminist, pro-queer, and pro-trans advocacy and analysis, they were less capable of managing external disruption and movement growth.

The Garvey movement faded into obscurity when its leader was exposed for his incompetence in managing the finances of UNIA when he was convicted for mail fraud. The Allah Temple of Islam became the NOI in the late 1930s under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad,³³⁶ but the organization did not experience significant strides in membership growth until Malcolm X headed its expansion efforts as its national spokesperson in the mid-1950s.³³⁷ The movement then fractured upon the acrimonious departure of Malcolm X from the NOI in the 1964 when Elijah Muhammad, its messianic leader, was revealed to have violated the moral code of the organization as he faced paternity suits from two of his personal secretaries who claimed that he fathered their children. The Black Power movement started as a youth-led development in the mid-1960s, but its vanguardian tendencies kept leadership concentrated among an aging few who refused to relinquish their monopolized grasp on decision making and resource management responsibilities. Maulana Karenga's ability to lead the Us Organization deteriorated as he was "overcome by fatigue, abuse of medication, paranoia, and reckless authoritarian conduct."³³⁸ In parallel, Huey P. Newton's ability to lead the Black Panther Party also deteriorated as he became

³³³ Kim Parker, Nikki Graf, and Ruth Igielnick, "Generation Z Looks a Lot Like Millennials on Key Social and Political Issues," Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/01/17/generation-z-looks-a-lot-like-millennials-on-key-social-and-political-issues/>.

³³⁴ Li Cohen, "From TikTok to Black Lives Matter, how Gen Z is revolutionizing activism," CBS News, July 20, 2020. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/from-tiktok-to-black-lives-matter-how-gen-z-is-revolutionizing-activism/>.

³³⁵ The Civil Rights movement is typically bookended between the *Brown v. Board* ruling in 1954 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Black Power movement begins immediately afterwards, surging in growth and relevance in the late 1960s and then cresting by the mid-1970s. The Nation of Islam was founded in 1930, but the movement underwent its most dramatic surges in growth and relevance during Malcolm X's tenure as its national spokesperson between the mid-1950s and early-1960s.

³³⁶ Ula Y. Taylor, *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam*, (United Kingdom: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

³³⁷ The Nation of Islam rapidly expanded from approximately 500 members to over 300,000 members under the lieutenancy of Malcolm X between 1955 and 1964. Eric C. Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (1994), [page numbers]

³³⁸ Scot Brown, *Fighting for Us* (2003).

strained, paranoid, and increasingly abusive of the organization's members.³³⁹ In almost each example, misogyny and heteropatriarchy plagued the circumstances in which organizations were unable to withstand turbulence.

BLM can largely attribute its longevity to the versatility of its intersectional and intergenerational "group centered" leadership structure which has proven to be more capable than the centralized "messianic" alternative in mitigating the threat of external disruptive forces and in managing the growing pains of movement expansion. Recent years have shown that the movement is most fragile when it begins to shift away from its youth-led and group centered origins. When decision making and resource management became increasingly concentrated among a centralized few within the BLM Global Network, the movement became susceptible to many of the pitfalls that its 20th century predecessors stumbled into. These developments demonstrate how organizations are necessary in providing some level of structure, stability, and direction for movements, but also how movement stability and longevity can be compromised by the inclination of one organization to centralize decision-making and resource management under the pressure of external disruption and expansion. For this reason, BLM has thrived most optimally when the responsibility of movement sustainability has rested in the collective hands of the many instead of a few. Organizational diversity and an embrace of ideological complexity have been more conducive to movement growth than organizational dictatorship.

Beyond the BLM Global Network and its affiliate chapters, the movement has always been sustained by the ever-replenishing force of youth radicalism. From the very beginning, the youth leadership contingencies of BLM has been perpetually generated by both Black Studies departments in colleges and universities and community-based nonprofit organizations. J4TMLA was organically forged from the intersecting activist developments of the Pan-African Studies Department at Cal State LA and of the Dignity and Power Now grassroots organization. The former was comprised of college students, the mentees of Professor Melina Abdullah, who had been promoting race-conscious and international solidarity frameworks in their campus organizing endeavors. The latter was comprised of prison abolitionist community organizers led by Patrisse Cullors. Both had been steeped in campus and community organizing in the years leading up to the acquittal of George Zimmerman.

J4TMLA was largely youth-led and group centered in that its decision making was collectively shared among members who were mostly in their early 20s. It was intergenerational in that it honored the counsel and guidance of elders and other activist veterans. The group upheld a versatile and diverse leadership structure that corrected the vulnerabilities of the "messianic" forms seen in the past. Of course, this was maintained with a membership of no more than 30 people with scarce resources in the short span of a few weeks in the summer of 2013. Upholding the ideal of a youth-led group centered approach became infinitely more complicated with the rapid growth of the movement in the years that followed. Youth activists would be a crucial ever-present contingency in building the BLM movement, but most would experience tremendous difficulty in maintaining consistent involvement amidst the precarious circumstances of scrambling to secure gainful employment and to pursue postgraduate studies. This has resulted in the tendency towards leadership centralization in which decision making and resource management falls in the hands of the few, typically older BLM members, who are more stable and more established in their personal careers and therefore better positioned to maintain steady participation. The academy and nonprofits present diverse alternatives to movement participation

³³⁹ Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin, *Black Against Empire* (2013).

that can greatly relieve the BLM Global Network and its affiliate chapters of having to bear the burden of sustaining the movement alone.

Youth and student advocacy have also been key components in the effort towards building responsive and proactive systems of resistance. The academy and the nonprofit sector have been instrumental in cultivating youth participation and movement growth in three particular ways: (1) by building the leadership capacities of each successive wave of enthusiastic youth and student activists to continuously refresh the leadership roster of the movement, (2) by providing a growing array of employment opportunities for organizers to maintain their involvement in movement activism, and (3) by engaging the aforementioned elements of movement building in both theory and practice. Los Angeles has been a particularly potent site at which these developments have progressed. There has been a reciprocal growth cycle by which these spaces build and expand the capacity of the BLM movement and, in turn, the movement builds and expands the capacity of Black Studies and community-based nonprofits. The Department of Pan African Studies at Cal State LA would dramatically expand from a handful of less than ten majors during the time that the PASC was active in 2007-2013 to well over eighty students declaring themselves as Pan African Studies majors by 2015. Moreover, the student movement to strengthen and expand Ethnic Studies that began at Cal State LA in 2014 would lay the foundations for the broader demand for Ethnic Studies to be made a requirement in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD).³⁴⁰ A variety of school-based or community-based youth-led organizing spaces like Students Deserve and the BLM Youth Vanguard have been created and other existing spaces like the Urban Scholars program at the Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI), the Brothers Sons Selves Coalition, the LA Youth Uprising Coalition have been dramatically expanded.³⁴¹ As the BLM Global Network attracted an influx of funding sources in the wake of the 2020 BLM uprisings, a variety of other community-based social justice organizations also saw an exponential increase in their funding capacities. This has resulted in the expansion of employment opportunities for academics with experience in teaching Black Studies and Ethnic Studies as well as movement participants with organizing experience. Those academics and organizers, then utilize their positions to promote the growth of the movement which then creates even more opportunities in the continuation of a growth cycle of building and reinforcing counter-hegemonic movements and institutions.

The Genealogy of Youth and Student Activism

Black and Third World youth and student activism of the 21st century continues a tradition of radical action that can trace its roots in the germination of Black Power within the Civil Rights movement. Since the 1960s, expressions of youth and student indignation have fueled varying iterations of the Black freedom struggle. The Black Power movement would emerge from the Black student radicalism of the 1960s. Then, reciprocally, the movement would

³⁴⁰ Stephen Ceasar, "L.A. Unified to require ethnic studies for high school graduation," *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 2014. <https://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-ethnic-studies-20141209-story.html>.

³⁴¹ Over the course of the last decade, SJLI has served over 1600 students through its Urban Scholars program, built over 100 community gardens in the LA area, and distributed over 1800 pounds of produce to the community each year. SJLI website, "Who We Are: Our Impact." <https://sjli.org/who-we-are/>.

fuel student radicalism in birthing Black Studies Departments and other affinity spaces on college campuses. Black Studies would then, in turn, cultivate the radical awareness of Black student organizers that would emerge in the late 2000s, which would manifest in the BLM movement. Then the movement would again reciprocally empower Black students to take action on campus. In this regard, BLM and the Movement for Black Lives can be understood as the revitalization of Civil Rights and Black Power repertoires. Through decades of intellectual redevelopment and tactical retooling, new and old movement strategies were employed to create lasting institutional change and to shift the public discourse about racism. Whereas the Black Power movement was summarily derailed, in part, because of the rigidity of its centralized leadership structures and its lack of intersectional praxis, BLM holds the promising potential of sustaining its radical growth cycle through the reinforcement of its intersectional group-centered youth leadership components.

Civil Rights → 1960s Student Radicalism ↔ Black Power → Black Studies Departments →
21st Century Student Radicalism ↔ Black Lives Matter/the Movement for Black Lives

From Black Studies to Black Radical Awakenings

Throughout the last quarter of the 20th century, Black Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Gender and Women Studies departments – along with Black and Third World scholars throughout the academy in general – would develop and cultivate more comprehensive frameworks for Black liberation. Feminist, womanist, queer, trans, and intersectional interventions have widened the scope and vision for Black and Third World liberation, critiquing the masculinist, hetero-patriarchal male centeredness that have characterized the nationalist and civil rights movements of the past. Black radical feminists such as Barbara Smith and the Combahee River Collective would lead the way in expanding leftist discourse to elevate the positional significance of Black queer women in movement building. Angela Y. Davis would emphasize the pervasiveness of gender politics in race and class dynamics in her seminal book, *Women, Race, and Class* (1983). Alice Walker would conceive of the term *Womanism* in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens* (1983) and Patricia Hill Collins would develop *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) in providing alternative gender justice frameworks from the mainstream white-centered feminist movements that tended to neglect the racialized, class and colonized subjectivities of women’s experiences. The term *intersectionality* was developed by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 as a framework to accurately describe the unique ways in which Black women experience oppression. The turn of the century saw the vigorous continued production of scholarship emphasizing the pervasiveness of institutional racism in the post-civil rights era. The term *Abolition* was revived by Angela Y. Davis in her writings throughout the late 20th century as a framework for approximating U.S. militarism, policing and prisons as atrociously violent institutions akin to the despicability of slavery, and therefore are in imminent need of abolishment.³⁴²

Black and Ethnic Studies departments as well as campus affinity spaces and Cross Cultural Centers would foster these critical race, gender, and class discourses amidst the initial

³⁴² Cherron A. Barnwell, “A Prison Abolitionist and Her Literature: Angela Davis,” *CLA Journal* 48, no. 3 (2005): 308–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44325619>.

sedation of the liberal integrationist hope that Barack Obama's induction into presidency had promoted. The Black student radicalism of the 21st century was spurred by the sobering realities of mass incarceration, state-sanctioned violence, anti-Black racism, big bank bailouts amidst the Great Recession, the housing crisis – which disproportionately impacted Black families – and the incursion of budget cuts and massive student fee hikes to higher education. What millennial activists had learned about race, gender, and class in the academy was now more plainly reflected in their lived realities and the bleak futures that the neoliberal order had presented to them. The dramatic rise of student tuition and the dwindling accessibility to quality education coinciding with the economic crisis, the expansion of the prison industrial complex, and the constant viral exposure of wanton Black death at the hands of police and vigilantes would spur a radical awakening.

In the 2007-2008 school year, student organizers throughout the California State University (CSU) system would form Students for Quality Education (SQE) to build the movement for educational rights in higher education, ushering an era of direct action protests in the form of mass demonstrations, walk-outs and sit-ins.³⁴³ In 2009, they witnessed the execution style killing of 22 year old Oscar Grant at the hands of police in Oakland, CA and the rage of community uprisings, the likes of which have not been seen in the U.S. since the 1992 LA uprisings in response to the police abuse of Rodney King. In 2011, it was the California student movement, particularly at UC Berkeley, that would evoke the phrase “Occupy Everything, Demand Nothing,” leading the way in the making of the international Occupy Movement.³⁴⁴ As their hopes for a thriving liberal democracy under Obama dwindled, their resolve to advance race, gender, and class conscious solutions would accelerate. Just as the student organizers of the mid-1960s were sobered and radically awakened by the glaring limitations of civil rights legislation in bringing about the Black Power movement, the student organizers of the 21st century would also immediately recognize the glaring limitations of Obama's presidency and the fallacies of post-racial discourse, compelling them to take action against the interlocking forces of anti-Black racism, U.S. American plutocracy, and state-sanctioned violence in the making of the Black Lives Matter movement. Equipped with refined technologies for liberation praxis, Black youth and students were primed to translate their activism into refreshing new forms of movement building.

The Role of Black Studies Departments

The effort to institutionalize Black Studies can find its origins in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois,³⁴⁵ Carter G. Woodson,³⁴⁶ J.A. Rogers and other early 20th century intellectual figures like Hubert Harrison and Arturo Schomburg. As civil rights efforts began to yield gradual results in

³⁴³ Students for Quality Education website. “About Us.” <http://csusqe.org/about/>.

³⁴⁴ Aaron Bady and Mike Konczal, “From Master Plan to No Plan: The Slow Death of Public Higher Education,” *Dissent Magazine*, Fall 2012. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/from-master-plan-to-no-plan-the-slow-death-of-public-higher-education>.

³⁴⁵ James B. Stewart, “The Legacy of W. E. B. Du Bois for Contemporary Black Studies,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 53, no. 3 (1984): 296–311. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2294865>.

³⁴⁶ Jarvis R. Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching*, (United Kingdom: Harvard University Press, 2021).

granting increased educational access for people of color in the mid-20th century, it was evident that the institutions in which they matriculated into were sorely lacking pedagogical competencies to accommodate the educational and sociocultural needs of nonwhite students. The 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision enabled Black and Brown students to attend predominantly white colleges and universities (PWIs), but these institutions imposed hostile learning environments that were practically void of the relevant curricula and resources required to satisfy their intellectual needs and to optimize their success as students. PWIs purveyed a strong sense of marginal inclusion for the newly enrolled students of color. The limitations of civil rights advocacy and integration were immediately felt by those students who realized that their academic success in these institutions hinged on their ability to constrain their intellectual contributions and behaviors to the preferences and beliefs of their white professors and peers.

By the 1960s, the Black freedom struggle would see the germination of Black Power ideology in universities and colleges where students were developing radical paradigms of resistance. As the youth proponents of civil rights organizations like the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) would become increasingly disillusioned with integrationist ambitions and non-violence tactics, the nationalist and revolutionary ethos of Black self-determination and self-defense would begin to resonate more strongly with youth and student organizers. The rhetoric of Malcolm X and Harold Cruse were beginning to gain more traction with them and the waves of decolonization movements taking place in Africa, Asia, and Latin America amidst the Cold War would compel the transnational expansion of their liberation visions. For instance, the declaration of the Republic of Ghana in 1957 and the Cuban Revolution in 1957 compelled many young artists and activists like Amiri Baraka,³⁴⁷ John Henrik Clarke, and Julian Mayfield to travel to those places, fueling their radicalization and prompting the formation of study groups.

The inspiration of these Third World liberation developments captivated the revolutionary imaginations of Black students and other students of color in the U.S. They moved to take the liberation theories and concepts that they had engaged in their readings and study groups out of the classrooms and into their communities. In college campuses in the Bay Area, a group called the Afro-American Association would engage youth through street rallies and study sessions, giving rise to a west coast contingency of Black radical militancy. Those who were involved with the group would splinter into a variety of radical projects like the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM).³⁴⁸ In Los Angeles, BSU students from Pasadena City College, led by Clyde Halisi³⁴⁹, would join UCLA student Maulana Karenga³⁵⁰ in building a Black cultural nationalist movement to form the Us Organization in 1965.³⁵¹ In Oakland, Merritt College students Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale would begin building a Black radical left movement by adapting revolutionary concepts from *Quotations from Chairman Moai Tse-Tung*, referred to as “The Little Red Book,” in the making of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in 1966. They began by selling copies of the book at UC Berkeley to purchase weapons for organization members to defend themselves and their communities against police brutality.³⁵²

³⁴⁷ Formerly known as LeRoi Jones

³⁴⁸ Robin D.G. Kelley, “Stormy Weather” in *Is It Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism*, (United Kingdom: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 69.

³⁴⁹ Formerly known as Clyde Ray Daniels

³⁵⁰ Formerly known as Ronald or “Ron” Everett

³⁵¹ Scot Brown, *Fighting for US*.

³⁵² Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin, *Black Against Empire*.

As the presence of first-generation Black students in universities would give birth to a radical intelligentsia who would enact community-based revolutionary developments, the momentum of Black Power and Third World liberation activism would, in turn, give rise to student movements calling for the institutionalization of Black and Ethnic Studies in college campuses. Student unrest was stirred from the exhaustion of consuming Eurocentric scholarship and the need for curricula that held relevance to Black and Third World perspectives, experiences, cultures, and histories. By the late 1960s, Black students began demanding for Black Studies to be instituted at predominantly white institutions as well as historically Black schools and universities. Their objective was to turn college and university campuses into community resources through Black and Ethnic Studies departments that would serve as “hub[s] for fomenting radical social change.”³⁵³ Other lofty goals included making colleges and universities more accessible to Black and Brown communities by eradicating the fraudulent merit-based admissions standards and processes. In 1968, Black students at San Francisco State University issued a list of “nonnegotiable” demands which included the hiring of 20 full-time faculty members for a Black studies department and the stipulation that it be controlled by faculty and staff without interference from administrators or trustees. Taking after the confrontational attitude of Black Power activism, these students took on a militant posture in asserting their demands. They then launched a series of student strikes over the course of several months. By 1969, the very first School of Ethnic Studies was established at SF State University.³⁵⁴

University administrators, trustees, and politicians could ill afford to deny them the establishment of Black and Ethnic Studies departments and cultural resource centers in the face of intensified political pressure of the Black student movement, but they were relatively successful in neutering these departments of the radicalism with which they were intended to uphold. The repression began with the rejection of targeted admissions of and the creation of a separate school of Third World Studies.³⁵⁵ In understanding the revolutionary origins of the effort to establish Black and Ethnic Studies, it is critical to note that very few departments have remained true to the community empowerment imperatives with which they were intended to serve. Over the decades, many departments have struggled to reappropriate campus resources to serve the Black and Third World communities that were responsible for their institutionalization to begin with. Many have foregone the radical imperatives to bring the campus to the community and to invite the community onto campus, opting instead to replicate the ivory tower elitism that has characterized traditional disciplines. This is of course coerced by the repression imposed by administrators, trustees, and politicians. Alternatively, departments like Pan African Studies at Cal State LA have succeeded in producing the sort of campus and community engagement envisioned by the Black and Third World student activists in the 1960s. Its ability to develop a student activist contingency that was primed to apply their campus organizing skills in the community when the moment signaled the need for their leadership is a testament to the quality of the academic rigor combined with community relationship building that the department fosters in its students.

³⁵³ Angela Ryan, “Counter College: Third World Students Reimagine Public Higher Education,” *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (November 2015), 413.

³⁵⁴ [author] *The African American Studies Reader*, (United States: Carolina Academic Press, 2007).

³⁵⁵ Angela Ryan, “Counter College,” 435-436.

Pan African Studies at Cal State Los Angeles

The Pan-African Studies (PAS) Department at Cal State LA is one of the first Black Studies Departments to be instituted in the U.S., second only to the School of Ethnic Studies at SF State. It was first established as a program in 1967 before it achieved departmental status in 1969.³⁵⁶ It is the oldest of four degree-granting academic departments that is specifically named “Pan-African Studies,”³⁵⁷ which is distinguished from the “Africana” or “African American” Studies title variants in that it signifies a focus and commitment to cultivating transnational understandings of the social, psychological, cultural, political, and economic dimensions of Black existentiality. The name also implies that the department upholds the political imperative to produce scholarship and promote community engagement that advances the worldwide movement to strengthen bonds of political solidarity and economic collaboration among communities of African descended people both on the African continent and throughout the African Diaspora. At Cal State LA, the department faculty and staff are particularly adept in grounding student learning in community engagement and activism.

Professor Abdullah has often referred to the department as the “intellectual arm of the revolution” – the academic companion to the BLMLA chapter with which it has interfaced in various ways. Beyond the PASC students who co-founded the BLM movement in 2013, PAS faculty and staff have been avid participants in building the LA chapter over the years. Professor Anthony Radcliff would conduct routine political education sessions and Professor Nana Gyamfi would intermittently serve as a legal observer and strategist for BLMLA. The department would also recruit faculty and staff from other departments like Professor Molly Talcott from the Department of Sociology to participate in *accomplice*³⁵⁸ activist projects. Because Professor Abdullah was concurrently the lead core organizer for BLMLA and the Chair of the PAS department between 2015 and 2019, many events and engagements overlapped between the two.

The department fosters a multifaceted approach to scholar-activism that is grounded in liberation praxis, community engagement and spiritual connectedness³⁵⁹ with its mission being to “Educate and engage students and the broader community about the dynamic and complex experiences of the Pan-African world through an interdisciplinary curriculum and innovative methods of teaching, learning, research, and community engagement that empower them to make necessary and positive social, political, and economic change.”³⁶⁰ During the time in which the PASC was active, in 2007-2014, each faculty member contributed critical aspects of their students’ development both as intellectuals and as campus organizers. Professors Nana Lawson Bush and Nana Gyamfi incorporated Akan spiritual practices and rituals in departmental events and gatherings. Professors Staci Mitchell, Penni Wilson, and Aminah Bakeer Abdul-Jabbaar cultivated their students’ artistic talents in poetry, theatre, music, and filmmaking. Professor Msia Clarke creatively engaged her students in world politics through African Hip-Hop.

³⁵⁶ In the same year, Cal State LA would also establish the oldest Chicano Studies Department in the U.S.

³⁵⁷ The other three being the Pan-African Studies Departments at California State University, Northridge, Kent State University, and the University of Louisville, Kentucky.

³⁵⁸ The term “accomplice” has come to be embraced as a more invested expression of inter-group or interracial solidarity than the less assertive and more tenuous notion of “allyship.”

³⁵⁹ Professors Nana Lawson Bush, the current Chair, and Nana Gyamfi are spiritual leaders and healers trained in the Akan priesthood of West Africa. PAS events are typically engaged with the call-and-response rituals of this tradition, in commemorating the spirits of ancestors through the pouring of libations.

³⁶⁰ Department of Pan African Studies at Cal State LA mission statement.

The late Professor C.R.D. Halisi was a political scientist and a veteran of the Black Power movement as the former vice chair of the Us Organization. He anchored his students' understanding of global politics with rigorous studies of how social movements in the U.S. overlapped with Pan-African and Third World developments. His leadership role in the Black Power movement is well known among activists of the time, but he is largely overlooked in historical accounts. In an era defined by the romantic revolutionary posturing and grandiosity of charismatic larger-than-life figures like Kwame Ture,³⁶¹ H. Rap Brown, Angela Y. Davis, Amiri Baraka, Eldridge Cleaver, Huey P. Newton, Maulana Karenga and Elaine Brown, Halisi was distinguished by his stoic brilliance and reserved and unassuming demeanor. He showed little interest in promoting himself as a pronounced movement leader despite being a major intellectual asset to the Us Organization and Black Power movement in general. He served as the interim Chair for Us during Karenga's prison term from 1970 to 1975³⁶² and maintained an independent school, the Kawaida Education and Development Center in Pasadena. When he parted ways with Karenga and moved on from US in the mid-1970s, he began his studies on South African politics as a Ph.D. student in Political Science at UCLA. During his years as a researcher, he travelled extensively to South Africa, befriended Steve Biko,³⁶³ the leader of the Black Consciousness movement; setting in motion a lifelong commitment to the study and liberation of Africa.³⁶⁴ His life experiences, both as a Black Power leader and as a Pan-African researcher fostered a strong impression among his students and mentees of the interconnectedness of movement building in the U.S. and non-western resistance efforts around the world.

Professor Abdullah, the former chair of the department and one the most prominent leaders of BLMLA, is a political scientist grounded in womanist scholar-activism. Affectionately referred to as "Mama Melina" by many of her mentees, she instills radical feminist and intersectional groundedness in her students, emphasizing "group-centered" or collective leadership in honoring the legacies of Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer. Moreover, she was and continues to be something of a civic engagement and direct action coach for her students. Through her guidance and encouragement, students would look to put the liberation theories that they cultivated in their classes and department events into community action, leading to the rise of a core group of student activists who would take the Cal State LA campus by storm.

The Pan African Student Collective

The Pan African Student Collective (PASC) was a student organization that promoted "the total unification of all Afrikans [both] on the continent and [throughout] the [African] diaspora under scientific socialism."³⁶⁵ Deeply influenced by the writings and speeches of Kwame Ture, the Du Bois and Kwame Nkrumah-led Pan African Congress proceedings, and by Third World revolutionary histories in general, the PASC was explicit in its radical posture.

³⁶¹ Formerly known as Stokely Carmichael.

³⁶² Scot Brown, *Fighting for Us* (2003), 128.

³⁶³ C.R.D. Halisi, xvii

³⁶⁴ Halisi was selected as one of 74 United Nations observers to monitor the 1994 election of President Nelson Mandela.

³⁶⁵ The original Pan African Student Collective Facebook page.

Originally founded in 2007 by a handful of students led by Jason X Anderson, the organization would reach the height of its prominence as a major organizing force on campus between 2010 and 2014. Its core membership included Thabisile Griffin, Jelani Hendrix, Funmilola Fagbamila, Sharlia Lebreton Gulley, Arcadia Le Vias, Jillian Bell, Dajon “Dae Dae” Johnson, Olatunde Kosoko, Adal Osman, Simeon Carson, and the author of this dissertation.

We began with weekly internal political education sessions and hosting events and discussions promoting critical race consciousness, intersectional consciousness, and worldwide decolonization. By 2011, our efforts would rapidly develop into organizing community forums, engaging in policy and advocacy work, mobilizing direct actions, mass protests and sit-in demonstrations in response to fee hikes and budget cuts to the CSU system. By 2012, we would become highly efficient in their ability to rally students, faculty and staff behind their advocacy efforts, mobilizing thousands of protesters in massive direct actions such as the walkout on March 1, 2012 and the May Day student strike of May 1, 2012.³⁶⁶ As a unified force, the PASC and our allies established a strong network of solidarity in resistance to the neoliberal forces that purveyed campus and statewide politics.

Their blitz-pressure protest activism and oratory diatribes against administrative and institutional oppression would become routine features of campus life. PASC leaders would also frequently engage and interact with various Black Power and Pan African veterans like Dedon Kamathi, Hank Jones, Ericka Huggins, Kathleen Cleaver, Amiri Baraka, and Angela Davis in various campus events and forums, fostering spaces for intergenerational dialogue. By the time their core leaders graduated in 2013, they were experienced activists who had developed proficiency in various aspects of movement building, ready to succeed the work that their mentors began. They were poised to transfer the skills that they had cultivated in their undergraduate years at Cal State LA into community-based grassroots organizing.

A month shy of their graduation ceremony, their beloved mentor, Halisi, would succumb to a respiratory illness that was aggravated by his final trip to Africa, where he was a delegate at the African Union’s 50th Anniversary Summit in Ethiopia in 2013.³⁶⁷ Bereaved by his passing, PASC members contemplated the uncertainty of their academic and activist pursuits without him. Within a matter of weeks, their grief would turn into a determined resolve as their leadership roles in igniting the BLM movement was made clear with the announcement of George Zimmerman’s not-guilty verdict. While they were not the first to take to the streets to protest state-sanctioned violence, they would play a pivotal role in the assertion of PAS frameworks to develop a movement grounded in intersectional consciousness, intergenerational collaboration, international solidarity, and group-centered leadership combined with the assertion of abolitionist frameworks by Patrisse Cullors and Dignity and Power Now organization.

³⁶⁶ Carla Rivera and Larry Gordon, “Occupy protests bring small yet intense crowds to state campuses,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 2012. <https://www.latimes.com/local/la-xpm-2012-mar-01-la-me-student-protests-20120302-story.html>.

³⁶⁷ He presented a paper entitled “Autochthonous African Nationalism, South African Revolution and Global Pan-African Thought: A Personal Journey.”

The Role of Non-Profit Organizations

While Black and Ethnic Studies departments have been accessed and engaged as conduits for activist training by student leaders who enjoy the privileged opportunity to attend colleges and universities, community-based nonprofits have served as conduits for civic engagement and movement participation for youth who cannot access universities. Black and Brown youth are particularly impacted by “zero-tolerance” policies and educational inequities that funnel them out of public schools and into juvenile halls and camps – a systemic crisis known as the *school-to-prison pipeline*.³⁶⁸ Nonprofits committed to youth justice and educational equity have been particularly instrumental in not only mitigating the effects of this trend in the youth that they serve, but also in cultivating their sociopolitical development in becoming agents of transforming these circumstances. The challenge has been navigating the tenuous circumstances in which the flow of funding into these programs are primarily dependent on the foundations and philanthropy of the wealthy elite. Grants therefore tend to be awarded on the condition that the recipient adheres to the preferences dictated by the funding source. This complicates the ability of any community-based nonprofit to secure dedicated sources of funding while maintaining full decision-making autonomy. Mark Fancher, a frequent contributor to the *Black Agenda Report*, surmises that “Community programs can be either an asset to the people’s struggle for liberation – as the Panther programs were – or they can arrest the development of a community’s political consciousness and obscure what would otherwise be a clear revolutionary vision.”³⁶⁹

In the collection of essays titled *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, contributors like Andrea Smith, Dylan Rodriguez, Robert Allen, Christine E. Ahn, and various others detail the multitude of ways in which the otherwise radical ambitions of program-based organizations can be stifled or altogether suppressed by the *nonprofit industrial complex* – “a set of symbiotic relationships that link political and financial technologies of state and owning class control with surveillance over public political ideology, including and especially emergent progressive and leftist social movements.”³⁷⁰ Andrea Smith laments how the activists of Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, a group formed in 2000 of feminists of color organizing against interpersonal and state forms of violence, were initially thrilled to be offered a multi-year \$100,000 grant from the Ford Foundation to support their efforts only for the grant to be rescinded because of the group’s statement of support for the Palestinian Liberation Struggle.³⁷¹ In this way, organizations are routinely faced with the conundrum of either maintaining their radical political platforms or appeasing the neutered preferences of funders if they want their organization to survive.

Alternatively, one might be tempted to confuse the appropriation of white philanthropic funds towards Black and Brown organizations as a form of reparations. This would only be the case if those organizations were able to access those funds with no strings attached or no conditions for the receipt of the grants. The notion of reparations is predicated on the reappropriation of economic and financial resources in an effort to “repair” systemic harm and

³⁶⁸ Jodi L. Carr, “School-to-Prison Pipeline,” Edited by Karen Dolan, *The POOR GET PRISON: The Alarming Spread of the Criminalization of Poverty*. Institute for Policy Studies, 2015.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27360.8>.

³⁶⁹ Mark Fancher, “The Non-Profit Industrial Complex,” *LA Progressive*, March 23, 2020.
<https://www.laprogressive.com/the-non-profit-industrial-complex/>.

³⁷⁰ Dylan Rodriguez, “the political logic of the non-profit industrial complex,” *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, Duke University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2017, 8.

³⁷¹ Andrea Smith, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, 2017, 1.

damages incurred by the presumed beneficiaries of the harm and damage. If organizations are not allowed to maintain complete decision-making autonomy with the funds that they receive, then it cannot be considered reparations. The nonprofit industrial complex can be understood as a neoliberal device adjacent to the structural adjustment programs imposed on Third World countries by multinational banking institutions like the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank in which lending is brokered to countries experiencing economic crisis on the condition that those countries adhere to the stipulations that the banks impose.³⁷² Both create systems of dependency that suppress the development of radical movement building.

“The ultimate danger for Black radical movements and other people of color-initiated movements is that they become misdirected and eventually co-opted by a white Left agenda that capitulates in the face of capitalist wealth, thus derailing and subjugating their progressive agendas for real social change. Black organizations have taken their cue from white left groups and have resorted to cultivating relationships with capitalist foundations instead of doing the time-honored work of building relationships with the masses of working and unemployed Black people fighting for reparations.”³⁷³

BLM proponents have long been critical of the limitations and the perceived counter-revolutionary tendencies of non-profit organizations. Its membership ranges from those who sustain their activist lifestyles through their employment in non-profit organizations to those who are vigilantly distrusting of non-profit leaders, but are reluctantly in coalition with them in the advancement of various campaigns and initiatives. Therefore, there is a tremendous degree of ambivalence in the BLM movement’s posture towards the non-profit non-governmental sector. The more critical view can find its roots in the Black Power Era critique of the legacy of Booker T. Washington, which disparagingly rejects any aspirations of promoting Black community uplift or building Black economic strength through the reliance on a steady flow of white philanthropic funds.³⁷⁴ Professor Abdullah has been particularly critical of the nonprofit industrial complex and how it can disrupt and derail the efforts of grassroots advocacy. In 2017, she stated:

“BLACK LIVES MATTER IS HEIR TO THE BLACK POWER MOVEMENT. We are not a part of the non-profit industrial complex; we are not a policy or a social service organization. To attempt to measure our “wins” solely in terms of electoral victories, legal processes, legislation, public policy, or service numbers, in effect to submit to the existing hegemony that we seek to transform...”³⁷⁵

In this declaration, Professor Abdullah juxtaposes the funding-based operation of nonprofits against the grassroots activist-based efforts of the BLM movement. Although

³⁷² Jiah L. Sayson, “Structural Adjustment Programs: Whose Colonizing Instrument?” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 34, no. 1 (2006): 53–64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29792583>.

³⁷³ Tiffany Lethabo King & Ewuare Osayande, “Progressive Philanthropy’s Agenda to Misdirect Social Justice Movement,” *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, 2017, 87.

³⁷⁴ Wilson J. Moses, “From Booker T. Washington to Malcolm X.”

³⁷⁵ Melina Abdullah, Facebook Post, May 30, 2017.

<https://www.facebook.com/melina.abdullah/posts/10155255603475930>.

nonprofits have certainly strived to operate in the likeness of the service-based program models of the Black Power era – such as the youth center, community learning center, free health clinics, screening centers, free breakfast for children and free food pantries that were operated by the Black Panther Party (BPP) – they do not command complete community-based decision making autonomy. The BPP remarkably upheld its autonomy with a meager budget and against the forces of state disruption like COINTELPRO.³⁷⁶ For years, BLM seemed to faithfully embody this imperative to maintain control of its funds and its decision-making independence, but it has not produced the sort of programs that the BPP had. Moreover, while BLM itself was not answerable to any major donors or philanthropic foundations, its programs were often engaged in coordination with nonprofits like the Youth Justice Coalition (YJC) which has regularly hosted BLMLA general meetings and strategy sessions for years at *Chuco's* Justice Center.³⁷⁷

“...As organizations slide in on policy, expand, gain recognition, get funding, and collaborate with existing systems, we cannot lose sight of who and what we are. Black Lives Matter is our sacred duty that honors those who walked before us, it is not our job. It is the freedom dreams of our Ancestors, not a policy outcome. It is the collective purpose of our people, rather than a campaign.”³⁷⁸

Ironically, the BLM Global Network would become a registered 501(c)(3) organization and declared nonprofit status in December 2020.³⁷⁹ The BLM summer uprisings compelled numerous philanthropic sources to dedicate an enormous surge of funding to the Global Network. BLM leaders thereafter sought nonprofit status so that the Network can receive tax-deductible donations directly. In a remarkable turn of events, the organization dramatically shifted from a grassroots advocacy effort “scraping for money”³⁸⁰ to a robustly funded operation. However, this was by no means an introduction to the nonprofit sector for BLM leaders and activists. There are many, like the BLM co-founders, whose involvement in non-profit organizing was instrumental in the formation of BLM and the movement for Black lives. Nonprofit organizations also offered alternative avenues of involvement to advance the movement beyond the BLM Global Network. Each of the three BLM co-founders have been intimately involved in non-profit organizing both prior to the establishment of the Global Network and after their departure from it. In 2018, Alicia Garza would launch the Black Futures Lab (BFL), a non-profit organization focused on building Black political power in the U.S. its Black Census Project – the largest survey of Black people conducted in the U.S. since Reconstruction – and its Black to the Future Public Policy Institute, a training fellowship that works to enact policies in the areas of voting rights, public health, and economic security. Opal

³⁷⁶ Nelson Blackstock and Cathy Perkus, *Cointelpro: the FBI's Secret War on Political Freedom*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1976).

³⁷⁷ Black Lives Matter Los Angeles [@blmlosangeles], #Vision4BlackLives March 12, 2017 meeting flyer, *Instagram* Post, March 9, 2017. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BRbZKuHD5XU/>.

³⁷⁸ Melina Abdullah, *Facebook* Post, May 30, 2017.

³⁷⁹ Aaron Morrison, “AP: Exclusive: Black Lives Matter opens up about its finances,” *AP News*, February 23, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/black-lives-matter-90-million-finances-8a80cad199f54c0c4b9e74283d27366f>.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid*, Patrisse Cullors is quoted stating “We were often scraping for money, and this year was the first year where we were resourced in the way we deserved to be.”

Tometi had served as the Executive Director of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI) for nearly a decade before she helped start the BLM movement.

Cullors' foray into community activism began with her introduction to an organization called the Labor Community Strategy Center when she was 17 years old. With the continued abuse that her older brother Monte repeatedly suffered at the hands of law enforcement, Cullors was compelled to take organized action against prison and policing institutions.³⁸¹ In September 2012, she and Mark-Anthony Johnson launched the Coalition to End Sheriff Violence, which was initially intended to establish civilian oversight of the sheriff's department. As they pursued this goal, they came to realize that the scope of the work would require the development of a new organization. This is how they founded Dignity & Power Now.³⁸²

Nonprofit organizations have therefore been an ever-present resource that BLM has continuously accessed in both its development and its sustainability. Its members have woven between the nonprofit and grassroots spheres of activism until the Global Network itself eventually declared nonprofit status. Its affiliate chapters, however, remain unbounded by the tethers of philanthropic funding, although the Network's BLM Grassroots program is in the process of developing management systems to better support them. The years to come will reveal how the Global Network will be shaped by the 2020 surge of funding and its nonprofit status. Whether this marks the opening of a new array of radical possibilities to push the envelope on the objective of abolishing state-sanctioned violence or if it is the beginning of the derailment of the organizations' radical imperatives through philanthropic cooptation, BLM is at a pivotal juncture. Regardless of which direction the Global Network takes, the radical properties of the BLM movement at-large can be survived by the development of its youth leadership contingencies. The radical socio-political development of youth has been cultivated through various community-based nonprofits that BLM organizers have engaged.

The BLM Youth Vanguard and Students Deserve

In 2015, the primary- and secondary-school-aged leaders of BLMLA formed the BLM Youth Vanguard which focuses on promoting Black student empowerment and advocating for Black children in schools.³⁸³ The group has been led by none other than the daughters of Professor Abdullah, her eldest Thandiwe Abdullah, a graduate of the Los Angeles Center for Enriched Studies and now a sophomore at Howard University, and her middle-child, Amara Abdullah, a High School sophomore. The two were ten- and seven-years-old when J4TMLA was formed in 2013. They were right there alongside the PASC members during the Zimmerman protests and have continuously been engaged in the movement and with BLMLA ever since. They represent the rising generation of youth who came of age in the thick of BLM activism and other progressive movements. Their efforts largely focused on calling attention to anti-Blackness in schools and the harm and trauma that Black students experience when police are brought on campuses. In 2017, Students Deserve – a multiracial, but Black-led LA-based student

³⁸¹ Patrisse Cullors, "Dignity and Power. Now." *when they call you a terrorist: a black lives matter memoir*, St. Martin's Griffin: New York, 2017, 156-165.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Who We Are, BLMLA website. <https://www.blmla.org/who-we-are#ourteam>.

empowerment organization – was formed in partnership with BLMLA.³⁸⁴ Its lead coordinator, Joseph Williams, is also a core member of BLMLA. The organizing strategy of both the BLM Youth Vanguard and Students Deserve have been focused on reducing youth contact with law enforcement by divesting from school police departments and then re-investing those funds into campus resources promoting Black student achievement³⁸⁵. This follows the divest-invest framework introduced by J4TMLA and expanded on in the M4BL platform.³⁸⁶

By the summer of 2020, youth and student activists would join the leadership ranks of these groups to bolster these organizational entities. LAUSD high schoolers Sierra Leone Anderson, Kahlila Williams, Maleeyah Frazier, and Marshé Doss would take on prominent leadership roles. During the summer uprisings, the BLM Youth Vanguard and Students Deserve would spearhead the launch of a massive campaign to defund school police in LAUSD in tandem with the larger nation-wide BLM defund police campaign. Together with UTLA, the LAUSD teacher’s union, they would mobilize a series of massive protests at each LAUSD Board meeting throughout the summer demanding for the school police budget to be reduced by 90% over the course of three years.³⁸⁷ In July 2020, the Board rejected the initial motion but conceded to approve an immediate 35% reduction of \$25 million to be diverted towards a Black student achievement plan in response to the protests calling for the elimination of the department.³⁸⁸

These youth-based components of BLM organizations are perhaps the least affected by the manipulation of the nonprofit industrial complex, although they do operate in coalition with youth advocacy groups based in various nonprofit groups. Over the past decade, organizations like Community Coalition (CoCo),³⁸⁹ the Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI), Brotherhood Crusade,³⁹⁰ Inner City Struggle (ICS),³⁹¹ Khmer Girls in Action (KGA),³⁹² the Youth Justice Coalition (YJC),³⁹³ and the Gender and Sexuality Alliance Network (GSAN)³⁹⁴ would also grow their youth leadership programs to address the intersecting issues of police violence and harassment, the criminalization and incarceration, and the educational disparities that plague youth of colors. As progressive and radical movements have gained momentum in thrusting equity and justice frameworks into the mainstream discourse of public policy, philanthropic donors and foundations would be forced to allow a greater leniency on the radical expression of nonprofits.

³⁸⁴ “Black Lives Matter and Students Deserve are partners in the truest sense, sharing core values and vision as well as goals and objectives.” – the Los Angeles Students Deserve website.

<https://www.schoolslastudentsdeserve.com/black-lives-matter-partnership.html>

³⁸⁵ Melissa Gomez, “LA school board cuts its police force and diverts funds for Black student achievement,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 16, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-02-16/lausd-diverting-school-police-funds-support-black-students>.

³⁸⁶ M4BL website, “Invest-Divest.” <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/invest-divest/>.

³⁸⁷ This initial motion was put forth by LAUSD board member Monica Garcia on June 23, 2020.

<http://laschoolboard.org/sites/default/files/06-23-20RegBdOBPost.pdf>.

³⁸⁸ Howard Blume and Sonali Kohli, “L.A. Unified police chief resigns after district slashes department budget,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-06-30/lausd-unified-budget-school-police-reopening>.

³⁸⁹ Community Coalition website. <https://cocosouthla.org/>.

³⁹⁰ Brotherhood Crusade website. <https://brotherhoodcrusade.org/>.

³⁹¹ Inner City Struggle website. <https://www.innercitystruggle.org/>.

³⁹² Khmer Girls in Action website. <http://kgalb.org/>.

³⁹³ Youth Justice Coalition. <https://youthjusticela.org/>.

³⁹⁴ Gender and Sexuality Alliance Network. <https://gsanetwork.org/>.

David C. Turner III and Youth Leadership Coalitions

Besides the BLM Youth Vanguard and Students Deserve, a variety of BLM organizers have been specifically focused on political education and leadership development with the intent of continuously training successive generations of young people who they hope will inherit the movement and succeed them as its leaders. None would commit to this mission more emphatically than David C. Turner III. Born and raised in Inglewood, CA, Turner is a homegrown LA-based scholar-activist who underwent a similar activist trajectory as his J4TMLA peers. The only reason why he and his wife Jamelle Fortune Turner were not a part of the original group was because they were on the other side of the country in UPENN pursuing his graduate degree at the time that J4TMLA was formed. Much like the members of the PASC, he began organizing in college at California State University, Dominguez Hills as a student member of Students for Quality Education (SQE) and as the president of the Organization of Africana Studies.

He began engaging in community organizing with the Social Justice Learning Institute, a community based organization in Inglewood California, from 2012-2013. He became a coordinating member for Black Lives Matter, Bay Area in 2014-2016 while completing his Ph.D. coursework at UC Berkeley. He was also a member of the Black Student Union at Berkeley and a co-founding member of the Black Liberation Collective – a network of Black student organizers from across the United States and Canada. In 2016, Turner would return to Los Angeles and continue his organizing pursuits with the Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI). In 2018, Turner became the manager of the Brothers, Sons, Selves (BSS) Coalition – a youth organizing coalition for Boys and Men of Color in Los Angeles, and a core member of the research team for BLMLA.

As a BLM movement veteran, Turner found his vocation in youth leadership development with SJLI. Founded in 2008 by D'Artagnan Scorza, SJLI is a community based non-profit that provides a range of services and leadership development programs focused on empowering Black and Brown communities throughout Los Angeles County. Its Educational Equity program offers an Ethnic Studies and leadership class called “Urban Scholars” with which high school students can earn elective credits towards graduation; academic and career support in assisting students with college and financial aid applications, resume building and job applications; and court support for system-impacted and foster youth. Its immediate target outcomes are to increase Black and Brown student attendance, self-efficacy, self-awareness; instill critical consciousness, social and global awareness; and reduce youth recidivism.³⁹⁵ Its overall target outcomes are to increase Black and Brown high school graduation rates – which inoculates youth from the school-to-prison-pipeline, significantly decreasing their chances of incarceration – and for them to either obtain college admission or gainful employment upon graduation.³⁹⁶

Moreover, SJLI looks to build leadership competencies in public speaking, action research, and critical literacy in guiding youth to be agents of *transformational resistance* in their communities. Each Urban Scholars class undertakes a youth participatory action research (YPAR) project in identifying social justice issues plaguing their schools and communities and then conducting a study to formulate policy recommendations to change it. The objective is to affirm the intellectual agency of community youth and to equip them with the analytic tools to

³⁹⁵ SJLI's 2019 Educators Guide to the Urban Scholar's Program, 8.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

investigate the social, political, and economic conditions of their own communities and to tell their own stories. Turner was pivotal in helping Scorza develop the curriculum for the program and in fostering a trusting learning environment for youth to invest and believe in it. He would champion an *anti-deficit* approach to youth engagement, which rejects the neoliberal tendency to devalue and overlook the intellectual capabilities of Black and Brown youth and uplifts and celebrates their experiential knowledge and perspectives.

Over the years, a variety of other BLM members including Daniel Castillo and Justin Andrew Marks, and PASC alumni Tunde Kosoko, Jelani Hendrix, and the author of this dissertation would gain employment at SJLI. Along with Turner, Castillo and Marks would build the infrastructure for the expansion of the Educational Equity Program from its Morningside High School origins to a handful of schools. Kosoko would succeed them in becoming the regional manager of the program, overseeing the program's implementation and expansion to nearly 30 schools by the Fall of 2021. In 2018, Jelani Hendrix would launch the organization's Policy and Advocacy program as its director, expanding the organization's capacity to take on a broader range of community issues. In 2019, he led a hard-fought campaign to secure a historic rent control win in the city of Inglewood where Black residents are rapidly being displaced amidst the development boom of building a new NFL stadium, an arena for the LA Clippers, a new rail line and thousands of market-rate apartments.³⁹⁷

In 2018, Turner would transition to joining a nonprofit called Inner City Struggle (ICS) becoming the manager of the Brothers, Sons, Selves Coalition (BSS), which is comprised of various youth development organizations including SJLI, YJC, CoCo, KGA, GSAN, Brotherhood Crusade, and the Labor Community Strategy Center. In alliance with the BLM Youth Vanguard and Students Deserve, BSS seeks to develop the leadership of Black, Brown, and South East Asian youth by training them to lead their own campaigns, to divest from policing and incarceration and redirect that funding to improving the life outcomes of youth, and to build and implement a countywide youth development system that includes youth affirming institutions and alternatives to incarceration through direct actions, research and data analysis, policy creation, coalition building and community organizing.³⁹⁸

Through the anti-deficit approach, organizations and coalitions like SJLI and BSS vigilantly address one of the most poignant admonitions of the late Franz Fanon concerning the vital but often neglected role of the lumpenproletariat segments of "colonized society." In the *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon strongly cautions against the orthodox Marxist tendency to view the non-proletariat segments of society such as the peasantry, the lumpenproletariat, and, by extension, the colonized populations of the global south, as counterrevolutionary nuisances to the development of a matured revolutionary working class force. Such a view maintains a *deficit* outlook that overlooks the revolutionary potency festering in the most deprived and desperate segments of capitalist and colonized society. With the prevalence of ROTC programs and other military recruitment agencies in High Schools located in impoverished Black and Brown communities where opportunities to pursue a college education or obtain gainful employment is scant, the allure of becoming an agent of imperialism presents more practical outcomes for financial stability and career development than espousing radical political views. Whereas universities and colleges only accommodate the cream of the crop, nonprofits like SJLI and BSS

³⁹⁷ Rob Hayes, "Inglewood passes temporary rent control ordinance amid rent hikes," *ABC News*, March 5, 2019. <https://abc7.com/inglewood-stadium-rent-increases-hikes/5170428/>.

³⁹⁸ Brothers Sons Selves 2021 Youth Bill of Rights Workshop.

specifically seek out youth who have been most impacted by concentrated poverty and institutional racism.

The Might of Organizational Plurality

In Chapter 1, we explored how ideological and organizational diversity strengthens a movements' ability to withstand the disruptive forces. With consideration of the limitations of both the academy and the nonprofit sector, unfettered revolutionary action cannot independently be mobilized by either. Only through the complex coordination between and among co-conspiring radical activists diversely operating in various spheres of radical development can the BLM movement be sustained. In and of themselves, neither the Black and Ethnic Studies departments in colleges and universities nor the nonprofit organizations are fully equipped to single-handedly advance the forward momentum of BLM. Although departments like Pan African Studies at Cal State LA make an earnest effort to involve the larger community in its programs, access to the academy is largely restricted to college students, faculty, and staff and it will always be hindered by the neoliberal educational practices. Although nonprofit organizations like CoCo, SJLI, YJC, ICS, KGA, and GSAN make an earnest effort to maintain their autonomy in making community-based decisions, their efforts will, to some degree, always be hindered by the nonprofit industrial complex. However, the coordination of radical activists operating in each of these can feed the grassroots.

The 21st century would see the confluence of traditional civil rights tactics and Black Power principles anchored by pro-feminist, pro-LGBTQ, and intersectional modalities of advocacy and analysis. Black youth and students have endeavored to accommodate a more holistic vision for Black freedom, one that not only features Black women and Black LGBTQ leaders and perspectives prominently, but emphasizes the vitality of their positionalities in advancing the movement's objectives. These frameworks were cultivated in the Black Studies and affinity space silos of the academy, which were instituted through the radical action of student insurgency in the late 1960s. These departments would then produce the radical student movements of the 21st century which, in concert with the youth activism of nonprofits, would be pivotal in shaping the Black Lives Matter movement. The millennial and generation z application of intersectional and margins-to-center analytic devices into BLM has allowed for a more flexible and therefore more resilient and adaptable movement paradigm. Through the cultivation of youth leadership development systems, the movement can be perpetually replenished with renewed revolutionary zest and enthusiasm of incoming waves of youth activists.

Conclusion

Through the Fire and All the Smoke

A large billowing cloud of dark smoke rises high into the sky behind the buildings in the direction that I'm striding towards as I make my way back to where I parked my car, walking rather swiftly from a BLM rally that had just concluded. I was among the many marchers who quickly dispersed when LAPD began to tear gas the crowd from every direction of the area. I hurriedly walked up the street, away from the locus of tear gas grenades being thrown on 3rd Street only to find a police squad car engulfed in flames in broad daylight at the intersection of Beverly Blvd and Fairfax Ave near a Shell gas station.³⁹⁹ Some protesters were utterly horrified by the sight, others were expressly jubilant, cheering and throwing victorious fists in the air. I immediately cleared away from the area. After about another half hour of weaving through alleyways and side-streets, I finally got back to my car and I carefully drove back home. I turned on the radio to learn that many protesters had pressed on towards Beverly Hills. The stores and buildings of the luxurious shopping center, the Grove, had been vandalized and looted. Storefront windows were shattered, a police kiosk was set on fire, and about a dozen other LAPD cruisers were either destroyed or defaced. A separate throng of insurrectionists were wreaking havoc in the downtown area. Thereafter, California Governor Gavin Newsom declared a state of emergency in Los Angeles and he deployed the National Guard to support LA County police officers.⁴⁰⁰

This was on May 30, 2020. BLMLA had called to mobilize a massive rally and march at Pan Pacific Park in the upscale Fairfax District of Los Angeles in the wake of the viral video of the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers. Thousands upon thousands of marchers converged at the park. Up to that moment, it was the largest protest that I had ever participated in. The action was an amplified echo of the very first BLM action mobilized by J4TMLA seven years prior. The lead organizers were calling to push the very same divest and invest strategy, they were chanting most of the same chants with subtle innovations, and they were applying the same mobilization strategy of bringing the protest to the more affluent parts of the city rather than incurring an uprising within the Black and Brown neighborhoods of South Central. The organizational commitment to non-violent action was also upheld until the moment that the BLMLA-sanctioned event was adjourned. They closed with the same "Assata" verse. At the heart of the leadership were Professor Abdullah and Patrisse Cullors, the very same co-leaders who assembled the original J4TMLA group. Among them was a new core action team of Tabatha L. Jones Jolivet, Greg Akili, Joseph Williams, Jan Williams, Janaya "Future" Khan, and Kendrick Sampson.

³⁹⁹ Dakota Smith, Steve Saldivar, "LAPD cars set on fire near the Grove amid violent clashes between police, protesters in Fairfax District," *Los Angeles Times*, May 30, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-05-30/protesters-march-toward-beverly-hills-demanding-justice-for-george-floyd>.

⁴⁰⁰ Hailey Branson-Potts, Rong-Gong Lin II, Laura J. Nelson and Alex Wigglesworth, "Newsome declares state of emergency in L.A., deploys National Guard," *Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-05-30/hundreds-arrested-after-looting-vandalism-sweep-downtown-la>.

BLM Growth and Expansion

As strikingly similar as the action was to the original, there were also several things that were markedly different. The first and most glaring were the masses of white supporters and co-conspirators who showed up to the protests. Whereas the early 2013 demonstrations were almost exclusively if not entirely organized and attended by Black and Brown activists and marchers, the 2020 demonstrations saw an incredible surge of white attendees and white co-conspirator support. Over the years, a network of white anti-racist activists called Showing Up for Racial Justice developed the white solidarity organization to BLM known as White People for Black Lives (WP4BL).⁴⁰¹ Throughout the summer protests of 2020, they were in solidarity in a number of ways, from holding “white people for Black Lives” signs to providing free snacks and water bottles to promote wellness and positioning themselves between law enforcement and Black people, acting as human shields during turbulent confrontations. There was also a more robust presence of legal observers, many of them white, from the National Lawyers Guild who were seen wearing their green hats, documenting police interactions with protesters.⁴⁰²

Another notable difference was the show of support by high profile figures. Actor Kendrick Sampson, known for his role in Issa Rae’s critically acclaimed, Emmy nominated *Insecure* (2015), was now a core organizer of BLMLA.⁴⁰³ He founded the nonprofit Build Power (BLD PWR) in May 2019 as a partner organization to BLM through which high-profile actors and artists can support grassroots causes for racial, gender, immigration, economic, educational, and environmental justice.⁴⁰⁴ Throughout the summer of 2020, actors Tessa Thompson, Michael B. Jordan, Cedric the Entertainer, Meagan Good and DeVon Franklin would make appearances at various BLM protests and rallies, attend meetings, and issue statements calling out the anti-Black racism that pervades Hollywood and the entertainment industry. The summer also saw the appearances of politicians and nonprofit leaders, many of whom had shied away from giving their full fledged support of BLM in the past. Former LA City Council President Herb Wesson could be seen in attendance at various BLM events declaring his support for the movement.⁴⁰⁵

Perhaps the most significant difference was the presence and participation of family members of those killed by law enforcement. Since the killing of 25-year-old Ezell Ford at the hands of LAPD officers in 2014,⁴⁰⁶ BLMLA has made a sustained effort to reach out and center the voices of family members in their actions and campaigns. Fouzia Almarou, the mother of Kenneth Ross Jr., was one of the most spirited speakers at the Pan Pacific Park action and she

⁴⁰¹ WP4BL website. <https://www.awarela.org/white-people-4-black-lives>.

⁴⁰² Abbey McMahon, “The Green Hats at the Protests: National Lawyers Guild Legal Observers,” *NWSidebar*, August 20, 2020. <https://nwsidebar.wsba.org/2020/08/20/the-green-hats-at-the-protests-national-lawyers-guild-legal-observers/>.

⁴⁰³ Laura Zornosa, “Kendrick Sampson calls on Hollywood to confront its anti-Black bias,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 24, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-06-24/kendrick-sampson-tessa-thompson-black-lives-matter>.

⁴⁰⁴ About, BLD PWR website. <https://bldpwr.com/about/>.

⁴⁰⁵ Black Lives Matter Los Angeles [blmlosangeles], Black Community Meeting: Herb Wesson, *IGTV Post*, June 11, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CBTXdwBBFIO/>.

⁴⁰⁶ Kate Mather, James Queally, and Marisa Gerber, “No charges against LAPD officers who shot and killed Ezell Ford, D.A. says,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 24, 2017. <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-ezell-ford-no-charges-20170124-story.html>.

would consistently be present in the series of demonstrations in the weeks to come.⁴⁰⁷ The families of Lee Dyrell Jefferson, Anthony Vargas, and Ryan Twyman were also present that day. Throughout the summer, a variety of family members who have been turned activists would be centered amidst the demonstrations. Lisa Hines, the mother of Wakiesha Wilson, Helen Jones, the mother of John Horton, Johnny Weber, the brother of Anthony “AJ” Weber, and various members of Jesse Romero’s family were avid speakers at most of the rallies.

The May 30th action would set in motion a series of advocacy engagements. In continuing the movement strategy of diverting the uprisings away from South Central, BLMLA looked to mobilize more massive rallies and marches in other affluent areas of the city. On June 6, 2020 they collaborated with BLD PWR in holding a rally at the upscale Century City Westfield Mall featuring Hollywood actors Michael B. Jordan, Alexi Underwood, and Anthony Anderson as speakers.⁴⁰⁸ The next day, on June 7, they collaborated again with BLD PWR and rapper YG to amass a rally of an estimated 20,000 protesters who converged at the intersection of Hollywood Blvd. and Highland Ave., the very same place where Sharlia Gulley concluded her eight-mile trek amidst the Trayvon Martin uprisings seven years prior.⁴⁰⁹ The organizers would ensue their weekly protests held every Wednesday afternoon at the Hall of Justice in downtown LA to oust DA Jackie Lacey from office, which they had ceased to mobilize in the first few months of the pandemic.⁴¹⁰ They would begin a weekly virtual discussion panel called *This Is Not A Drill* every Thursday evening on Facebook Live to discuss a range of topics concerning the BLM movement.⁴¹¹

Every aspect of what J4TMLA initiated back in 2013 had been expanded in ways that none of us in the original group ever anticipated or imagined. Accessibility to participate in protests had been enhanced with American Sign Language (ASL) translators now being present at almost every BLMLA event, including the virtual panels. The Global Network would launch the BLM Grassroots and the BLM Political Action Committee (PAC) in September 2020. Public support was at an all-time high with a Pew Research study conducted in June 2020 found that two-thirds of U.S. adults claimed support for BLM, with 38% reporting to strongly support it, and 55% viewing the protests and rallies as at least somewhat effective in bringing about social equality.⁴¹² This was reflected in the pouring of over \$90 million into the Global Network with the average donation of \$30.64.⁴¹³ Their collective email list grew from 42,878 recipients at the

⁴⁰⁷ Black Lives Matter Los Angeles [blmlosangeles], Pan Pacific Park Rally, *IGTV Post*, May 30, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CA0wTQ9gSn3/>.

⁴⁰⁸ Ryan Lattanzio, “Michael B. Jordan Urges Studios to Commit to Black Hiring: ‘Let Us Bring Our Darkness to the Light’,” *Indie Wire*, June 7, 2020. <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/06/michael-b-jordan-protest-los-angeles-black-hiring-1202235862/>.

⁴⁰⁹ Arit John and Kevin Rector, “Massive Hollywood protest shows the staying power of the George Floyd movement,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 8, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-06-08/massive-hollywood-protest-george-floyd-movement>.

⁴¹⁰ Black Lives Matter Los Angeles [@blmlosangeles], “Jackie Lacey Must Go” Rally Flyer for Sept. 23, *Instagram Post*, September 22, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFcfELUg6zg/>.

⁴¹¹ Black Lives Matter Los Angeles [@blmlosangeles], “This Is Not A Drill” Panel Discussion Flyer for Sept. 17, *Instagram Post*, September 16, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFNdrI9ASdo/>.

⁴¹² Kim Parker, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, and Monica Anderson, “Amid Protests, Majorities Across Racial and Ethnic Groups Express Support for the Black Lives Matter Movement,” *Pew Research Center*, June 12, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/06/12/amid-protests-majorities-across-racial-and-ethnic-groups-express-support-for-the-black-lives-matter-movement/>.

⁴¹³ Black Lives Matter 2020 Impact Report, 20. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/2020-impact-report/>.

start of 2020 to 1,997,844 recipients at the end of the year. Its social media platforms reached 750,000 Facebook followers, 1 million twitter followers, and 4.3 million Instagram followers.⁴¹⁴

The purpose of my attendance at the 2020 summer demonstrations was to serve as an added security detail to ensure the safety of Professor Abdullah and her children during the BLMLA-sanctioned rallies and marches. It was not a formal assignment. William Campbell, also known as “Billion Godsun,” an Africa Town Coalition leader, was the head of security. His team was in charge of detaching would-be agitators and provocateurs from shifting the direction of the non-violent action agendas set by BLMLA. I was not a part of his team nor was I there as a core organizer. I was just there to keep a watchful eye on my mentor, her children, and my fiancé – who served as a coordinating assistant for BLMLA for a few weeks at the height of the summer uprisings. The demonstrations during that time were particularly turbulent, not just in the picket-line confrontations with law enforcement, but also in the tensions among the crowd. Professor Abdullah commanded a strong leadership presence, but not everyone in attendance held a favorable view of her leadership or BLMLA and BLMGN.

BLM Conflict and Division

The remarkable increase in support and notoriety from across the country and around the world was also accompanied with an intensified scrutiny and critique of BLM organizations, particularly of the Global Network and the Los Angeles chapter. Some of the critiques expectedly came from external forces of disruption, from right-wing pundits looking to discredit movement leaders, but many of the critiques also came internally from various movement activists who felt that they could no longer remain silent about the Global Network’s nonexistent democratic structure and its lack of financial transparency. “With their time and resources, our local campaigns were co-opted under the BLMGN banner, which assumed credit for our work, and consolidated credibility, power, and resources into an opaque institution.”⁴¹⁵ Some of the dissenters became newly aware of the perceived misconduct of the organization amidst the 2020 developments, others had been raising their concerns for years. Many of the aforementioned changes to the structure and programming of the Network were not universally embraced as enhancements to the movement. Rather, many regarded the changes as non consensual decisions made unilaterally by BLMGN and against the will of various chapter leaders and their members.

On November 30, 2020, a collection of BLM organizations – BLM Philly (Philadelphia), BLM 5280 (Denver), BLM Hudson Valley, BLM Oklahoma City, BLM Chicago, BLM New Jersey, BLM DC, BLM Indy (Indianapolis), BLM San Diego, and BLM Vancouver – came together to issue a letter of accountability concerning the Global Network’s undemocratic tendencies and its lack of financial transparency. They called themselves the *BLM10*. The first discrepancy was the confusion and ambiguity around how to be established as an affiliate chapter in order to be eligible for membership and funding to begin with. Members of the group have expressed that their requests for clarification on the eligibility requirements to join BLMGN have, for years, largely either been ignored or met with vague responses. Details about the

⁴¹⁴ Ibid, 7.

⁴¹⁵ BLM10+, “Tell No Lies,” *#BLM10Plus Statements*, June 10, 2021. <https://www.blmchapterstatement.com/no2/>.

structure and operation of the Network were not readily offered. Their initial optimism and willingness to collaborate with the Global Network therefore dissolved into frustration.

“Since the establishment of BLMGN, our chapters have consistently raised concerns about financial transparency, decision making, and accountability. Despite years of effort, no acceptable internal process of accountability has ever been produced by BLMGN and these recent events have undermined the efforts of chapters seeking to democratize its processes and resources.”⁴¹⁶

Their letter included several points of accountability which include: the self-appointment of Patrisse Cullors as Executive Director without their knowledge and consent, the formation of BLM Grassroots and BLM PAC without their knowledge or support, the alleged prevention of establishing financial transparency, collective decision making, or “collaboration on political analysis and vision,” and the lack of clarity on how they can apply for grants.⁴¹⁷ With consideration to these grievances, the local chapter organizations have urged the general public and other philanthropic sources to donate directly to them rather than the Global Network, which has allegedly hoarded funds accrued from *their* labor, sacrifice, and frontline activism. By June 2021, the number of signatories of the accountability statement had nearly doubled with BLM Nashville, BLM Boston, BLM Houston, and BLM Cleveland, and BLM Inland Empire (IE) joining the collective, prompting the name change to BLM10*Plus*.

“Black Liberation must be about more than protecting the few of us that are doing well. It must be about building a movement that will ensure all of us get free. Because successful movements are collective, not individual, they must be rooted in accountability that protects all of our people. Our love for the people means we have a duty to prioritize this principled accountability for each other, our communities, and the struggle for Black Liberation.”⁴¹⁸

Many among the group expressed their reluctance and hesitancy to air their grievances in the hopes of resolving the issues internally without a public audience. “These conversations have been going on internally for years,” said Krystal Strong from BLM Philly. “It’s really about how we can profess to be a decentralized ‘leaderful’ movement, but then have self-appointed leadership making unilateral decisions that not only affects all of us, but in many cases, puts us at risk.”⁴¹⁹ She and the other signatories felt compelled to write the letter when their communities began associating them with the decisions being made by the Global Network. “I think there comes a time when you can call people in and attempt to have democratic discussions about leadership, accountability, our political direction,” said April Goggans from BLM DC. “But there comes a point when whoever it is [that] you’re trying to hold accountable is clearly not in alignment with those things.”⁴²⁰ She pointed out that the organizers of the BLM10 live in the

⁴¹⁶ BLM10, “It is Time for Accountability,” BLM 10 Plus Accountability Statements, November 30, 2020. <https://www.blmchapterstatement.com/no1/>.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ BLM10+, “Tell No Lies...” June 10, 2021.

⁴¹⁹ Black Power Media, The #BLM10 Speak: “It’s Time For Accountability,” *YouTube* Video, February 10, 2021, 13:10. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=if_IAZpFm7w&t=1354s.

⁴²⁰ Ibid, 8:50.

communities where they are active and that they are accountable to those communities. When BLMGN makes decisions that are not vetted through systems of community consent, the local chapters are subject to community demands for accountability despite not being included in decision making processes themselves. “We don’t have to agree, but there has to be some principled struggle about these things,” said Goggans. “We can’t afford to do this wrong. None of us have closed the door, but people have to opt into accountability.”⁴²¹

Signatories of the BLM 10 Plus collective detail how they have made various attempts to engage BLMGN in an “internal process” towards accountability, transparency, and democratization in good faith that its leaders would uphold the ideal of Ella Baker’s group-centered or “leaderful” principles. For a period, it seemed that they were on the verge of a breakthrough in realizing the democratization of the BLMGN. On July 10, 2020, Professor Abdullah wrote an internal accountability letter addressed to the BLMGN Board of Directors with a list of 11 demands calling for the immediate resignation of Managing Director Kailee Scales, who many believed to be the purveyor of obscuring accountability, the release of the names and contacts of the Board, and a revision of chapter agreements and the implementation of a chapter-driven advisement and decision-making structure.⁴²² However, these efforts were summarily derailed with the public launch of BLM Grassroots and PAC without the input or collaboration of the majority of chapters.⁴²³ It was at this point that the original signatories of the collective felt that they could no longer remain silent.

“The issues we raise are bigger than simple complaints about individual leaders, but about the ways liberalism and capitalism have manifested in BLMGN and the current iteration of the Black liberation movement as a whole, co-opting and deradicalizing this critical historic moment of revolutionary possibility...

...They are about how nepotism, proximity to power, and access to resources became more important to the Network than making sure that they had a radical vision, objectives, and strategies created through a transparent, democratic decision making process and a solid foundation of shared governance and political alignment.”⁴²⁴

In March 2021 Samaria Rice, the mother of Tamir Rice, and Lisa Simpson, mother of Richard Risher, issued a statement calling for BLM leaders Patrisse Cullors and Professor Abdullah, as well as other high profile movement figures Tamika Mallory, Shaun King, and attorney Benjamin Crump to “step down, stand back, and stop monopolizing and capitalizing our fight for justice and human rights,” accusing them of exploiting the publicity of the deaths of their children to build their fame and pursue lucrative opportunities.⁴²⁵ The statement was

⁴²¹ Ibid, 11:30.

⁴²² Melina Abdullah, “Letter to the Board of Directors, Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation,” July 10, 2020. <https://www.blmchapterstatement.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Chapters-Letter-to-Network-.pdf>.

⁴²³ Melina Abdullah, “Building a Free Black Future,” Black Lives Matter website, June 7, 2021. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/building-a-free-black-future/>.

⁴²⁴ BLM10+, “Tell No Lies...” June 10, 2021.

⁴²⁵ [@_Rawilcox], Official Statement from Samaria Rice, Mother of Tamir Rice, and Lisa Simpson, Mother of Richard Rischer, *Twitter* Post, March 16, 2021 6:24 pm. https://twitter.com/_Rawilcox/status/1371995843683876865.

prompted by the Grammys performance of rapper Lil Baby, which opened with a depiction of police brutality featuring Kendrick Sampson and with Tamika Mallory performing a spoken word piece at the conclusion. “Look at this clout chaser,” said Samaria Rice in reference to Mallory. “Did she lose something in this fight? I don’t think so. That’s the problem, they take us for a joke and that’s why we never have justice cause of sh-t like this.” Weary of the increasing commercialization of Black death at the hands of police and the sensationalism of movement activism, Rice felt compelled to speak out. In an interview with Imani Perry, Rice put forth a particularly scathing, yet sobering critique of certain “ambulance chasing” trends that she identified as harmful to the movement and the families whose loved ones have been slain:

“Families of those who are killed by the police — and whose loved ones’ deaths spark mass movements — continue to navigate political misrepresentation, battle zones of police repression, homelessness, and poverty, while Black “leadership” that has not been selected by the masses flourishes through celebrity status. These families must be provided the resources to sustain themselves, their families, and their work dedicated to building community infrastructure... Stop celebrity activism; stop corporate investments that support lobbyists for this norm; put an end to the political-economy’s parasitism on Black death and poverty.”⁴²⁶

As some of the families have looked to definitively break affiliation with BLMGN, many of the local chapters contemplated whether or not to keep “Black Lives Matter” in their organizational titles. Some have changed their organization names in a definitive separation from the Network – BLM Minneapolis became the Black Vision Collective, BLM IE became the Black Power Collective. “The use of the BLM name, which we believed was intended to unify our struggle, has been commodified and debased. It is now being used to sell products, acquire book deals, T.V. deals, and speaking engagements. We have no interest in these pursuits and we are opposed to the movement to substitute Black capitalism for white capitalism.”⁴²⁷ Others have retained the “BLM” moniker in their organizational titles on the premise that it was the labor and frontline activism of local chapters that ascended the slogan into national and worldwide prominence, not BLMGN. April Goggins reflected on the benefits of changing the DC chapter name, but how its members ultimately decided against it. “We also worked really hard behind this name,” she stated. “Why should we have to change who we are because folks up there [BLMGN] decided that they weren’t gonna define who they were?”

According to the BLM10+, chapter affiliation was vaguely determined and were internally referred to as official, unofficial, or rogue. “The capricious designation made it easier to arbitrarily distribute resources and opportunities and to make them accessible only to a few. The most alarming use of official and unofficial chapters was BLMGN’s willingness to position a chapter as unofficial if the chapter did not align with their *personal* political interest.”⁴²⁸

⁴²⁶ Imani Perry, “Stop Hustling Black Death, Samaria Rice is the mother of Tamir, not a ‘mother of the movement,’” *The Cut*, May 24, 2021. <https://www.thecut.com/article/samaria-rice-profile.html>.

⁴²⁷ Black Power Collective, “Breaking: Black Lives Matter Inland Empire Announces Departure From BLM Global Network,” *Left Out Mag*, February 4, 2021. https://leftoutmag.com/2021/02/04/breaking/amp/?fbclid=IwAR1e3tV80A4-6JSYWNZ8m_28RV5UiD8TpWeCNjOzScRhi8ZfrFgfBOXhXmY.

⁴²⁸ BLM10+, “Tell No Lies...” June 10, 2021.

The Los Angeles chapter has been identified by some of the dissenting organizations and some of the families of victims as one of the few organizations that are optimally benefiting from its affiliation with BLMGN and as the main organization in compliance with its secrecy and its alleged deceptions. “Chapters were often referred to as official in cities BLMGN was seeking to court prominent individuals and high visibility opportunities.”⁴²⁹ In their statement of departure from BLMGN, the Black Power Collective – formerly known as BLM IE – laments when they were first approached by Cullors to join the Network in 2015 in stating “We were told that the organization we were joining was decentralized and leaderless, but we quickly discovered that was not the case. [BLMGN] is a top-down dogmatic organization that promotes certain chapters that choose to align with their direction and sequester the ones that don’t.”⁴³⁰

In echoing the general concerns of the original BLM10, they accused BLMLA of working “to undermine a grassroots movement by capitalizing on unpaid labor, suppressing any internal attempt at democracy, commodifying Black death, and profiting from the same pain and suffering inflicted on Black communities that we’re fighting to end.”⁴³¹ More specifically, they believed that BLMLA and BLMGN betrayed one particular community agreement, its professed refusal to work with or endorse politicians, which they believed would safeguard their grassroots efforts from being corrupted by the nonprofit sector or “absorbed into the Democratic Party.” While BLMLA had largely been steadfast in upholding its rule of barring law enforcement, elected officials, and media from attending BLM meetings and events, they seemed to have loosened those restrictions in recent years.

The attendance of elected officials at general meetings, the open endorsements of political candidates by BLMLA members, and their heavy engagement with BLD PWR have called into question the organization’s fidelity to the aforementioned community agreement. Although BLMLA has never endorsed any political candidates as an organization, its members’ individual endorsements have raised suspicions that the chapter has become more increasingly aligned with corporate interests and the Democratic Party. This is a glaring concern shared by many of the BLM10+ in relation to BLMGN. “We’re not a tool of the Democratic Party,” clarified April Goggans. “We have worked tirelessly with our communities to be about what’s going on on-the-ground.”⁴³² She describes the Global Networks’ interactions with the Democratic Party as “a failure to stay with your feet, your ears, your heart on the ground.”

The BLM10+ and the families of victims have claimed that responses have varied from receptive to defensive or avoidant. They claimed that many have largely trivialized their calls for accountability by conflating their criticisms with the right-wing attacks on the movement and its leaders in general. In an interview with Marc Lamont Hill, Patrisse Cullors addressed these criticisms levelled against her and BLMGN. “The minute we started to receive funding, I looked at my team and said ‘we have to get these dollars out the door,’” she stated. “Now that Black Lives Matter has money, we have to be a grant making body as well as a think tank.”⁴³³ She expressed that the surge in funding was unexpected and that managing the rapid increase in funds and resources within a brief period of time was a challenging task. “I think there are some

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

⁴³⁰ Black Power Collective, “Breaking: Black Lives Matter Inland Empire...” February 4, 2021.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² Black Power Media, The #BLM10 Speak: “It’s Time for Accountability,” 10:09.

⁴³³ BNC News, “Activist Patrisse Cullors Talks Criticisms Surrounding Black Lives Matter Network Foundation: Pt. 1,” *YouTube* Video, April 15, 2021, 7:30. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2z-rxVKcDSc>.

grounded critiques of me and BLM and I take those very seriously.” Perhaps the most significant response was BLMGN’s release of its *Impact Report*, which discloses that \$8.4 million went into operating expenses, \$21.7 million in grants were disbursed to more than 33 organizations that are Black- and LGBTQ-led.⁴³⁴ BLMGN reportedly disbursed six-figure grants to chapters including Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, DC, Nashville, and others. They have committed 23% of its total assets in disbursements and charitable giving, which is almost three times the industry norm.⁴³⁵ “We are no longer a small, scrappy movement. We are an institution. We are mature. We are a growing entity developing its stake in the philanthropic world.”

BLM was initiated with a scathing critique and dismissal of traditional Civil Rights and Black nationalist leaders, indicting them as political opportunists looking to exploit the high profile deaths of Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown for personal gain. Ironically, its national leaders have now awkwardly found themselves as the subjects of a strikingly similar critique. Whether the centralization of leadership was motivated by the perceived necessity to consolidate decision-making and resource management in order for the movement to survive or by the alleged intent to exploit movement activists and families for personal gain is not the concern here. Whatever the case may be, the intent of this dissertation is neither to further indict nor vindicate the Global Network of the allegations leveled against them, but to foster an understanding of the circumstances that compelled leadership centralization and to explore the avenues by which group-centered leadership can be maintained to fidelity.

Through the Fire and All the Smoke

In each chapter, we explored constitutive dimensions of the BLM movement that have contributed to its development and continue to offer an array of possibilities for either its growth and sustainability or its demise. Chapter 1 introduced the concept of the *Black Populist Biome* as a framework for managing political difference within the Black freedom struggle and understanding the significance and limitations of the spontaneity and accessibility of populist uprisings. Chapter 2 uplifts the analytic concept of *racial capital* developed by the late Cedric J. Robinson for understanding how race and class continue to be mutually constituted in the 21st century political economy. It also critiques class-reductionist tendencies and explores the relationship between Marxist theories and Black radical activism. Chapter 3 introduced the concept of *Black Proletarian Democracy* and argues of the centrality of Black workers, particularly Black women, in union-based labor movements to strive to increase political power in the workplace rather than just increased wages and expanded benefits. Chapter 4 explores the dynamics of intercommunal solidarity among Black, Indigenous, Latin American, and Asian groups in the U.S. It also critiques race-reductionist tendencies and it explores the possibilities and pitfalls of Black internationalism envisioned by the late Malcolm X. Chapter 5 argues for the vitality of youth and student leadership in movement development. It examines the roles of Black and Ethnic Studies Departments and of community-based nonprofit organizations in sustaining BLM activism.

⁴³⁴ Black Lives Matter 2020 Impact Report, 20. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/2020-impact-report/>.

⁴³⁵ Ibid, 21.

This dissertation is intended to convey the historical significance of the BLM movement and to bring clarity on the array of political ideas and strategies that are implicated in its development. Moreover, it is meant to bring light to the dimensions of the movement at-large that are often overshadowed by the mainstream historical focus on the BLM co-founders and the BLMGN. From the early efforts of J4TMLA, its PASC contingency of Jelani Hendrix, Funmilola Fagbamila and company, the heroics of Sharlia Lebreton Gulley, to the youth organizing efforts of David C. Turner III in sustaining the movement, the scope of BLM and the movement for Black Lives is much larger than BLMGN.

This study also explores how movement participation demands an embrace of the complexities and contradictions that inhabit all organizing projects. Moreover, it considers how these complexities and contradictions are in fact constitutive dynamics that allow for sustained mobilization; how it is these differences that allow for movement. It considers how movement sustainability is not upheld by the absence of contradiction and complexity but rather by activists and organizers' ability to thoroughly engage the complexity instead of shying away from it or attempting to efface it. The title of this dissertation is meant to depict the arduous protracted trajectory that the BLM movement has undergone. "Through the Fire" is an expression of resilience and determination in pursuit of a fierce and undying love by the late Chaka Khan. "All the Smoke" is a millennial expression of an undeterred willingness to confront or incur hostility and chaos. Together, the two expressions form an intergenerational link in the navigation between love and rage to get through the fire and to confront the "smoke" – not only with the state and the market – but also between and among activists and organizations.

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