



FROM #BLACKLIVESMATTER TO
BLACK LIBERATION

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

"From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation is a must-read for everyone who is serious about the ongoing praxis of freedom."

—Barbara Ransby

Table of Contents

[Praise for From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation](#)

[Introduction: Black Awakening in Obama's America](#)

[Chapter 1. A Culture of Racism](#)

[Chapter 2. From Civil Rights to Colorblind](#)

[Chapter 3. Black Faces in High Places](#)

[Chapter 4. The Double Standard of Justice](#)

[Chapter 5. Barack Obama: The End of an Illusion](#)

[Chapter 6. Black Lives Matter: A Movement, Not a Moment](#)

[Chapter 7. From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Notes](#)

[About the Author](#)



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PRAISE FOR FROM #BLACKLIVESMATTER TO BLACK LIBERATION

“Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s searching examination of the social, political, and economic dimensions of the prevailing racial order offers important context for understanding the necessity of the emerging movement for black liberation.”

—**Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow***

“Class matters! In this clear-eyed, historically informed account of the latest wave of resistance to state violence, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor not only exposes the canard of colorblindness but reveals how structural racism and class oppression are joined at the hip. If today’s rebels ever expect to end inequality and racialized state violence, she warns, then capitalism must also end. And that requires forging new solidarities, envisioning a new social and economic order, and pushing a struggle to protect Black lives to its logical conclusion: a revolution capable of transforming the entire nation.”

—**Robin D. G. Kelley, author of *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination***

“With political eloquence, intellectual rigor, and an unapologetically left analysis, the brilliant scholar-activist Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has provided a powerful contribution to our collective understanding of the current stage of the Black freedom struggle in the United States, how we arrived at this point, and what battles we need to fight in order to truly achieve liberation. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* is a must read for everyone who is serious about the ongoing praxis of freedom.”

—**Barbara Ransby, author of *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision***

“Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has a strong voice, a sharp mind, and a clear, readable style that all come together in this penetrating, vital analysis of race and class at this critical moment in America’s racial history.”

—**Gary Younge, editor at large, *Guardian***

“Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor brings the long history of Black radical theorizing and scholarship into the neoliberal twenty-first century with *From*

#BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation. Her strong voice is deeply needed at a time when young activists are once again reforging a Black liberation movement that is under constant attack. Deeply rooted in Black radical, feminist, and socialist traditions, Taylor's book is an outstanding example of the type of analysis that is needed to build movements for freedom and self-determination in a far more complicated terrain than that confronted by the activists of the twentieth century. Her book is required reading for anyone interested in justice, equality, and freedom."

—**Michael C. Dawson, author of *Blacks in and out of the Left***

"*From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* is a profoundly insightful book from one of the brightest new lights in African American Studies. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor invites us to rethink the postwar history of the United States and to place the actions of everyday people, including the hundreds of thousands of African Americans who participated in the urban rebellions and wildcat strikes of 1960s and 1970s, at the forefront of American politics. By doing so, she offers up a "usable past" for interpreting the current anti-state-sanctioned-violence movement sweeping the United States in the early twenty-first century. This timely volume provides much needed analysis not only of race and criminalization in modern American history but of the specific roles played by a bipartisan electoral elite, the corporate sector, and the new black political class in producing our current onslaught of police killings and mass incarceration in the years since the Voting Rights Act's passage. Taylor's fluent voice as historian and political theorist renders legible the accomplishments and, perhaps most importantly, the expansive possibilities of a new generation of black youth activism."

—**Donna Murch, author of *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California***

"Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has given us an important book, one that might help us to understand the roots of the contemporary policing crisis and build popular opposition capable of transforming the current, dismal state of affairs. Equal parts historical analysis and forceful polemic, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* provides a much-needed antidote to the postracial patter that has defined the Obama years, but it also serves as a proper corrective for the "new civil rights movement" posturing of some activists. Against such nostalgic thinking, Taylor reminds us of the new historical conditions we face and the unique challenges created by decades of African American political integration.

From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation sketches a politics that rightly connects anti-police brutality protests and a broader anti-capitalist project. Everyone who has grown sick of too many undeserved deaths at the hands of police and vigilantes should read and debate this book.”

—**Cedric G. Johnson, author of *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics***

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Contents

- [Introduction: Black Awakening in Obama's America](#)
- [Chapter 1. A Culture of Racism](#)
- [Chapter 2. From Civil Rights to Colorblind](#)
- [Chapter 3. Black Faces in High Places](#)
- [Chapter 4. The Double Standard of Justice](#)
- [Chapter 5. Barack Obama: The End of an Illusion](#)
- [Chapter 6. Black Lives Matter: A Movement, Not a Moment](#)
- [Chapter 7. From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation](#)
- [Acknowledgments](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [About the Author](#)

To the parents, brothers, sisters, partners, and friends of those who have been killed by police and other forms of state-sanctioned violence and yet remain committed to the struggle for a just world

Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

—Frederick Douglass, 1857

INTRODUCTION

Black Awakening in Obama's America

I am not sad that black Americans are rebelling; this was not only inevitable but eminently desirable. Without this magnificent ferment among Negroes, the old evasions and procrastinations would have continued indefinitely. Black men have slammed the door shut on a past of deadening passivity. Except for the Reconstruction years, they have never in their long history on American soil struggled with such creativity and courage for their freedom. These are our bright years of emergence; though they are painful ones, they cannot be avoided. . . . In these trying circumstances, the black revolution is much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes. It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. It is exposing the evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws and suggests that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced. . . . Today's dissenters tell the complacent majority that the time has come when further evasion of social responsibility in a turbulent world will court disaster and death. America has not yet changed because so many think it need not change, but this is the illusion of the damned. America must change because twenty-three million black citizens will no longer live supinely in a wretched past. They have left the valley of despair; they have found strength in struggle. Joined by white allies, they will shake the prison walls until they fall. America must change.

—**Martin Luther King Jr.**, “A Testament of Hope,” 1969

Martin Luther King Jr. wrote these words in the weeks before his assassination, while the “eminently desirable” Black rebellion rose in the streets of the United States, exposing the triumphalist rhetoric of the American dream as meaningless. While the United States may have been considered an “affluent society,” for the vast majority of African Americans, unemployment,

underemployment, substandard housing, and police brutality constituted what Malcolm X once described as an “American nightmare.” Indeed, the relentless burden of those conditions would propel more than half a million African Americans—almost the same number of troops sent to fight in Vietnam—to rise up in the “land of the free” over the course of the 1960s.

It is almost never useful to compare eras; it is even less useful to look at the past and say nothing has changed. But in King’s words are painful continuities between the present and the past that remind us that, in some cases, the past is not yet past. Over the course of ten months, spanning from the summer and fall of 2014 into the winter and spring of 2015, the United States was rocked by mass protests, led by African Americans in response to the police murder of a young Black man, Michael Brown. In the summer heat of August, the people of Ferguson, Missouri, rose up and brought the world’s attention to the crisis of racist policing practices in the United States. Eight months later, some forty miles from the nation’s capital, the city of Baltimore exploded in fury at the police killing of young Freddie Gray.

King’s words could easily describe the emergence of this protest movement. What began as a local struggle of ordinary Black people in Ferguson, who for more than one hundred days “slammed the door shut on deadening passivity” in the pursuit of justice for Brown, has grown into a national movement against police brutality and daily police killings of unarmed African Americans. It is no exaggeration to say that the men and women in blue patrolling the streets of the United States have been given a license to kill—and have demonstrated a consistent propensity to use it. More often than not, police violence, including murder and attempted murder, is directed at African Americans. Take Philadelphia: the birthplace of American democracy but also home to one of the most brutal police departments in the country. When the Department of Justice (DOJ) conducted an investigation of the Philadelphia Police Department from 2007 to 2013, it found that 80 percent of the people Philadelphia police officers had shot were African American, even though less than half the city’s population is African American.¹ Perhaps the most important finding, though, is that despite police shootings of unarmed people in violation of the force’s own standards and rules, it is virtually impossible to punish—let alone indict, jail, or prosecute—police for this criminal behavior. For example, in Philadelphia, of 382 shootings by police, only 88 officers were found to have violated department policy. In 73 percent of those cases there was no suspension or termination.²

It should go without saying that police murder and brutality are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the US criminal justice system. Is it any wonder that a new movement has taken “Black Lives Matter” as its slogan when it is so

clear that, for the police, Black lives do not matter at all? In fact, it is impossible to understand the intense policing of Black communities without putting it into the wider context of the decades-old War on Drugs and the effects of mass incarceration. Today, the United States accounts for 5 percent of the world's population but 25 percent of the world's prison population. There are more than a million African Americans in prison because Black people are incarcerated at a rate six times that of whites. The systematic overimprisonment of Black people, and Black men in particular, has conflated race, risk, and criminality to legitimize close scrutiny of Black communities as well as the consequences of such scrutiny. As Michelle Alexander has pointed out in her book *The New Jim Crow*, the imprisonment of Black men has led to social stigma and economic marginalization, leaving many with few options but to engage in criminal activity as a means of survival. When white men with criminal records are as likely to be hired as Black men with *no* criminal records, one can only imagine the slim prospects for legitimate work for Black men returning from jail and prison. The entire criminal justice system operates at the expense of African American communities and society as a whole.

This crisis goes beyond high incarceration rates; indeed, the perpetuation of deeply ingrained stereotypes of African Americans as particularly dangerous, impervious to pain and suffering, careless and carefree, and exempt from empathy, solidarity, or basic humanity is what allows the police to kill Black people with no threat of punishment. When Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson gave grand jury testimony about his engagement with Mike Brown, he sounded as if he were describing an altercation with a monster, not an eighteen-year-old. Even though Wilson and Brown were the same height, Wilson said he felt like he was being tossed around like a rag doll and that if Brown were to punch him in the face it would be fatal. Wilson went on to describe Brown as a “demon” who made “grunting” noises before inexplicably deciding to attack a police officer who had already shot him once and was poised to do so again.³ Wilson attributed superhuman strength to Brown, whom he described as running through a hail of bullets, leaving Wilson with no alternative but to keep shooting.⁴ It is an unbelievable story that hinges on the complete suspension of belief in Brown's humanity, his literal humanness.

The United States is often referred to these days as a “colorblind” or “postracial” society, where race may once have been an obstacle to a successful life. Today, we are told, race does not matter. Racial discrimination, sanctioned by law in the South and custom and public policy in the North over much of the twentieth century, caused disparities between Blacks and whites in employment, poverty, housing quality, and access to education. But in the aftermath of the

Black freedom struggles of the 1960s, removing race from the law and shifting attitudes regarding race were supposed to usher in a new period of unfettered Black success and achievement. That an African American family inhabits the White House, an edifice built by slaves in 1795, is a powerful example of the transformation of racial attitudes and realities in the United States. Beyond the presidency of Barack Obama, thousands of Black elected officials, a layer of Black corporate executives, and many highly visible Black Hollywood socialites and multimillionaire professional athletes animate the “postracial” landscape in the United States. The success of a relative few African Americans is upheld as a vindication of the United States’ colorblind ethos and a testament to the transcendence of its racist past. Where there is bad treatment on the basis of race, it is viewed as the product of lapsed personal behavior and morality, but it is “no longer endemic, or sanctioned by law and custom,” as President Obama suggested in a speech commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Voting Rights Act.⁵

This is precisely why the spectacle of unchecked police brutality and murder has morphed into a political crisis. After all, the United States does not passively contend that it is a colorblind society; it actively promotes its supposed colorblindness as an example of its democratic traditions and its authority to police the globe. The federal government and politicians in both parties have used this as an excuse to cut social programs and other aspects of the public sector, in denial of the central way that discrimination harms Black life in the United States. In other words, if a central demand of the civil rights movement in the 1960s was federal intervention to act against discrimination and act affirmatively to improve the quality of life for African Americans, promoting the United States as colorblind or postracial has done the opposite as it is used to justify dismantling the state’s capacity to challenge discrimination.

The Supreme Court has done precisely this with voting rights, essentially ruling that racism no longer hinders access to voting, as it most clearly and demonstrably did in the era of Jim Crow. Chief Justice John Roberts said, when striking down the Voting Rights Act, “Our country has changed in the last fifty years.” He added that Congress needed to “speak to current conditions.”⁶ Of course the country has changed, but the passage of time alone is not a guarantee that it has changed for the better. Justice is not a natural part of the lifecycle of the United States, nor is it a product of evolution; it is always the outcome of struggle.

Not only do these attacks have consequences for ordinary Black people, but they are also a “Trojan horse” shielding a much broader attack against all working-class people, including whites and Latino/as. African Americans, of

course, suffer disproportionately from the dismantling of the social welfare state, but in a country with growing economic inequality between the richest and poorest Americans, austerity budgets and political attacks on social welfare come at the peril of all ordinary people. It is an example of how, counterintuitively, even ordinary white people have an interest in exposing the racist nature of US society, because doing so legitimizes the demand for an expansive and robust regime of social welfare intended to redistribute wealth and resources from the rich back to the working class—Black, Brown, and white. Conversely, it is also why the political and economic elites have such a vested interest in colorblindness and in the perpetuation of the myth that the United States is a meritocracy.

The spotlight now shining on pervasive police abuse, including the ongoing beatings, maimings, and murders of Black people, destabilizes the idea of the United States as colorblind and thus reestablishes the basis for strengthening regulatory oversight and antidiscrimination measures. In this process, larger questions inevitably arise as to the nature of such a society that would allow police to brazenly attack and kill so many African Americans. This is why the persisting issue of police violence is so explosive, especially in this particular historical moment of supposed colorblindness and the height of Black political power. Indeed, an African American president, attorney general, and Philadelphia police chief have led the national discussion on police reform. Yet, as near-daily reports on police brutality and murder fill the airwaves, this unprecedented display of Black political power appears to mean very little in the lives of ordinary Black people, who wield almost no power at all.

Two Black Societies, Separate and Unequal

How do we explain the rise of a Black president, along with the exponential growth of the Black political class and the emergence of a small but significant Black economic elite, at the same time as the emergence of a social movement whose most well-known slogan is both a reminder and an exhortation that “Black Lives Matter”? Examples of Black ascendance have been used to laud the greatness of the United States, as Obama echoed when he claimed that “for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.”⁷ At the same time, Black poverty, imprisonment, and premature death are widely seen as the products of Black insolence and lapsed personal responsibility. In reality, these divergent experiences are driven by deep class differences among African Americans that have allowed for the rise of a few while the vast majority languishes in a despair driven by the economic inequality that pervades all of American society. Here, as in the rest of the world, the

neoliberal era of free-market reform, the rollback of social spending, and cuts in taxes for corporations and the wealthy have produced social inequality on a scale unseen since at least the 1920s. As the Occupy movement of 2011 pointed out, the wealthiest 1 percent of the population controls 40 percent of the wealth. From 1978 to 2013, CEO compensation, adjusted for inflation, increased 937 percent compared to the anemic 10 percent growth in a typical worker's compensation over the same period.⁸ As always, economic privation and social inequality have a disproportionate impact on Black America.

In fact, the gap between rich and poor is even more pronounced among Blacks than among whites. The richest whites have seventy-four times more wealth than the average white family. But among African Americans, the richest families have a staggering two hundred times more wealth than the average Black family. African Americans make up 1.4 percent—about 16,000 of the 14 million Black families in the United States—of the richest 1 percent of Americans. Each of those families' net worth averages \$1.2 million, in comparison to \$6,000 for the average Black family.⁹ These class differences influence the ways in which they experience the world and the political conclusions they draw from those experiences. Class differences have always existed among African Americans, but the pall of legally instituted racism in an earlier era essentially tethered Blacks together into a Black community. Today, the absence of formal barriers to Black economic and political achievement has allowed for more differentiation among African Americans and has frayed notions of “community.”

This does not mean that Black elites can transcend racism altogether. The Black elite is much smaller than the white elite; its members have greater debt and less overall net worth compared to rich whites. But it does mean that, in general, they experience racial inequality differently compared to poor and working-class African Americans and draw different conclusions about what these experiences mean. For example, a Pew Research Center poll conducted in 2007 showed that 40 percent of African Americans say that because of the “diversity within their community, blacks can no longer be thought of as a single race.”¹⁰ Additionally, 61 percent of Blacks believed that the “values held by middle-class Black people and the values held by poor Black people have become more different.” Well-educated Blacks are more likely than Blacks with less formal education to say that the “values gap” within the Black community has widened over the last decade. Finally, low-income African Americans, according to the poll, suggest that the perception of differences over values and identity among Blacks “is felt most strongly by those Blacks at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum.”¹¹

For Black elites, in particular, their success validates the political and economic underpinnings of US society while reaffirming the apparent personal defects of those who have not succeeded. Blaming Black inequality on Black people is not a new development, but the social movements of the 1960s made powerful structural critiques of Black poverty and deprivation as products of a society that, for much of its existence, thrived on the oppression and exploitation of African Americans. Black revolutionary Stokely Carmichael and social scientist Charles Hamilton coined the phrase “institutional racism” in their book *Black Power*.¹² The term was prescient, anticipating the coming turn toward colorblindness and the idea that racism was only present if the intention was undeniable. Institutional racism, or structural racism, can be defined as the policies, programs, and practices of public and private institutions that result in greater rates of poverty, dispossession, criminalization, illness, and ultimately mortality of African Americans. Most importantly, it is the *outcome* that matters, not the intentions of the individuals involved. Institutional racism remains the best way to understand how Black deprivation continues in a country as rich and resource-filled as the United States. This understanding is critical to countering the charges that African Americans are largely responsible for their own predicament.

The debate over the nature of Black inequality is not benign; it has deep political implications for the nature of American society more generally. The focus on Black culture as the source of Black inequality was never born out of hatred of Black people. Its function is to explain the Black experience as something that exists outside of the American narrative of unimpeded social mobility, the pursuit of happiness and equality for all: a way to exonerate the American system while simultaneously implicating African Americans in their own hardships. However, any serious interrogation of the history of Black life in the United States upends all notions of American exceptionalism.

After slavery, the popular explanations for Black poverty and marginalization drifted between biology and culture, but the ideas of free enterprise and American democracy “with contradictions” have never seriously been interrogated. The civil rights movement and the Black Power rebellion unfolding over the course of the 1960s pushed institutional racism, as opposed to Black cultural and familial practices, to the forefront as the central explanation for Black inequality. This was amplified by a commission’s report based on the findings of a federal investigation into the causes of “civil disorder” throughout the 1960s. The Kerner Commission report plainly stated that “white racism” was responsible for Black poverty—“white society created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.”¹³ The complicity of the state itself in

the subjugation of Black life legitimized the right of Blacks to demand that the state intervene and undo what it had played a clear role in creating. But this demand was only enforceable when the movement was on the streets. As the movement receded in the 1970s and as a bipartisan political attack on the welfare state gained traction, the mantras of the “culture of poverty” and “personal responsibility” reemerged as popular explanations for Black deprivation.

Today, the various problems that pervade Black communities are largely believed to be of Black people’s own making. Indeed, President Obama, addressing an audience of Black graduating college students, exhorted, “We’ve got no time for excuses,” as if the greater rates of unemployment and poverty experienced by African Americans were the products of “excuses.” These are not just the admonishments by the Black elite: 53 percent of African Americans say that Blacks who do not get ahead are mainly responsible for their situation, while only 30 percent say that discrimination is to blame.¹⁴ The premise that Black inequality is a product of the slackening of Black communities’ work ethic and self-sufficiency has been bolstered by the visibility of the Black elite. In this context, the election of Barack Obama has been heralded as the pinnacle of Black achievement and, presumably, the end of racial grievances.

Black Awakening in Obama’s America

There are, however, periodic ruptures in the US narrative of its triumph over racism as a defining feature of its society. The murder of Emmett Till in 1955 exploded the rhetoric of the moral and democratic superiority of American society when the United States was in the throes of the Cold War. The Black freedom struggle of the 1960s, while the United States was simultaneously waging a war in Vietnam (supposedly in the name of freedom), exposed the country as a whole as deeply racist and resistant to Black equality or liberation. More recently, the Los Angeles Rebellion in 1992 reignited a national discussion about the persistence of racial inequality. In 2005, the Bush administration’s shameful response to Hurricane Katrina momentarily submerged the glowing self-appraisals of American society at a time when the country was, once again, locked in war and occupation, this time in Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively, in the name of freedom and democracy.

Today, the birth of a new movement against racism and policing is shattering the illusion of a colorblind, postracial United States. Cries of “Hands up, don’t shoot,” “I can’t breathe,” and “Black lives matter” have been heard around the country as tens of thousands of ordinary people mobilize to demand an end to rampant police brutality and murder against African Americans. It is almost

always impossible to say when and where a movement will arise, but its eventual emergence is almost always predictable. On a weekly basis, social media brims with stories of police brutalizing ordinary citizens or killing the young, the Black, and—almost always—the unarmed. The advent of social media has almost erased the lag between when an incident happens and when the public becomes aware of it. Where the mainstream media have typically downplayed or even ignored public claims of police corruption and abuse, the proliferation of smartphones fitted with voice and video recorders has given the general public the ability to record these incidents and share them far and wide on a variety of social media platforms.

Historically, incidents of police brutality have typically sparked Black uprisings, but they are the tip of the iceberg, not the entirety of the problem. Today is no different. While it may be surprising that a Black protest movement has emerged during the Obama presidency, the reluctance of his administration to address any of the substantive issues facing Black communities has meant that suffering has worsened in those communities over the course of Obama's term of office. African Americans mobilized historic levels of support for Obama in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections based on his promises of hope and change and his declaration that “yes, we can” end the war in Iraq. Perhaps most compelling to African Americans was their own hope of breaking free from the Bush administration's breathtaking indifference to Black suffering, as exemplified by the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe. By any measure, however, African Americans under Obama are experiencing the same indifference and active discrimination; in some cases, these have become worse. Black unemployment has remained in the double digits throughout the Obama presidency. Even Black college graduates are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as white college graduates. Twelve percent of Black college graduates, compared to 4.9 percent of white college graduates, were out of work in 2014.¹⁵ Even those African American college graduates who made “no excuses,” went to college, and—as President Bill Clinton liked to say—“played by the rules” still fared significantly worse than their white peers.

Pundits and politicians alike have been celebrating what they describe as an economic recovery from the Great Recession of 2008, but for African Americans, the long winter of the downturn keeps churning on—demonstrated most sharply by the 27 percent of African Americans who live in poverty.¹⁶ The national poverty rate for African Americans can obscure the even greater depths of Black economic deprivation concentrated in some parts of the country, especially across the southern United States. Across the Midwest, too, there is also intense Black poverty, including 46 percent in Minnesota, 39 percent in

Wisconsin, and 34 percent in Michigan. Since Obama came into office, Black median income has fallen by 10.9 percent to \$33,500, compared to a 3.6 percent drop for whites, leaving their median income at \$58,000.¹⁷ Poverty contributes to a host of other social ills: 26 percent of Black households are “food insecure,” the government’s euphemistic description of hunger; 30 percent of Black children are hungry; 25 percent of Black women are without health insurance; 65 percent of all new AIDS diagnoses are among Black women. In larger cities, Black women are as likely to be evicted as Black men are to be imprisoned: in Milwaukee, though Black women are 9 percent of the population, they account for 30 percent of all evictions.¹⁸ The cascading effects of racism and poverty are unrelenting in the lives of working-class and poor African Americans.

Poverty is but a single factor in making sense of the ever-widening wealth gap between African Americans and whites. Over the last twenty-five years, the disparity in household wealth has tripled; today, white median wealth (as opposed to income) is \$91,405, compared to \$6,446 for African American households.¹⁹

If there were a single indicator to measure the status of Black women in the United States, it would be the difference in median wealth for single Black women compared to single white women. A 2010 study found that the median wealth of single white women was \$42,600 compared to the surreal median of \$5 for single Black women.²⁰ The historic crash of the American housing market in 2008 destroyed much of African Americans’ wealth holdings. At the height of the mortgage lending boom in the mid-2000s, almost half of the loans given to African Americans were subprime. Today, according to the Center for Responsible Lending, almost 25 percent of Black families who purchased homes during this period are at risk of losing their homes as a result.²¹ As has been widely reported, the crisis effectively destroyed tens of billions of dollars of Black wealth invested in real estate, as more than 240,000 African Americans lost their homes.²² In Detroit, for example, a city that once boasted one of the highest Black homeownership rates in the country, more than one-third of Black families who borrowed between 2004 and 2008 have lost their homes to foreclosure.²³ The loans were “ticking time bombs” that eventually detonated, causing Black homeowners’ already meager accumulated wealth to evaporate into thin air.²⁴

Barack Obama became president right at a time when Black people needed help the most, yet he has done precious little. In fact, when he ran again in 2012, he reassured the nation (or at least white voters), “I’m not the president of Black America. I’m the president of the United States of America.”²⁵ It’s not only that Obama is reluctant to offer or support a Black agenda: he has also played a

destructive role in legitimizing the “culture of poverty” discourse discussed above. At a time when the entire Western world was pointing to corrupt practices on Wall Street and illicit gambling in global financial markets as the causes of the global slump, there was Obama blaming Black fathers, “Cousin Pookie,” families’ eating habits, ESPN’s *SportsCenter*, and Black parents not reading to their children at night for the absence of secure work and stable home lives in Black communities.²⁶

“Hands Up, Don’t Shoot”

The killing of Mike Brown, along with an ever-growing list of other unarmed Black people, drove holes in the logic that Black people simply doing the “right things,” whatever those things might be, could overcome the perennial crises within Black America. After all, Mike Brown was only walking down the street. Eric Garner was standing on the corner. Rekia Boyd was in a park with friends. Trayvon Martin was walking with a bag of Skittles and a can of iced tea. Sean Bell was leaving a bachelor party, anticipating his marriage the following day. Amadou Diallo was getting off from work. Their deaths, and the killings of so many others like them, prove that sometimes simply being Black can make you a suspect—or get you killed. Especially when the police are involved, looking Black is more likely to get you killed than any other factor. In Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014, people’s exhaustion, sadness, frustration, and anger at the dehumanizing trauma inflicted by racism finally boiled over. But the outpouring of support and solidarity that followed was not only about Ferguson. The tens of thousands of people who poured into the streets over the summer, into the fall, and during the deep chill of winter were drawing from the deep wells of exhaustion among African Americans who have grown weary of the endless eulogizing of Black people—young and old, men and women, transgender, queer, and straight—killed by the police.

The explosion in Ferguson and the nationwide protests have deepened the political crisis, shattered the “postracial” proclamations, and inspired others to rise up against a worsening epidemic of police harassment, brutality, corruption, and murder that threatens to snatch the lives and personhood of untold numbers of African Americans in every city and suburb. But the sense of political crisis can be measured by the degree of attention it garners from elected officials scrambling to try and rescue the legitimacy of law-enforcement agencies and the rule of law itself. While many predicted the intervention of the Reverend Al Sharpton, Attorney General Eric Holder’s appearance was unexpected. Holder traveled to Ferguson to announce that federal officials would ensure a fair investigation. Elected officials tweeted that they were attending Brown’s funeral;

President Obama was forced to make public statements acknowledging what he described as “mistrust” between “the community” and the police.²⁷

The specter of crisis was also bolstered by cops’ simple inability to stop killing Black people. Just prior to Brown’s murder, forty-six-year-old Eric Garner of Staten Island, New York, unarmed and minding his own business, was approached by police and then choked to death as he gasped eleven times, “I can’t breathe.” Two days after Brown was killed, Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers shot and killed another young Black man, Ezell Ford. Months later, autopsy reports would confirm that Ford was shot multiple times, including once in the back, while he lay on the ground.²⁸ In a suburb of Dayton, Ohio, police shot to death John Crawford III, twenty-two years old and African American, while he was talking on his cell phone and holding an air gun on sale in the aisle of a Walmart. And as the nation waited to hear whether a grand jury would indict officer Darren Wilson for Brown’s death, Cleveland police killed thirty-seven-year-old, African American Tanisha Anderson when they slammed her to the ground, remaining on top of her until her body went limp.²⁹ The following week, police in Cleveland struck again, murdering a twelve-year-old boy, Tamir Rice, less than two seconds after arriving at the playground where Rice was playing alone. Making matters worse, the two Cleveland police stood by idly, refusing aid, while Tamir bled to death. When his fourteen-year-old sister attempted to help him, police wrestled her to the ground.³⁰ An earlier audit of the Cleveland Police Department (CPD) described the department as essentially lawless. It found that officers routinely “use unnecessary and unreasonable force in violation of the Constitution” and that “supervisors tolerate this behavior and, in some cases, endorse it.” The report showed a “pattern or practice of using unreasonable force in violation of the Fourth Amendment,” including the “unnecessary and excessive use of deadly force” and “excessive force against persons who are mentally ill or in crisis.”³¹

We know the names of these people because of the nascent movement now insisting that Black lives matter. In the short span of a year, the impact of the movement is undeniable. It can be measured by some localities forcing police to wear body cameras or the firing of a handful of police for violence and brutality that was previously considered unremarkable. It can be measured by the arrest for murder of small numbers of police officers who would previously have gone unpunished. Perhaps most telling, it can be measured in the shifting discourse about crime, policing, and race.

After spending the better part of his presidency chastising African Americans for their own hardships, post-Ferguson, Obama has shifted gears to focus on what he termed the “criminal injustice system” in a speech on crime and

punishment. In the summer of 2015, President Obama appeared at the national convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to deliver a sweeping speech on reforming the criminal justice system. The president highlighted the racial disparities that lead to vastly different punishments for Blacks, whites, and Latino/as, called for restoring voting rights to the formerly incarcerated, and argued that the \$80 billion spent annually to maintain the nation's prisons could cover the cost of college tuition in every public college and university in the country. This transformation in Obama's rhetoric is welcome, but none of it would be possible without the rebellions in Ferguson and Baltimore or the dogged movement building that has happened in between. In other words, the radical movement of ordinary Black people has forced the federal government and its leader, the most powerful political figure in the world, to account for the war against Black life. The challenge, of course, will be going from recognizing Black humanity to changing the institutions responsible for its degradation.

The Future of Black Politics

The most significant transformation in all of Black life over the last fifty years has been the emergence of a Black elite, bolstered by the Black political class, that has been responsible for administering cuts and managing meager budgets on the backs of Black constituents. Today, a layer of Black "civil rights entrepreneurs" have become prominent boosters and overseers of the forces of privatization, claiming that the private sector is better suited to distribute public services than the public sector. This juncture between public and private is where Black incompetence fades to the background and government malfeasance comes to the fore as an excuse for privatization. Today there are many African American administrators who advocate for greater privatization of public resources in education, housing, and healthcare. Redevelopment programs often promise to include ordinary Blacks instead of pushing them out of urban communities—but when those promises fall through, Black officials are just as eager as white officials to invoke racist stereotypes to cover their own incompetence, from claims about cultural inferiority to broken families to Black criminality. There is growing polarization between the Black political and economic elite and those whom historian Martha Biondi and others have referred to as experiencing a social condition of "disposability." Biondi describes this condition as "encompass[ing] not only structural unemployment and the school-to-prison pipeline, but also high rates of shooting deaths as weaponry meets hopelessness in the day-to-day struggle for manhood and survival. Disposability also manifests in our larger society's apparent acceptance of high rates of

premature death of young African Americans and Latinos.”³²

These relatively new tensions between the Black working class and the Black political elite raise new questions about the current movement to stop police abuse and, more fundamentally, about the future of the Black freedom struggle, which side various actors will be on, and what actual Black liberation would look like. More importantly, what is the relationship between the movement as it exists today and the ongoing and historic struggle?

Today’s movement has similarities with the struggles of the 1960s but does not replicate them. The questions raised by the civil rights movement seemed to have been answered—but under closer inspection, those rights many thought had been won have come under withering attack. Audits of the nation’s police departments reveal that police largely operate outside of the Constitution when dealing with African Americans. The right wing mobilizes stridently conservative candidates who seem to want to travel back to a time before the rights revolution of the 1960s, while the “colorblind” assault on voting rights—a very basic emblem of a supposedly free society—undermines Black voters’ access to the voting booth. An estimated 5.8 million Americans are prevented from voting because of a prior felony conviction, including more than 2 million formerly incarcerated African Americans.³³ These and other violations of the basic rights of citizenship of Black people have not been resolved.

Black Lives Matter is not simply a replay of the civil rights movement. Typically, when more than six Black people assemble in one place to make a demand, the media instantly identifies a “new civil rights movement.” But this elides the new and significantly different challenges facing the movement today—and obscures the unresolved questions of the last period. In many ways, the Black Lives Matter movement, now in its infancy, is already encountering some of the same questions that confronted the Black Power movement in the 1960s and 1970s. For example: Can the conditions created by institutional racism be transformed within the existing capitalist order? Housing, wages, and access to better jobs and education can certainly be improved, but can that be achieved on a mass level and not just for a few? Various sections of the movement believed these things could be achieved in different ways: some put their faith in electoral politics, others in Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) litigation. Still others believed the movement should fight for those reforms within the context of a larger struggle against capitalism *and* fight for a socialist redistribution of wealth and resources. The intense debate over how to achieve Black liberation was interrupted by vicious government repression combined with cooptation and accommodation from within. The resulting decline muffled these questions but did not resolve them. Deepening inequality in Black

communities—even as a Black man has ascended to the highest level of elected office in the country—is reviving these questions for a new generation of Black radicals who have come of age in a time of economic austerity and political bankruptcy.

This book explores why the movement marching under the banner of Black Lives Matter has emerged under the nation’s first Black president. Police brutality is not a new phenomenon; it has existed, in some form or other, since the abolition of slavery. Why has abusive policing created a breaking point in the age of Obama? How does this fit into a larger historical pattern of explosive Black politics and the consistent denial of Black oppression in US society?

Chapter 1 looks at the ideas of “American exceptionalism” and the “culture of poverty,” mutually reinforcing concepts used to explain the persistence of Black poverty while deflecting attention away from systemic factors rooted in the United States’ history as a settler-colonial state that came to rely on slavery as its dominant mode of production.

Chapter 2 examines the origins of “colorblindness” as an ideological tool, initially wielded by conservatives in the Nixon era to resist the growing acceptance of “institutional racism” as the central explanation for Black inequality. An important contribution of the civil rights and Black Power explosions of the era was locating the roots of Black oppression in the institutional and material history of the United States. The high point of this recognition came with the publication of the Kerner Commission report, which blamed “white racism” for segregation and Black poverty. The threat of violence and rebellion curbed conservatives’ efforts to roll back the welfare state—at least initially. Instead of mounting a frontal attack on the Black insurgency, they deployed the language and logic of colorblindness in such a way as to distinguish between intentional racism and the effects of racism wherever race was not specifically mentioned. This helped to narrow the scope of the meaning of “race” at the onset of the post-civil rights period. It also became a pretext for rolling back the gains of the 1960s: If the attainment of those rights was rooted in the acknowledgement that racism in both public and private sectors had harmed African Americans, then there was a claim for that harm to be cured. Instead, the absence of racial language in the law became a pretext for further diminishing the regulatory capacity of the state. Downplaying race meant, once again, emphasizing culture and morality as important to understanding Black progress.

Chapter 3 examines the rise of the Black political elite and the divergence of Black political interests in the post-civil rights era. I look at this development as a product of pressure from below and above—and thus one that is rife with

contradictions. Black urbanites were demanding “home rule” and an end to political domination by corrupt white political machines; at the same time there was a general recognition that Black control of Black living spaces could help cool off the hot cities. Black politicians took over bankrupt cities with weak tax bases and were put in the position of having to manage urban economic crises on the backs of their Black constituents. The unmanageability of these conditions and the absence of real solutions meant that Black elected officials were also quick to blame Black residents as a way of absolving themselves. They became reliable mouthpieces for rhetoric that blamed Black people for the conditions in Black communities. The further the movement drifted into the background, the more conservative formal Black politics became—and the more disillusioned ordinary African Americans became with “Black faces in high places.”

Chapter 4 examines the “double standard of justice” in the United States historically. Policing has always been racist and abusive, even after massive efforts to professionalize the police in the aftermath of the 1960s rebellions. These same racist practices inform policing today, but pressure to keep crime rates down in order to facilitate urban redevelopment has intensified them. Cities are increasingly two-tiered, with one tier for young, mostly white professionals and another for Black and Brown people who find their standards of living and quality of life in peril and are harassed by police along the racially segregated boundaries that outline the contours of gentrification. There are any number of conditions to protest in Black communities, but police violence has consistently sparked Black rage because it exemplifies the compromised citizenship of African Americans.

In chapter 5, I locate the roots of the current movement against police brutality in the raised expectations of the Obama campaigns, as well as Obama’s ensuing silence on the critical issues facing African Americans even as he has parroted the worst stereotypes about Black culture and irresponsibility. The political action of young Blacks is not happening in a vacuum; it is a part of the same radicalization that gave rise to the Occupy movement and coalesced around the murder of Trayvon Martin.

Chapter 6 looks at the current movement, from the protests in Ferguson to the rise of Black Lives Matter, and its role in distilling class conflict among African Americans while providing a political alternative based in protest and rearticulating Black oppression as systemic phenomenon. It then looks at the issues involved in moving from the protests that have brought about more general awareness of the crisis of police terrorism in Black communities to a deeply rooted movement capable of transforming those conditions.

Finally, in chapter 7, I examine the relationship between the movement

against police violence and the potential for a much broader anticapitalist movement that looks to transform not only the police but the entire United States.

CHAPTER FIVE

Barack Obama: The End of an Illusion

When an assault rifle is aimed at your face over nothing more than a refusal to move, you don't feel like the American experience is one that includes you. When the president your generation selected does not condemn these attacks, you suddenly begin to believe that this system is a fraudulent hoax—and the joke is on you. Racism is very much alive in America, but as a president with so much melanin in his skin, you seem to address it very bashfully.

—**Tef Poe**, “Dear Mr. President: A Letter from Tef Poe,” December 1, 2014

For more than a hundred days, a patchwork group of ordinary people-turned-activists had kept Mike Brown's name alive and held out hope that their protests would result in the indictment of Darren Wilson. Within a matter of minutes those hopes vanished into the November night, as the grand jury's decision not to indict Wilson was announced. One week later while the fires were still smoldering and the bitterness still lingered, hip-hop artist and St. Louis native Tef Poe sent an open letter to President Obama that spoke for a generation of young, Black people who had believed deeply in the promise of the president. He wrote,

I speak for a large demographic of us that has long awaited our Black president to speak in a direct tone while condemning our murders. From our perspective, the statement you made on Ferguson completely played into the racist connotations that we are violent, uneducated, welfare-recipient looters. Your remarks in support of the National Guard attacks upon us and our community devoured our dignity.¹

Yes We Can?

The hope and optimism that coursed through Black America in anticipation of Obama's victory as the first Black president in 2008 seemed a million miles

away. Even while Black people endured the effects of the 2008 economic crisis, particularly the continuation of home foreclosures and double-digit unemployment, there was optimism that Obama's election could change the course. Even before Obama was elected, there had been great optimism about what a Black presidency could mean for American racial politics. National Public Radio hosted a roundtable titled "A New, 'PostRacial' Political Era in America" several months before the 2008 election.²

President Obama turned out to be very different from candidate Obama, who had stage-managed his campaign to resemble something closer to a social movement. In the heated race for the Democratic nomination, Obama distinguished himself from establishment candidate Hillary Clinton by campaigning clearly against the war in Iraq and vowing to shut down the Guantánamo military internment camp. He spoke of economic inequality and connected with young people who were underwhelmed at the prospect of voting for yet another old, white windbag in John McCain. Black people's enthusiasm for the Obama campaign cannot be reduced to racial solidarity or recrimination. Obama electrified his audiences:

We've been asked to pause for a reality check. We've been warned against offering the people of this nation false hope. But in the unlikely story that is America, there has never been anything false about hope. For when we have faced down impossible odds, when we've been told we're not ready or that we shouldn't try or that we can't, generations of Americans have responded with a simple creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can. Yes, we can. Yes, we can.

It was a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation: Yes, we can. It was whispered by slaves and abolitionists as they blazed a trail towards freedom through the darkest of nights: Yes, we can. It was sung by immigrants as they struck out from distant shores and pioneers who pushed westward against an unforgiving wilderness: Yes, we can. It was the call of workers who organized, women who reached for the ballot, a president who chose the moon as our new frontier, and a king who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the promised land: Yes, we can, to justice and equality.

Yes, we can, to opportunity and prosperity. Yes, we can heal this nation. Yes, we can repair this world. Yes, we can.³

In March 2008 Obama finally gave a comprehensive speech on race, in which he pulled off the feat of addressing the concerns of African Americans while calming the fears of white voters. That he broached the topic at all meant his speech was wildly misinterpreted by liberals and the mainstream media alike as further left of center than it actually was. For example, David Corn, writing for *Mother Jones*, described Obama's speech as "trying to show the nation a pathway to a society free of racial gridlock and denial. . . . Obama was not playing the race card. He was shooting the moon."⁴ Obama had been pressured for weeks to rebuke his pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who had

delivered a sermon titled “God Damn America,” referring to the wrong the United States had committed in the world. Obama’s political enemies had unearthed the sermon and tried to attribute Wright’s ideas to Obama. Obama used his platform in Philadelphia to distance himself from Wright, whom he described as “divisive” and with a “profoundly distorted view of this country.” He went on to contextualize Wright’s angry comments and condemnations as based on his coming of age in a United States where

legalized discrimination—where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African-American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions or the police force or the fire department—meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations.⁵

No one running for president of the United States had ever spoken so directly about the history of racism in government and society at large. Yet Obama’s speech also counseled that a more perfect United States required African Americans “taking full responsibility for our own lives . . . by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny.” Obama couched his comments in the language of American progress and the vitality of the American dream, but the speech was remarkable nonetheless in the theater of American politics, where cowardice and empty rhetoric are the typical fare. In that sense Obama broke the mold, but he also established the terms upon which he would engage race matters—with dubious evenhandedness, even in response to events that required decisive action on behalf of the racially aggrieved. He spoke quite eloquently about the nation’s “original sin” and “dark history,” but has repeatedly failed to connect the sins of the past to the crimes of the present, where racism—albeit often without epithet or insult—thrives when police stop-and-frisk, when subprime loans are reserved for Black buyers, when public schools are denied resources, and when double-digit unemployment has become so normal that it barely registers a ripple of recognition. A healthy cynicism runs especially deep among young African Americans: In 2006, 52 percent of Black youth (ages eighteen to twenty-five) described the US government as “unresponsive” to Black needs, while 61 percent said they had experienced discrimination when looking for work and 54 percent believed that Black youth receive a “poorer education” than white youth.⁶

Before Ferguson, Obama’s Philadelphia speech was as close as he had ever come to speaking truthfully about racism in the United States, even though he

presented himself as an interested observer, a thoughtful interlocutor between African Americans and the nation as a whole, rather than a US senator with the political influence to effect the changes of which he spoke. Obama would continue in his role as “informed observer” even as president. We are led to believe that a man who can direct drone strikes in the mountains of Pakistan and Afghanistan, who can mobilize resources to any corner of the world in the name of American foreign policy, is powerless to champion legislation and the enforcement of existing laws and rights in the interest of racial justice.

In the context of the 2008 election, eight years after the Republicans stole the White House by disenfranchising Black voters in Florida and three years after Hurricane Katrina, Obama’s reluctant candor on race matters felt like a sea change. Political scientist Cathy Cohen identified Hurricane Katrina as a radicalizing event in the lives of Black youth, similar to the impact of the Rodney King beating on the previous generation.⁷ The federal government’s absence in New Orleans as thousands of Black people drowned dramatically pierced its post-9/11 declarations of national unity in the face of terrorism. While the American government had moved heaven and earth to rain war across the Middle East against an “axis of evil,” its shocking indifference to Black suffering inside the United States was a stark reminder of how little had actually changed. As actor Danny Glover so poignantly said, “When the hurricane struck the Gulf and the floodwaters rose and tore through New Orleans, plunging its remaining population into a carnival of misery, it did not turn the region into a Third World country, as it has been disparagingly implied in the media; it revealed one. It revealed the disaster within the disaster; grueling poverty rose to the surface like a bruise to our skin.”⁸

Shortly after Katrina struck, tens of thousands of mostly Black college students marched in the small town of Jena, Louisiana, to protest a racist attack on Black high school students there. Their activism did not mark the beginning of a movement, but they uncovered the persistence of racial inequality. Since September 11, wars and occupation had foreclosed the space for protest or even for articulating inequality, but Katrina exposed to the world that the United States was still the same old racist empire. Jena helped to revive a tradition of marching and protesting that had been decidedly muted. As Cohen argues, “For many in black communities, mobilization around the Jena Six reignited the hope that black politics—as it is often imagined and conceptualized: that is extrasystemic, collective, movement politics—is still alive among the younger generation of black Americans.”⁹

Generation O

The themes of “hope” and “change” tapped into optimism that the future could be different and better. Hip-hop artist Young Jeezy lyricized, “Obama for mankind, we ready for damn change so y’all let the man shine!” Khari Mosely, a Democratic Party ward chair in Pittsburgh, described Obama’s effect on the “so-called ‘lost’ generation of inner-city youth . . . young guys with the oversized baseball caps, low-hanging pants and colorful sneakers . . . who, through him, have rediscovered a sense of purpose in themselves and of faith in this nation.”¹⁰ Jay-Z linked Obama’s run to a longer narrative of Black struggle: “Rosa sat so Martin could walk; Martin walked so Obama could run; Obama is running so we all can fly!”¹¹ Rap mogul Sean Combs said, “I’m not trying to be dramatic, but I just felt like, Martin Luther King, and I felt the whole civil rights movement, I felt all that energy, and I felt my kids. It was all there at one time. It was a joyous moment.”¹²

Black voters’ enthusiasm for Obama was spelled out in the election returns. An unprecedented number, across all ages and genders, voted to put Obama in the White House. There were two million more Black voters in 2008 than in 2004.¹³ Overall, 64 percent of eligible Black voters voted in the 2008 presidential election, including 68 percent of eligible African American women voters, produced the highest turnout in a presidential election since 1968.¹⁴ But it was young Black voters who put Obama over the top. According to the Pew Research Center, the Black youth vote created the highest turnout among young voters from any ethnic group in US election history. Black millennials had the highest voter turnout “in the nation’s history.”¹⁵ “I feel happy and optimistic when I see Barack and Michelle. They give me hope, and the kids I teach hope, for something better,” said one woman.¹⁶ By 2012, for the first time ever, the percentage of Black voter turnout eclipsed that of white voter turnout in a presidential election, 66 percent compared to 64 percent.

The excitement about Obama turned into postelection euphoria. That was certainly the feeling in Chicago on election night, when a cross-section of the city converged in Grant Park to hear the country’s first Black president-elect address the nation. It was a rare, almost strange scene to see a multiracial crowd gathered in Chicago, one of the most segregated cities in the United States. That was the power of Obama’s calls for hope and change. On the eve of President Obama’s inauguration, 69 percent of Black respondents told CNN pollsters that Martin Luther King’s vision had been “fulfilled.”¹⁷ In early 2011, asked whether they expected their children’s standard of living to be better or worse than their own, 60 percent of Blacks chose “better,” compared with only 36 percent of whites.¹⁸ This was not just blind hope: it was the expectation that things would, in fact, be better. One researcher described the broader context: “Certainly, the

Obama presidency has fueled euphoria in black circles. But even before Obama came on the scene, optimism was building—most notably among a new generation of black achievers who refused to believe they would be stymied by the bigotry that bedeviled their parents. Obama’s election was, in effect, the final revelation—the long awaited sign that a new American age had arrived.”¹⁹ “Now we have a sense of future,” said Yale sociologist Elijah Anderson. “All of a sudden you have a stake. That stake is extremely important. If you have a stake, now there’s risk—you realize the consequences of compromising an unknowable future.”²⁰ Almost 75 percent of African Americans in the South said that Obama would help America rid itself of racial prejudice.²¹ *Forbes* ran an enthusiastic editorial opinion in December 2008 titled “Racism in America Is Over.”²²

Shots Ring Out

In the first hours of the new year, just weeks before Obama was to be inaugurated as the next president, shots rang out. It was a reminder that, as bright as the future seemed, the past was never far behind. An armed transit officer named Johannes Mehserle shot an unarmed twenty-two-year-old Black man who lay face down in handcuffs on a public transportation platform. His name was Oscar Grant. Dozens of witnesses, many of whom were returning to Oakland after New Year’s Eve celebrations, watched in horror as Grant was murdered in cold blood. His murder was captured on several smartphone video cameras. Black Oakland exploded in palpable anger, with hundreds, then thousands of people taking to the streets, demanding justice.

Perhaps this outcry would have happened under any circumstance, but the brutality of Grant’s murder in the few weeks before the nation’s first Black president was to take office felt like a shock of cold water. Police brutality and even murder had been a long fact of life in Oakland, California. But the United States was supposed to have entered into a postracial parallel universe. A local movement, led by Grant’s family and friends, unfolded across the Bay Area to demand that prosecutors charge and try Mehserle. Protests, marches, campus activism, public forums, and organizing meetings sustained enough pressure to force local officials to charge Mehserle with murder. It was the first murder trial of a California police officer for a “line-of-duty” killing in fifteen years. In the end, Mehserle spent less than a year in prison, but the local movement foreshadowed events to come.

Obama’s surprising electoral victory was beginning to lose its luster in the twilight of his first term. Obama has and will always poll high among African Americans, but that should not be mistaken for blind support for him or the

policies he champions. As long as members of the Republican Party treat Obama in a brazenly racist manner, Black people will defend him because they understand that those attacks against Obama serve as a proxy for attacks on them. Early in his administration, however, with the full effects of the recession still pulsing in Black communities, conflict between the Black president and his base could be detected. Black America was in the midst of an “economic free fall” and with it the disappearance of Black wealth. As Black unemployment was climbing into the high double digits, civil rights leaders asked Obama if he would craft policies to address Black joblessness. He responded, “I have a special responsibility to look out for the interests of every American. That’s my job as president of the United States. And I wake up every morning trying to promote the kinds of policies that are going to make the biggest difference for the most number of people so that they can live out their American dream.”²³ It was a disappointing response, even if that disappointment did not manifest in his approval ratings. In 2011, with Black unemployment above 13 percent, 86 percent of Blacks approved of the overall job the president was doing, but 56 percent expressed disappointment in the “area of providing proper oversight for Wall Street and the big banks.”²⁴ Only half of Blacks said Obama’s policies had improved the nation’s economic condition. For African Americans, Obama’s presidency had been largely defined by his reluctance to engage with and directly address the ways that racial discrimination was blunting the impact of his administration’s recovery efforts.

Obama has not shown nearly the same reticence when publicly chastising African Americans for a range of behaviors that read like a handbook on anti-Black stereotypes, from parenting skills and dietary choices to sexual mores and television-watching habits. These public admonishments work to close off the political space within which African Americans can express legitimate grievances about an economic recovery that has offered material relief to bankers and auto executives but only moral uplift to Black people. Their cries for relief have been met with quips that Obama is “not the president of Black America.” Vann Newkirk, a self-described member of “Generation O,” spoke for many when he wrote, “The Great Recession left us saddled with debt, deprived of savings, overeducated and underemployed, and deeply dissatisfied with the dissonance between American ethos and reality. Even now, in the midst of a recovery, we make up 40 percent of all unemployed individuals, still have a double-digit unemployment rate, and struggle with savings and debt.”²⁵

There is something disingenuous in focusing on poor and working-class Blacks without any discussion about the ways that the criminal justice system has “disappeared” Black parents from the lives of their children. When Obama

talks about absentee Black fathers, he never mentions the disparity in arrests and sentencing that is responsible for the disproportionate number of missing Black men. Few media discussions about Obama's candidacy mentioned curbing the nation's criminal justice system's voracious appetite for Black bodies, but the scars of "law and order" were all over the Black body politic: a million African Americans incarcerated; 10 percent of the Black formerly incarcerated prevented from voting; and one in four of Black men (in the age group twenty to twenty-nine) are under control of the criminal justice system. "Postracial" America was disappearing under an avalanche of disparities throughout the criminal justice system.

Over the course his first term, Obama paid no special attention to the mounting issues involving law enforcement and imprisonment, even as Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* described the horrors that mass incarceration and corruption throughout the legal system had inflicted on Black families. None of this began with Obama, but it would be naive to think that African Americans were not considering the destructive impact of policing and incarceration when they turned out in droves to elect him. His unwillingness to address the effects of structural inequality eroded younger African Americans' confidence in the transformative capacity of his presidency. As Newkirk put it:

The jubilation that I felt: the jumping for joy; the tears. They were not just my own but those of people who'd marched before me. The experience was spiritual.

But that idealism soon eroded. What we didn't expect was the false dream of blind post-race would supplant and masquerade as the dream of postracism. . . . The alternating currents of willful ignorance of racial issues and virulent racist responses to the president frustrated many black millennials, especially those indoctrinated on Obama's progressive ideal of hope. We were left struggling to find a way to voice our concerns when the momentum of the campaign ended.²⁶

The American Spring

There was one moment when Black America collectively came to terms with Barack Obama's refusal to use his position as president to intervene on behalf of African Americans. Troy Davis was a Black man on death row in the state of Georgia. It was widely believed that he had been wrongfully convicted, and in the fall of 2011 he was facing execution for a crime he had not committed. Davis's cries of innocence were not a voice in the wilderness: for years he and his sister, Martina Davis-Corriea, had joined with anti-death-penalty activists to fight for his life and exoneration. By September 2011, an international campaign was under way to have him removed from death row. The protests grew larger and more frantic as the death date crept closer. There were protests around the world; support from global dignitaries rolled in as the international movement to

stop Davis's execution took shape. The European Union and the governments of France and Germany implored the United States to halt his execution, as did Amnesty International and former FBI director William Sessions. A Democrat in the Georgia Senate, Vincent Fort, called on those charged with carrying out the execution to refuse: "We call on the members of the Injection Team: Strike! Do not follow your orders! Do not start the flow of the lethal injection chemicals. If you refuse to participate, you make it that much harder for this immoral execution to be carried out."²⁷ As Davis's execution drew near on the evening of September 20, people from around the world waited for Obama to say or do something—but, in the end, he did nothing. He never even made a statement, instead sending press secretary Jay Carney to deliver a statement on his behalf, which simply noted that it was not "appropriate" for the president to intervene in a state-led prosecution. In the end, the Black president succumbed to states' rights.²⁸ One Black observer captured the disappointment: "President Obama gives opinions on everything that's safe and what he thinks America wants to hear, but he straddles the fence on issues important to African Americans."²⁹ It was a moment of awakening for Generation O—and of newfound understanding of the limits of Black presidential power, not because Obama could not intervene, as his handlers insisted, but because he refused to do so. Johnetta Elzie, one of the best known of the Ferguson activists, told a reporter that Davis's execution "hurt me . . . that was the first time I'd ever been hurt by something happening to a stranger."³⁰

The Troy Davis protests were certainly not in vain. The day after the state of Georgia murdered Davis, Amnesty International and the Campaign to End the Death Penalty called for a "Day of Outrage" in protest. More than a thousand people marched, eventually making their way to a small encampment on Wall Street that was calling itself "Occupy Wall Street." The Occupy encampment had begun a week or so before Davis was killed, but it was in its fledgling stages. When the Troy Davis activists converged with the Occupy activists, the protestors made an immediate connection between Occupy's mobilization against inequality and the injustice in the execution of a working-class Black man. After the march, many who had been activated by the protests for Davis stayed and became a part of the Occupy encampment on Wall Street. Thereafter, a popular chant on the Occupy marches was "We are all Troy Davis."³¹

Protests to save the life of death-row inmate Troy Davis and the electrifying Occupy Wall Street protests in 2011 seemed to signify the beginning of the "American Spring." Obama's refusal to intervene for Davis and the Republican victories in the 2010 midterm elections signaled that the progressive window many activists believed had been opened by the 2008 electoral victories had now

slammed shut. The protest movement lost and Davis was executed.

The Occupy movement, by contrast, would develop into the most important political expression of the US class divide in more than a generation. The slogan “We are the 99 percent” and the movement’s articulation of the divide between the “1 percent” and the rest of us offered a materialist, structural understanding of American inequality. In a country that regularly denies the existence of class or economic inequality, this was a critical step toward making sense of the limited reach of the American dream. Occupy’s close proximity to the protests for Troy Davis highlighted the entanglement of racial and economic inequality. Support for Occupy was higher among Blacks than among the general population, with 45 percent expressing a “positive” view of Occupy and another 35 percent saying the movement had been good for the American “political system.”³² Despite the movement’s difficulties in coherently expressing the relationship between economic and racial inequality, its focus on government’s bailouts for private enterprise while millions of ordinary people bore the weight of unemployment, foreclosures, and evictions addressed some of the most important issues affecting African Americans. It was hard to ignore that Black homeowners had been left to fend for themselves.

The media seized on descriptions of Occupy as “white,” which diminished hard-fought and sometimes successful efforts to bring more African Americans into the movement. The Occupy movement was mostly white, overall, and at one point various currents within it debated whether or not the police should be considered a part of the “99 percent.” However, the movement varied from city to city. In some cities there were very few Blacks, Latino/as, and other people of color involved, but Oakland activists named their encampment after Oscar Grant, and Atlanta activists named theirs after Troy Davis. Occupy Wall Street in New York had a “people of color working group” whose entire purpose was to organize around antiracist issues with the intent of drawing more Blacks and other people of color into the movement. Occupy Chicago organized teachins called “Racism in Chicago,” “Our Enemies in Blue,” and “Evictions and Foreclosures.”

Most significantly, Black Occupy activists organized “Occupy the Hood,” whose goal was to raise the profile of the Occupy movement in communities of color across the country and widen the range of people involved. Some “Occupy the Hood” organizers had also been involved in organizing against “stop-and-frisk.” Thus, not only did Occupy popularize economic and class inequality in the United States by demonstrating against corporate greed, fraud, and corruption throughout the finance industry, it also helped to make connections between those issues and racism. The public discussion over economic

inequality rendered incoherent both Democratic and Republican politicians' insistence on locating Black poverty in Black culture. While it obviously did not bury the arguments for culture and "personal responsibility," Occupy helped to create the space for alternative explanations within mainstream politics, including seeing Black poverty and inequality as products of the system. The vicious attack and crackdown on the unarmed and peaceful Occupy encampments over the winter and into 2012 also provided a lesson about policing in the United States: the police were servants of the political establishment and the ruling elite. Not only were they racist, they were also shock troops for the status quo and bodyguards for the 1 percent.

From Trayvon to the Future

The murder of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, in the winter of 2012 was a turning point. Like the murder of Emmett Till nearly fifty-seven years earlier, Martin's death pierced the delusion that the United States was postracial. Till was the young boy who, on his summer vacation in Mississippi in 1955, was lynched by white men for an imagined racial transgression. Till's murder showed the world the racist brutality pulsing in the heart of the "world's greatest democracy." To emphasize the point, his mother, Mamie, opted for an open-casket funeral to show the world how her son had been mutilated and murdered in the "land of the free." Martin's crime was walking home in a hoodie, talking on the phone and minding his own business. George Zimmerman, now a well-known menace but then portrayed as an aspiring security guard, racially profiled Martin, telling the 911 operator, "This guy looks like he's up to no good, or he's on drugs or something."³³ The "guy" was a seventeen-year-old boy walking home from a convenience store. Zimmerman followed the boy, confronted him, and eventually shot him in the chest, killing him shortly thereafter. When the police came, they accepted Zimmerman's account. Martin was Black and the default assumption was that he was the aggressor—so they treated him as such. They tagged him as a "John Doe" and made no effort to find out if he lived in the neighborhood or was missing. But the story began to trickle through the news media and, as more details became public, it was clear that Martin had been the victim of an extrajudicial killing. Trayvon Martin had been lynched.

Within weeks, marches, demonstrations, and protests bubbled up across the country. The demand was simple: arrest George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin. The anger was fueled, in part at least, by the overwhelming double standard: if Martin had been white and Zimmerman Black, Zimmerman would have faced immediate arrest, if not worse. Instead, the case showed the deadly consequences of racial profiling and of the alternating fear and disgust of

Black boys and men that allowed the police to try to sweep the matter under the rug. The protests were national, as they had been for Troy Davis, but they were much more widespread. This was the impact of Occupy, which had relegitimized street protests, occupations, and direct action in general. Many of the Occupy activists who had been dispersed by police repression the previous winter found a new home in the growing fight for justice for Martin. Protests in Florida and New York City reached into the thousands, with smaller protests in cities across the country.

The legal inaction around Martin's murder on the local, state, and federal levels demonstrated the racist hysteria that prevailed throughout American society. Martin was not a suspect because he had actually done anything suspicious; he was just Black. For weeks, President Obama deflected questions, commenting only that it was a local case. It took more than a month for Obama to finally speak publicly about the case, famously saying, "If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon. . . . When I think about this boy, I think about my own kids." But he also said, "I think every parent in America should be able to understand why it is absolutely imperative that we investigate every aspect of this, and that everybody pulls together—federal, state and local—to figure out exactly how this tragedy happened."³⁴

Obama could not come out and say the obvious, but the fact that he spoke at all was evidence of the growing momentum of the street protests that had been building for weeks. Martin's murder was a national and international embarrassment. Black people may have understood that Obama could not lead a social movement against police brutality as the president, but how could he not use his seat to amplify Black pain and anger? Though everyone applauded his personal touch, Obama was signaling that the federal government would stay out of the "local" matter. But it was exactly for moments like these that Black people had put Obama in the White House. "We had hope riding—we got Barack Obama elected and got him reelected, but this is still happening. That's kind of like saying, you knew the system hated you, and now, whatever speculation you had about it, even though Barack's in office, you have to check yourself," said poet Frankiem Nicoli.³⁵

It is impossible to know or predict when a particular moment is transformed into a movement. Forty-five days after George Zimmerman murdered Trayvon Martin in cold blood, he was finally arrested. It was the outcome of weeks of protests, marches, and demonstrations, many of which had been organized through social media, beyond the conservatizing control of establishment civil rights organizations. Parents, families, and friends of others killed by police, like Alan Blueford, Ramarley Graham, James Rivera, Danroy "DJ" Henry, and Rekia

Boyd, fought alongside local activists to bring attention to the murders of their children and loved ones.

I wrote that summer of the gathering tension over unpunished killings by police:

If the police continue to kill Black men and women with impunity, the kind of urban rebellions that shook American society in the 1960s are a distinct possibility. This isn't the 1960s, but the 21st century—and with a Black president and a Black attorney general serving in Washington, people surely expect more. Meanwhile, in a matter of a few days in late July, near-riots broke out in Southern California and Dallas after police, growing more brazen in their disregard for Black and brown life, executed young men in broad daylight, out in the open for all to see. . . . There's a growing feeling of being fed up with the vicious racism and brutality of cops across the country and the pervasive silence that shrouds it—and people are beginning to rise against it.³⁶

In the summer of 2013, more than a year after his arrest, George Zimmerman was found not guilty of the murder of Trayvon Martin. His exoneration crystallized the burden of Black people: even in death, Martin would be vilified as a “thug” and an aggressor, Zimmerman portrayed as his victim. The judge even instructed both parties that the phrase “racial profiling” could not be mentioned in the courtroom, let alone used to explain why Zimmerman had targeted Martin.³⁷

President Obama addressed the nation, saying, “I know this case has elicited strong passions. And in the wake of the verdict, I know those passions may be running even higher. But we are a nation of laws, and a jury has spoken. We should ask ourselves, as individuals and as a society, how we can prevent future tragedies like this. As citizens, that's a job for all of us.”³⁸ What does it mean to be a “nation of laws” when the law is applied inequitably? There is a dual system of criminal justice—one for African Americans and one for whites. The result is the discriminatory disparities in punishment that run throughout all aspects of American jurisprudence. George Zimmerman benefited from this dual system: he was allowed to walk free for weeks before protests pressured officials into arresting him. He was not subjected to drug tests, though Trayvon Martin's dead body had been. This double standard undermined public proclamations that the United States is a nation built around the rule of law. Obama's call for quiet, individual soul-searching was a way of saying that he had no answers.

For Generation O, this response illustrated the limits of Black political power. FM Supreme, a young Black hip-hop and spoken-word artist from Chicago, described the meaning of Zimmerman's exoneration:

When they announced it, it felt like a movie. . . . I just was like, man, this is fucked up. Are you kidding me? I wasn't really surprised, but I wasn't prepared for that. Overall, the decision that was made reinforces that the United States of America has no value for the life of Black people. . . . How they demonized Trayvon Martin, how they were prodding his dead body to see if he had drugs in his

system—they don't value us. They didn't check to see if George Zimmerman had drugs in his system. . . . We gotta move. We've got to take action. Specifically, we've got to holler at Stand Your Ground. We need to address racism in America. We need to hit them economically. And so we have to come up with a strategy. We need to recall Emmett Till and how after his death, there was Rosa Parks and the bus boycotts.³⁹

Almost two years after Zimmerman was acquitted, the DOJ quietly announced it would file no federal charges against him. Martin's mother, Sybrina Fulton, said, "What we want is accountability, we want somebody to be arrested, we want somebody to go to jail, of course."⁴⁰

The acquittal did not spell the end of the movement; it showed all the reasons it needed to grow.⁴¹ Out of despair over the verdict, community organizer Alicia Garza posted a simple hashtag on Facebook: "#blacklivesmatter." It was a powerful rejoinder that spoke directly to the dehumanization and criminalization that made Martin seem suspicious in the first place and allowed the police to make no effort to find out to whom this boy belonged. It was a response to the oppression, inequality, and discrimination that devalue Black life every day. It was everything, in three simple words.⁴² Garza would go on, with fellow activists Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, to transform the slogan into an organization with the same name: #BlackLivesMatter. In a widely read essay on the meaning of the slogan and the hopes for their new organization, Garza described #BlackLivesMatter as "an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression."⁴³

Zimmerman's acquittal also inspired the formation of the important Black Youth Project 100 (BYP 100), centered in Chicago. Charlene Carruthers, its national coordinator, said of the verdict, "I don't believe the pain was a result, necessarily, of shock because Zimmerman was found not guilty . . . but of yet another example . . . of an injustice being validated by the state—something that black people were used to."⁴⁴ In Florida, the scene of the crime, Umi Selah (formerly known as Phillip Agnew) and friends formed the Dream Defenders; for thirty-one days they occupied the office of Florida governor Rick Scott in protest of the verdict. Selah said, "I saw George Zimmerman celebrating, and I remember just feeling a huge, huge, huge . . . collapse. . . . I'll never forget that moment . . . because we didn't even expect that verdict to come down that night, and definitely didn't expect for it to be not guilty."⁴⁵ Selah quit his job as a pharmaceutical salesman to organize full time.⁴⁶

No one knew who would be the next Trayvon, but the increasing use of smartphone recording devices and social media seemed to quicken the pace at

which incidents of police brutality became public. These tools being in the hands of ordinary citizens meant that families of victims were no longer dependent on the mainstream media's interest: they could take their case straight to the public. Meanwhile, the formation of organizations dedicated to fighting racism through mass mobilizations, street demonstrations, and other direct actions was evidence of a newly developing Black left that could vie for leadership against more established—and more tactically and politically conservative—forces. The Black political establishment, led by President Barack Obama, had shown over and over again that it was not capable of the most basic task: keeping Black children alive. The young people would have to do it themselves.

CHAPTER SIX

Black Lives Matter: A Movement, Not a Moment

What happened to my daughter was unjust. It was unjust. It was really unjust. I've been through all the range of emotions that I can go through, concerning this. But I will not stop, as all of the rest of the mothers have said, until I get some answers.

—**Cassandra Johnson**, mother of Tanisha Anderson, killed by Cleveland police in 2014

Every movement needs a catalyst, an event that captures people's experiences and draws them out from their isolation into a collective force with the power to transform social conditions. Few could have predicted that white police officer Darren Wilson shooting Mike Brown would ignite a rebellion in a small, largely unknown Missouri suburb called Ferguson. For reasons that may never be clear, Brown's death was a breaking point for the African Americans of Ferguson—but also for hundreds of thousands of Black people across the United States. Perhaps it was the inhumanity of the police leaving Brown's body to fester in the hot summer sun for four and a half hours after killing him, keeping his parents away at gunpoint and with dogs. "We was treated like we wasn't parents, you know?" Mike Brown Sr., said. "That's what I didn't understand. They sicced dogs on us. They wouldn't let us identify his body. They pulled guns on us."¹ Maybe it was the military hardware the police brandished when protests against Brown's death arose. With tanks and machine guns and a never-ending supply of tear gas, rubber bullets, and swinging batons, the Ferguson police department declared war on Black residents and anyone who stood in solidarity with them.

Since then, hundreds more protests have erupted. As the United States celebrates various fiftieth anniversaries of the Black freedom struggles of the 1960s, the truth about the racism and brutality of the police has broken through the veil of segregation that has shrouded it from public view. There have been periodic ruptures in the domestic quietude that is so often misinterpreted as the

docility of American democracy: the brutal beating of Rodney King, the sodomy of Abner Louima, the execution of Amadou Diallo. These beatings and murders did not lead to a national movement, but they were not forgotten. As Ferguson protestor Zakiya Jemmott said, “My first protest was in 1999, when Amadou Diallo was murdered by police. I haven’t seen any changes and have not changed my perception of police officers.”²

It is impossible to answer, and perhaps futile to ask, the question “why Ferguson?” just as it’s impossible ever to accurately calculate when “enough is enough.” The transformation of Mike Brown’s murder from a police killing into a lynching certainly tipped the scales. Writer Charles Pierce captured what many felt: “Dictators leave bodies in the street. Petty local satraps leave bodies in the street. Warlords leave bodies in the street. Those are the places where they leave bodies in the street, as object lessons, or to make a point, or because there isn’t the money to take the bodies away and bury them, or because nobody gives a damn whether they are there or not.”³ In the hours after Brown’s body was finally moved, residents erected a makeshift memorial of teddy bears and memorabilia on the spot where police had left his body. When the police arrived with a canine unit, one officer let a dog urinate on the memorial. Later, when Brown’s mother, Lesley McSpadden, laid out rose petals in the form of his initials, a police cruiser whizzed by, crushing the memorial and scattering the flowers.⁴ The next evening, McSpadden and other friends and family went back to the memorial site and laid down a dozen roses. Again, a police cruiser came through and destroyed the flowers.⁵ Later that night, the uprising began.

The police response to the uprising was intended to repress and punish the population, who had dared to defy their authority. It is difficult to interpret in any other way their injudicious use of tear gas, rubber bullets, and persistent threats of violence against an unarmed, civilian population. The Ferguson police, a 95 percent white and male force, obscured their badges to hide their identities, wore wristbands proclaiming “I AM DARREN WILSON,” and pointed live weapons at unarmed civilians engaged in legal demonstrations. The municipality resembled a rogue state, creating arbitrary rules governing public protests and assaulting the media, as both an act of revenge and an attempt to hide the sheer brutality of its operation. In the twelve days following Brown’s death, 172 people were arrested, 132 of whom were charged only with “failure to disperse.” At one point during the demonstrations, a Ferguson officer pointed his AR-15 semiautomatic rifle in the direction of a group of journalists and screamed, “I’m going to fucking kill you!” When someone asked, “What’s your name, sir?” He screamed, “Go fuck yourself!”⁶ For a moment, the brutal realities of Black life in Ferguson were exposed for all to see.

Black protestors went on to unmask the kleptocracy at the heart of municipal operations in Ferguson, revealing that the Ferguson police department, directed by the mayor and city council, were targeting the Black population as the major source of revenue for the town (see chapter 4). Black households were inundated with fines, fees, citations, tickets, and arrests to such an extent that the revenues were the town's second leading source of revenue. Court fines deriving from motor-vehicle violations were 21 percent of revenue, accounting for "the equivalent of more than 81 percent of police salaries before overtime."⁷ Failure to pay or appear in court to respond to tickets instantly produced an arrest warrant. Emails between city administrators openly called for more. In March 2013, the finance director wrote to the city manager, "Court fees are anticipated to rise about 7.5%. I did ask the Chief if he thought the PD [police department] could deliver 10%. He indicated he could try."⁸ By December 2014, the department had 16,000 outstanding arrest warrants, mostly for minor offenses.⁹ Ninety-five percent of traffic stops were directed at Black drivers. As the DOJ report said, "Ferguson law enforcement practices are directly shaped and perpetuated by racial bias."¹⁰ Black people in Ferguson were living under the near complete domination of the police.

Indeed, as the daily protests went on, the Ferguson police's escalating brutality and lawlessness seemed to arise out of frustration that they could not make the Black men and women of Ferguson submit. Quentin Baker, a nineteen-year-old from St. Louis, observed that "all of these things happen after the police provoke it. What they want to do is impose their will."¹¹ Just as residents rebuilt the memorials for Mike Brown within hours every time the police tried to destroy them, the same dynamic held for the protests. Every night the police used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the crowd; the next day, the crowds would reemerge. Ferguson activist Johnetta Elzie described how the protestors were changing even in the face of "unthinkable" police violence:

I became less of a peaceful protester and more of an active one. Using my voice to chant loudly along with other protesters seemed to be enough but it wasn't. Instead, I decided to yell directly at the police. I decided to dare the police to look at the faces of the babies and children their dogs were so ready to chase down. As more people began to look directly at the police and yell their grievances, the more aggravated they became.¹²

Protestor Dontey Carter said, "I've been down here since the first day. . . . We all had the same pain and anger about this. We all came together that day. . . . They're killing us, and it's not right."¹³

Carter's words addressed the urgency of a summer that had turned into a killing season. Just weeks before Mike Brown was shot, the world had watched video of New York City cop Daniel Pantaleo choking the life out of Eric Garner.

Four days before Brown was killed, the police struck in a suburb of Dayton, Ohio. John Crawford III, a twenty-two-year-old, unarmed African American man, was killed in the aisle of a Walmart while he talked on the phone with the mother of his children. Crawford had been holding a toy gun. Even though Ohio is an “open carry” state where citizens are allowed to carry unconcealed guns, local police opened fire on Crawford with little to no warning, killing him.¹⁴ Two days after Brown’s murder, police in Los Angeles shot unarmed Ezell Ford three times in the back as he lay face down on the sidewalk. The following day, elsewhere in California, Dante Parker, a thirty-six-year-old African American man, was detained by police and tasered multiple times before dying in police custody.¹⁵ The Ferguson rebellion became a focal point for the growing anger in Black communities across the country.

For almost the entire fall, the Ferguson movement focused on winning an indictment of Darren Wilson. Prosecutors worked to drag out the grand jury proceedings as long as possible, believing that colder weather would edge the movement off the streets. Undoubtedly, given the level of repression, the intensity of the August protests was not sustainable over time. But when that level of intensity waned, the *persistence* of the protests kept the movement alive. Activists and others from around the country were also important in helping sustain the local movement. In late August 2014, Darnell Moore and Patrisse Cullors of #BlackLivesMatter organized a “freedom ride” to bring people from all around the country to the suburb in solidarity with the local movement. Moore described the breadth of the mobilization:

More than 500 people traveled from across the United States and Canada to provide various forms of support to the activists on the ground in Ferguson. Those who traveled with us represented a new and diverse contingent of black activists. We weren’t all the same age, nor did we share the same political viewpoints. We weren’t all heterosexual or documented or free from past involvement with the criminal justice system. Some of us were transgender, disabled or bisexual.¹⁶

Local activists held vigils, picketed the Ferguson police department, and blocked traffic on Interstate 70, which runs through Ferguson, in a dogged effort to maintain pressure on local officials to indict Wilson. Continued police harassment was also critical to sustaining the movement. In late September, Mike Brown’s memorial was doused with gasoline and ignited. The flames revitalized the protests: more than two hundred people gathered in an angry protest that saw five people arrested.¹⁷

When local officials began to speculate that the grand jury decision would be made public in October, local activism picked up. A multiracial protest erupted in the solidarity song “Which Side Are You On?” during a performance of the St. Louis Symphony. When the protestors marched out, chanting “Black lives

matter,” many in the audience—including symphony musicians—applauded. On October 8, an off-duty St. Louis police officer fired at Black teenager Vonderrit Myers seventeen times, hitting him with eight bullets and killing him. Days after Myers’s death, two hundred students marched from Myers’s neighborhood, called Shaw, to join hundreds more students in an occupation of St. Louis University (SLU). For several days more than a thousand students occupied the campus, harkening back to the days of the Occupy movement.¹⁸ The occupation of SLU coincided with Ferguson October, in which hundreds of people traveled to Ferguson—in solidarity with the local movement, but also to register their own protest. As protestor Richard Wallace from Chicago put it, “Everybody here is representing a family member or someone that’s been hurt, murdered, killed, arrested, deported.”¹⁹ Ferguson officials continued to stall in announcing Wilson’s fate, but the resilience of the Ferguson movement was inspiring people far beyond the Midwest. Historian Donna Murch wrote,

I have no words to express what is happening in Ferguson. In the name of Michael Brown, a beautiful black storm against state violence is brewing so dense it has created a gravity of its own, drawing in people from all over the U.S., from centers of wealth and privilege to this city whose most prosperous years were a century ago. It looks explicitly not only to St. Louis city and county police and other municipal law enforcement, but also to the imperial wars in the Middle East as sites of murder and trauma. The call repeated over and over is Stokely Carmichael’s: “Organize, Organize, Organize.” And this growing youth movement has all the ancestral sweetness of kinship. In the words of a local hip-hop artist/activist, “Our grandparents would be proud of us.”²⁰

Changing of the Guard

A battle over the meaning of Ferguson between activists, civil rights leaders, elected officials, and federal agents was under way. For the activists and Black people of Ferguson, the point of the struggle was to win justice for Mike Brown, which meant keeping the protests alive. Winning an indictment against Wilson would vindicate their strategy and tactics, which often came into noisy conflict with establishment figures who made repeated calls for “calm” and often seemed more intent on criticizing the people in the streets than the conditions that compelled them to act in the first place.

The civil rights establishment, members of Congress, and federal agents were on hand for a variety of reasons. Members of the CBC appeared most concerned with increasing the voter rolls through registration campaigns and trying to transform the anger in the streets into a midterm-election turnout that would favor the Democratic Party. The civil rights establishment had overlapping and competing goals. The NAACP, whose reputation had been in decline, was looking to rehabilitate its image by trying to lead and direct events in Ferguson.

Jesse Jackson Sr., as a leading figure in civil rights lore, had been politically adrift and marginalized because he was not in the orbit of the Obama White House. He had been supplanted by the Reverend Al Sharpton as the new national face of the civil rights establishment. For years, families had called upon Sharpton to bring attention and resources to their children's murder by the police. Sharpton could and did provide both—and enhanced his reputation as a conduit into the Black community. He arrived in Ferguson shortly after Mike Brown's death. Barely a week after Sharpton's arrival came the DOJ, led by former attorney general Eric Holder. Sharpton and Holder worked in tandem to reestablish the legitimacy of “law and order” and of the federal government as a respectable arbiter in local situations that could not otherwise be resolved.

But by the time Sharpton arrived in Ferguson, it was too late. Young Black people had already endured two standoffs with police that had ended with tear gas and rubber bullets. People were furious. These bullying tactics had transformed the marches into much more than a struggle for Mike Brown. The battle in the Ferguson streets was also fueled by the deep grievances of the town's young people, whose future was being stolen by the never-ending cycle of fines, fees, warrants, and arrests. They were fighting for their right to be on the street and to be freed from the vice grip of the Ferguson police. They had experienced their own collective power and were drawing strength from outlasting the police. They were losing their fear. And they were not about to stand down or move aside to accommodate Sharpton's arrival as the spokesperson for a local movement already firmly in place.

The conflict was almost immediate. Sharpton convened a meeting the day he arrived. His first speech blamed protestors for the violence that had been the central theme of the mainstream media. He told the group, “I know you are angry. . . . I know this is outrageous. When I saw that picture [of Brown lifeless on the ground], it rose up in me in outrage. But we cannot be more outraged than his mom and dad. If they can hold their heads in dignity, then we can hold our heads up in dignity.” He added, “To become violent in Michael Brown's name is to betray the gentle giant that he was. Don't be a traitor to Michael Brown.”²¹

Even though Sharpton had just arrived in town, he was describing Mike Brown's character and personality to his friends and peers. It was condescending and presumptuous. Sharpton's words also lent legitimacy to Ferguson officials' accounts, which blamed violence on protestors even as police blatantly violated their rights to assemble. But Sharpton's plan transcended events in Ferguson: if he could quell the fires of Ferguson, his political value would increase exponentially. This was an important case for the Obama administration, given the growing national focus on police brutality. Holder's presence in Ferguson

confirmed this. When the protests continued despite Sharpton's arrival, he amplified his criticism of "violent" protestors by trying to draw a sharp line between them and "peaceful" demonstrators.

As Sharpton delivered the eulogy at Brown's funeral, he reserved his harshest words for the young Black protestors who had stood up to police violence and provocations. Brown's parents, he said,

had to break their mourning to ask folks to stop looting and rioting. . . . You imagine they are heartbroken—their son taken, discarded and marginalized. And they have to stop mourning to get you to control your anger, like you are more angry than they are. . . . Blackness was never about being a gangster or a thug. Blackness was no matter how low we was pushed down, we rose up anyhow. . . . Blackness was never surrendering our pursuit of excellence. It was when it was against the law to go to some schools, we built black colleges. . . . We never gave up. . . . Now, in the 21st century, we get to where we got some positions of power. And you decide it ain't black no more to be successful. Now you want to be a nigger and call your woman a ho. You've lost where you've come from. We've got to clean up our community so we can clean up the United States of America.²²

In one fell swoop, Sharpton not only condemned the young people of Ferguson but invoked stereotypes to do so. It confirmed a sense among the new activists that Sharpton and those like him were out of step. There was a lingering, if unspoken question: What gave Sharpton or Jackson or the NAACP or the Justice Department the authority to tell protestors how they should respond to the violence of the Ferguson police? What, really, did any of them know about the daily harassment local residents experienced? What had any of these officials ever done to stop police murder and brutality?

A New Civil Rights Movement?

The young people of Ferguson had great reverence and respect for the memory of the civil rights movement, but the reality is that its legacy meant little in their everyday lives. "I feel in my heart that they failed us," Dontey Carter said of contemporary civil rights leaders. "They're the reason things are like this now. They don't represent us. That's why we're here for a new movement. And we have some warriors out here."²³ When Jesse Jackson Sr. arrived in Ferguson, he was confronted by a local activist, who said, "When you going to stop selling us out, Jesse? We don't *want* you here in St. Louis!"²⁴ Other activists did not go that far, but they did note that young Black people had been thrust into leadership on the ground in Ferguson because they were the ones under attack. Johnetta Elzie recognized that: "The youth leading this movement is important because it is our time. For so long the elders have told us our generation doesn't fight for anything, or that we don't care about what goes on in the world. We have proved them wrong."²⁵

This division between the “old guard” and the “new generation” grew deeper as the movement began to take form. During a “Ferguson October” forum, tensions threatened to boil over when the organizers asked representatives of the civil rights establishment who had not been on the streets or at any of the daily protests to discuss the state of the movement. As NAACP president Cornell William Brooks gave a speech, several young people in the audience stood and turned their backs. Hip-hop artist Tef Poe informed the gathering, “This ain’t your grandparents’ civil rights movement.” He described the real movement as being made up of the young men in the streets with bandanas and young women who were supposed to be in school but were on the front lines instead. He said to the NAACP and the others assembled on the stage, “Y’all did not show up. . . . Get off your ass and join us!”²⁶

Part of Sharpton’s appeal for the political establishment has been his ability to keep protests narrowly fixed on the specifics of a given case, or at least on the narrow issue of “police accountability.” But the deepening conflict between the young activists and the establishment was exacerbated as Ferguson officials dragged out the decision of whether or not to indict Wilson. For the young people, this meant escalating the pressure, while the “old guard” continued to counsel patience and allowing the process to play out. But there were other tensions. The young activists were beginning to politically generalize from the multiple cases of police brutality and develop a systemic analysis of policing. Many began to articulate a much broader critique that situated policing within a matrix of racism and inequality in the United States and beyond. Millennials United in Action activist Ashley Yates recognized that

the youth knew something very early in that the older generation didn’t. We knew that the system had already failed even before they began to show their hand publicly. We knew that not only was the murder of Mike Brown unjustified, it was another example of how the systems in place made it acceptable to gun us down. We are the generation that was ignited by Trayvon Martin’s murder and placed our faith in a justice system that failed us in a very public and intentional manner.²⁷

Elzie also observed, “Thanks to Twitter, I had been able to see photos of Gaza weeks before, and feel connected to the people there on an emotional level. I never thought the small county of Ferguson, this little part of Greater St. Louis, would become Gaza.”²⁸

There was truth to the generational divide, as there often is when a new generation of activists emerges and is not weighed down by earlier defeats or habituated to a particular method of organizing or thinking. They bring new ideas, new perspectives, and often, new vitality to the patterns and rhythms of activism. In general, as the movement has developed, there has been an impulse by some activists to celebrate the youth and denigrate age and experience.

Generational tensions do not mean that movements and organizing in general cannot be multigenerational. Civil rights icon Ella Baker was significantly older and more experienced than the young activists she worked alongside in forming the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), yet she commanded tremendous respect because of the respect she had for the young people she organized with. In a well-known essay that described some of her conceptions of organizing and leadership during the sit-in movement in 1960, she wrote

[The] desire for supportive cooperation from adult leaders and the adult community was . . . tempered by apprehension that adults might try to “capture” the student movement. The students showed willingness to be met on the basis of equality, but were intolerant of anything that smacked of manipulation or domination. This inclination toward *group-centered leadership*, rather than toward a *leader-centered group pattern of organization*, was refreshing indeed to those of the older group who bear the scars of the battle, the frustrations and the disillusionment that come when the prophetic leader turns out to have heavy feet of clay.²⁹

Despite the constant clamor of “generational divide” today, there is much fluidity between the youth and older African Americans, who are often the parents of the young people being killed by the police. Where the generational divide expressed itself most forcefully today is over the developing politics of the movement. The tactical and strategic flexibility of the youth activists flowed from a developing politics that could not be constrained by a narrow agenda of voter registration or a simple electoral strategy. In Ferguson, these emerging politics were embodied by the emergence of young Black women as a central organizing force.

Black Women Matter

Most murders of Black people at the hands of the state go unnoticed by the public and unreported by the mainstream media. The few cases—compared to the significantly larger number of people killed—that do come into the public spotlight often involve Black men or boys. This was certainly true in Ferguson and Baltimore. This is not entirely surprising since, when police shoot to kill, they are usually taking aim at African American men. But Black women who are partnered with, have children with, or parent Black men and boys also suffer the effects of violence against them. The erasure of this particular way that Black women experience police violence minimizes the depth and extent of the harm caused by the abusive policing state. Black men falling under the control of the criminal justice system has a deleterious impact on their families and neighborhoods. Ex-convict status increases rates of poverty and unemployment, and the formerly incarcerated are banned from access to federal programs intended to blunt the worst effects of poverty, including housing vouchers,

student loans, and other forms of financial aid. These policies affect not only Black men but also Black women who have Black men in their lives.

Black women, however, are also the victims of the policing state, including police violence and imprisonment. While Trayvon Martin became a household name, most people are not familiar with the case of Marissa Alexander, a Black woman who was a victim of domestic violence. After using a firearm to keep her abuser at bay, Alexander invoked Florida's "stand your ground" statute as a defense. Although George Zimmerman, who killed Martin, succeeded in using this defense, Alexander was sentenced to twenty years in prison. Even though Alexander would eventually be released from jail, the contrast was a stark reminder of the dual system of justice in the United States.

The police also kill Black women. The names of Rekia Boyd, Shelly Frey, Miriam Carey, and Alberta Spruill are less familiar than those of Mike Brown or Eric Garner, but their killings were motivated by the same dehumanizing factors. Police also view Black women's lives with suspicion and ultimately as less valuable, making their death and brutalization more likely, not less. It is hardly even newsworthy when Black women, including Black transwomen, are killed or violated by law enforcement—because they are generally seen as less feminine or vulnerable. Consider the case of Tulsa, Oklahoma, police officer Daniel Holtzclaw, who was convicted of raping thirteen Black women while on duty. Holtzclaw is believed to have targeted Black women because they were of "lower social status," meaning that they were less likely to be believed and fewer people would care.³⁰ Indeed, Holtzclaw's crimes barely made a ripple in the national news.

Even though Black women have always been susceptible to violence from the police and the criminal justice system, where organizing and struggle have emerged, they have, for the most part, had a male face. For cases that develop a national profile, a male lawyer or reverend or civil rights leader—such as Al Sharpton—is usually the most visible face. Of course, mothers and other women in the lives of the (typically male) victims are heard from, but the activism has been seen as male-led and organized—until Ferguson.

In fact, the media have been particularly cognizant of the "women of Ferguson" as central to turning "a string of protests into a movement, by seamlessly shifting between the roles of peace-keepers, disrupters, organizers and leaders."³¹ Indeed, the women who played an indispensable role in keeping the Ferguson movement together through the summer until the early winter were also aware of their role. As Brittney Ferrell points out,

The media has left out that if it were not for Black women, there would be no movement. We have seriously carried this to where it is now, not to say there are no men out here doing their thing

because there are. What I am saying is that women have been here since day one, we are willing to lay our lives on the line to keep up the good fight without the support from anyone or any organization, hence why we built our own.³²

To ask why Black women have played such a central role in this movement is to assume that they have played a lesser role in other movements. It should go without saying that Black women have always played an integral role in the various iterations of the Black freedom struggle. Whether it was Ida B. Wells, who risked her life to expose the widespread use of lynching in the South, or the mothers of the wrongfully accused Scottsboro Boys, who toured the world to build the campaign to free their sons, Black women have been central to every significant campaign for Black rights and freedom. Black women, including Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Diane Nash, and countless and unknown others, were critical to the development of the civil rights movement, but that movement is still primarily known by its male leaders.

Today, though, the face of the Black Lives Matter movement is largely queer and female. How has this come to be? Female leadership may actually have been an outcome of the deeply racist policing Black men have experienced in Ferguson. According to the US Census Bureau, while there are 1,182 African American women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four living in Ferguson, there are only 577 African American men in this age group. More than 40 percent of Black men in both the 20–24 and 35–54 age groups in Ferguson are missing.³³

It's not just Ferguson. Across the United States, 1.5 million Black men are “missing”—snatched from society by imprisonment or premature death. To put it starkly, “More than one out of every six Black men who today should be between 25 and 54 years old have disappeared from daily life.”³⁴ This does not mean that, if the 40 percent of Black men missing from Ferguson were present, they would be playing the same role that women have played in building, organizing, and sustaining the movement, but it does provide a concrete example of the impact of the hyperaggressive, revenue-generating approach to policing in Ferguson. It is more likely that these women have stepped into leadership roles because of the absolutely devastating impact of policing and police violence in Black people's lives in general. But whatever the reasons, their presence has contributed more than just gender balance.

The Black women leading the movement against police brutality have worked to expand our understanding of the broad impact of police violence in Black communities. Sometimes this is articulated through the straightforward demand that society as a whole recognize that the police victimize Black women. “The media is excluding the fact that the police brutality and harassment in our

communities impacts the women just as much as the men,” says Zakiya Jemmott, adding, “They’re highlighting black male lives and pushing the black female lives lost to police violence to the side. I want for the media to understand that *all* black lives matter.”³⁵ But Black women have also made a much more deliberate intervention to expose police brutality as part of a much larger system of oppression in the lives of all Black working-class and poor people. Charlene Carruthers of Black Youth Project 100 explains,

It’s important because we are really serious about creating freedom and justice for all black people, but all too often black women and girls, black LGBTQ folks, are left on the sidelines. And if we’re going to be serious about liberation we have to include all black people. It’s really that simple. And it’s been my experience that issues of gender justice and LGBT justice have been either secondary or not recognized at all.³⁶

The Black women who created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter—Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza—articulate most clearly the overlapping oppressions confronting Black people in the struggle to end police violence and win justice. In an essay that captures the expansive nature of Black oppression while arguing that the movement cannot be reduced only to police brutality, Alicia Garza writes,

It is an acknowledgment Black poverty and genocide is state violence. It is an acknowledgment that 1 million Black people are locked in cages in this country—one half of all people in prisons or jails—is an act of state violence. It is an acknowledgment that Black women continue to bear the burden of a relentless assault on our children and our families and that assault is an act of state violence. Black queer and trans folks bearing a unique burden in a hetero-patriarchal society that disposes of us like garbage and simultaneously fetishizes us and profits off of us is state violence; the fact that 500,000 Black people in the US are undocumented immigrants and relegated to the shadows is state violence; the fact that Black girls are used as negotiating chips during times of conflict and war is state violence; Black folks living with disabilities and different abilities bear the burden of state-sponsored Darwinian experiments that attempt to squeeze us into boxes of normality defined by White supremacy is state violence.³⁷

The focus on “state violence” strategically pivots away from a conventional analysis that would reduce racism to the intentions and actions of the individuals involved. The declaration of “state violence” legitimizes the corollary demand for “state action.” It demands more than the removal of a particular officer or the admonishment of a particular police department, but calls attention to the systemic forces that allow the individuals to act with impunity. Moreover, these organizers are “intersectional” in their approach to organizing—in other words, they start from the basic recognition that the oppression of African Americans is multidimensional and must be fought on different fronts. The analytic reach of these organizers is what really underlies the tension between the “new guard”

and the “old guard.” In some ways, it demonstrates that today’s activists are grappling with questions similar to those Black radicals confronted in the Black Power era, questions bound up with the systemic nature of Black oppression in American capitalism and how that shapes the approach to organizing.

Placing police brutality into a wider web of inequality has largely been missing from the more narrowly crafted agendas of the liberal establishment organizations, like Sharpton’s National Action Network (NAN), which have focused more on resolving the details of particular cases than on generalizing about the systemic nature of police violence. This has meant that mainstream civil rights organizations tend to focus on legalistic approaches to resolve police brutality, compared to activists who connect police oppression to other social crises in Black communities. Of course, that approach has not been fully supplanted; a significant focus of the Ferguson movement was voter registration and increasing the presence of African Americans in local governing bodies. But the movement in Ferguson has also validated those who embraced a much wider view by showing how the policing of African Americans is directly tied to the higher levels of poverty and unemployment in Black communities through the web of fees and fines and arrest warrants trapping Black people in a never-ending cycle of debt. The gravity of the crisis confronting Black communities, often stemming from these harmful encounters with the police, legitimizes the need for a more encompassing analysis. It allows people to generalize from police violence to the ways that public funding for police comes at the expense of other public institutions, and creates the space to then ask why. Not only do the “new guard’s” politics stand in sharp contrast to those of the “old guard” but so does their approach to organizing. Beyond being led by women, the new guard is decentralized and is largely organizing the movement through social media. This is very different from national organizations like the NAACP, NAN, or even Jackson’s Operation PUSH, whose mostly male leaders make decisions with little input or direction from people on the ground. This strategy is not simply the product of male leadership, but of an older model that privileged leveraging connections and relationships within the establishment over street activism—or using street protests to gain leverage within the establishment. The newness of the Ferguson movement and the incipient movement against police violence have temporarily prevented that kind of political shortcut.

From Moment to Movement

On November 24, 2014, a grand jury in Ferguson decided not to indict Darren Wilson for the murder of Mike Brown. Angry protests ripped through the suburb in the dead of night when the decision was announced. Rows of riot police

protected City Hall and the police department while the commercial section of Black Ferguson was allowed to burn. There was little surprise about the decision not to indict, but there was anger at the completion of a legal lynching. President Obama returned to the airwaves to counsel patience and respect for the law. He reminded his audience that “we are a nation built on the rule of law,” a concept rendered hollow and meaningless by months of witnessing the lawlessness of the Ferguson police department.³⁸ Obama implored protestors to channel their concerns “constructively” and not “destructively,” but the split screens of several networks showed the president’s words were falling on deaf ears as fires burned through the night in Ferguson. This was not, however, a revival of the previous August, when the fires were igniting a new movement against police brutality; these were the flames of resignation and exhaustion.

As happened so often in 2014, at the moment when it appeared that the momentum of activism had swung back in the other direction, there was a new death at the hands of the police, like kindling on a fire. Two days before the Wilson decision was announced, young Tamir Rice, only twelve, was shot and killed by police in a playground in Cleveland, Ohio. Rice had been playing with a toy gun. Police shot and killed the boy within two seconds of their arrival—so quickly that the police car had not even stopped. Nine days earlier, Tanisha Anderson, also of Cleveland, had been killed when an officer performed a “judo” move to take her to the ground and in the process slammed her head into the concrete.³⁹ Days later, a Staten Island grand jury returned a decision not to indict Daniel Pantaleo, the officer who choked Eric Garner to death. Where the Ferguson decision seemed like an endpoint to the months-long struggle for justice there, these deaths and the Garner decision opened up an entirely new chapter. The continuation of the protests, however, was fraught with the tensions of going from “moment to movement.”⁴⁰

Obama quickly organized a meeting of some of the more visible activists from Ferguson and around the country to discuss police violence. James Hayes from the Ohio Student Union was one of the participants. “We appreciate that the president wanted to meet with us, but now he must deliver with meaningful policy,” Hayes reported. “We are calling on everyone who believes that Black lives matter to continue taking to the streets until we get real change for our communities.”⁴¹ That such a meeting ever convened was proof alone that this was no longer just about Ferguson. The nation’s political establishment was concerned about containing the movement.

This was no ordinary meeting; it included the president and vice president of the United States as well as the attorney general. But just as they were attempting to get in front of the anger over Ferguson, two days later the decision

not to indict Pantaleo produced even larger protests than those that had greeted the Wilson decision. Tens of thousands of people across the United States clogged the streets in disgust, if not rage, over the refusal to punish another white police officer for the death of an unarmed Black man. In Garner's case, the evidence was incontrovertible. Hundreds of thousands of people had watched the video of him pleading for his life and repeating, eleven times, "I can't breathe" while Pantaleo squeezed the life out of his body. Yet the grand jury found no fault. In the aftermath of the Garner decision Obama shelved the talk about "a nation of laws" and announced the formation of a new task force charged with creating "specific recommendations about how we strengthen the relationship between law enforcement and communities of color and minority communities that feel that bias is taking place."⁴²

Activists were not waiting. As waves of protests washed across the United States, the first national protests against police brutality were called for the following week: one in New York City and one in Washington, DC. The march in New York was organized on Facebook by activists, the Washington march by Sharpton's NAN. The emergence of the national movement was immediately confronted by the reemergence of the political tensions that had surfaced in Ferguson. Sharpton had intended to stage-manage the entire affair, featuring himself as keynote speaker. Activists from Ferguson had traveled to Washington, but were dismayed to see the stage filled with people who had no organic connection to the movement. In fact, security guards were demanding VIP badges to gain access to the stage, where the opening rally of the march would commence. Johnetta Elzie was infuriated: "When we first got there, two people from NAN told us that we needed a VIP pass or a press pass to sit on the ledge," she said. "If it is a protest, why do you need to have a VIP pass?"⁴³ When Sharpton finally made his way to the stage, he ripped the Ferguson activists, who were demanding to address the crowd, as "provocateurs." The breach between Sharpton and the Ferguson-hardened activists was not simply about stage passes or other perceived slights, however. One young organizer named Charles Wade observed, "I think part of it is people just don't connect with his leadership. . . . We've been excluded by the traditional groups, so we've started our own thing."⁴⁴ Both marches were wildly successful, bringing tens of thousands of people onto the streets and giving the movement its first profile as a national phenomenon, but the different paths forward were becoming clearer.

Days after the march, Sharpton wrote an article that revealed as much about the tremendous pressure he was under as it did his extremely vague view of how the movement would "reform [the] system":

10 or 25 years from now, it won't matter who got the most publicity or the most applause at a rally.

. . . Let us not give in to pettiness and emotion, for true change is at our doorstep. You could see on the faces of those marching and chanting on Saturday, and you can see it in Washington as our elected officials are taking steps to reform a system that has failed far too many for too long. . . . You can literally feel it in the air—permanent change is on the horizon. Now we must seize it, and this moment, as we record history together.⁴⁵

It was a far cry from his arrogant saunter into Ferguson. But Sharpton's mentions of "publicity" and "applause" showed that these were things that were on his mind. His vision of "big change" did not look like much: the two "major" reforms he named were body cameras for police and independent prosecutors to investigate police misconduct.

The smallness of his demands perfectly distilled the difference between the "old guard" and the growing youth rebellion. He made no mention of racism, mass incarceration, or any of the broader issues for which younger activists were arguing much more aggressively. Jesse Jackson also weighed in on this question: "To go from protesting to power, you need demonstrations, legislation and litigation. . . . Sprinters burn out real fast. These young people need to be in it for the long run. And it must be an intergenerational coalition. A movement that's mature requires clergy and lawyers and legislators. The struggle is never a one-string guitar."⁴⁶ Jackson was certainly less offensive than Sharpton, but his comments reflected a different conception of what the movement should focus on and look like. Moreover, it perpetuated the assumption that the new organizers were against "old people," which has never been demonstrated to be true. As Alicia Garza clarified in an interview, "We learned by making mistakes and from our elders who are brave enough to share with us all that they've learned. I think it's about having courageous conversations about the world we want to build and how we think we can get there, and calling people out when we see things that are problematic."⁴⁷ Jackson's coalition of "clergy, lawyers and litigators" has failed miserably over the last forty years. Counseling the youth to pick up the tools of a failed strategy only served to reinforce the perception that the old guard was out of touch and out of its element. Sharpton's frustration at the questioning of his leadership and his role as the conduit to Black America eventually boiled over. Weeks after the December marches, Sharpton compared the "new guard" to "pimps" and to the people following them as "hoes." He went on:

And while they got y'all arguing about old or young in Ferguson, they running an election and y'all ain't got a candidate in the race. Cause you're busy arguing with your mommy and daddy when they re-electing a mayor, and re-electing a prosecutor. They got you arguing about who going to lead a march—the old or the young—when they cutting up the city budget. You can't be that stupid! . . . It's the disconnect that is the strategy to break the movement. And they play on your ego. "Oh, you young and hip, you're full of fire. You're the new face." All the stuff that they know will titillate

your ears. That's what a pimp says to a ho.⁴⁸

Sharpton's stunning rant confirmed all of the concerns about his continuing role as the self-anointed leader of Black America.

In the days after the big December protests, Ferguson Action, the central body of the various activist formations located in and inspired by Ferguson, released a statement that included some of the activists who had been barred from speaking in Washington. It was titled "About This Movement" and, in its breadth and optimism, it made Sharpton's tantrum seem even pettier:

This is a movement of and for ALL Black lives—women, men, transgender and queer. We are made up of both youth AND elders aligned through the possibilities that new tactics and fresh strategies offer our movement. Some of us are new to this work, but many of us have been organizing for years. We came together in Mike Brown's name, but our roots are also in the flooded streets of New Orleans and the bloodied BART stations of Oakland. We are connected online and in the streets. We are decentralized, but coordinated. Most importantly, we are organized. Yet we are likely not respectable negroes. We stand beside each other, not in front of one another. We do not cast any one of ours to the side in order to gain proximity to perceived power. Because this is the only way we will win. We can't breathe. And we won't stop until Freedom.⁴⁹

Black Lives Matter

In December and January, "Black Lives Matter" was the rallying cry from every corner. A week after the Garner decision, several hundred congressional aides, most of them Black, walked off the job in protest.⁵⁰ Black professional athletes wore T-shirts adorned with the slogan "I Can't Breathe." Soon after, high school and college students began wearing the shirts as well. Thousands of college, high school, and even middle school students began organizing and participating in die-ins, walkouts, marches, and other forms of public protest.⁵¹ At Princeton University, more than four hundred students and faculty participated in a die-in. The protest included mostly African American students, but a number of white, Latino/a, and Asian students participated in the direct action. Students at Stanford blocked the San Mateo Bridge across San Francisco Bay. Students at seventy medical schools organized die-ins under the slogan "White Coats for Black Lives."⁵² Public defenders and other lawyers organized their own actions, including die-ins.⁵³ Protests were sweeping the nation and politicians raced to keep up. Presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton, who had never publicly mentioned Mike Brown's name, was forced to say "Black Lives Matter" when she spoke in New York three days after the march.⁵⁴

Even Obama began to change his tune. When talking about young African Americans, he was speaking less about morality and "instead focused on African American concerns about unfair treatment and called them part of the American

family—which makes it awfully hard to single them out as the problem child in need of some tough love.”⁵⁵ Garza of #BlackLivesMatter spoke to the significance of the actions: “What’s happening right now is that a movement is growing. We are building relationships and connections, exercising new forms of leadership, new tactics, and learning lessons from our elders—people like Bayard Rustin, Diane Nash, Linda Burnham, Assata Shakur and Angela Davis—who have been part of social movements before us.”⁵⁶

With the momentum clearly on the side of the movement, its leaders now had to articulate a way forward. Sharpton and the establishment had provided a convenient foil against which to contrast their politics, strategies, and tactics. It was easy to focus on the differences, but how did the new organizers, like those who penned the Ferguson Action document, envision the movement forging ahead? In the aftermath of Sharpton’s meltdown and with “Black Lives Matter” absorbed into the daily banter of African Americans, they now had the country’s attention. The sharp contrast between the intersectional, grassroots organizing of the “new guard” and the top-down control of the civil rights establishment had helped to obscure important differences that existed *among* the new organizers. For example, some embraced building organizations like Black Youth Project 100 (BYP 100), #BLM, Dream Defenders, Million Hoodies, and Hands Up United, while others saw little need for that, instead embracing social media as the best way to organize the movement. Two of the most high-profile and influential activists in the movement, Johnetta Elzie and DeRay McKesson, were less committed to building an organization.

Ferguson Action’s statement echoed this sentiment when it described the movement as “coordinated” and “organized” but “decentralized.” In some sense, the futility of organization had been confirmed by their wild success in organizing protests and demonstrations on the fly. For months, Twitter and other social media platforms *were* successful in organizing large and influential protests. The December 13 march in New York City was organized by two relatively novice activists on Facebook; within hours thousands of people had “liked” it and committed to attending. Upward of fifty thousand people actually showed up for the rally. But how would the movement go from direct action, die-ins, highway closures, and walkouts to ending police brutality without dedicated spaces to meet, strategize, and engage in democratic decision-making? Considering the demands and “vision” that Ferguson Action put forward, everything from ending racial profiling to full employment and ending mass incarceration, it is impossible to imagine any of this happening only online.

These debates over organization resemble some of the hostility to organization that emerged in the Occupy movement from 2011. In both cases, the absence of

formal structures and formal leadership was described as “giving everyone a voice.” If there is no organization, then no one can take over control. DeRay McKesson acknowledged this when he said, “But what is different about Ferguson . . . what makes that really important, unlike previous struggle, is that—who is the spokesperson? The people. The people, in a very democratic way, became the voice of the struggle.”⁵⁷ McKesson is one of the most visible actors in the movement and his insights are influential. He elaborates:

It is not that we’re anti-organization. There are structures that have formed as a result of protest, that are really powerful. It is just that you did not need those structures to begin protest. *You* are enough to start a movement. Individual people can come together around things that they know are unjust. And they can spark change. Your body can be part of the protest; you don’t need a VIP pass to protest. And Twitter allowed that to happen. . . . I think that what we are doing is building a radical new community in struggle that did not exist before. Twitter has enabled us to create community. I think the phase we’re in is a community-building phase. Yes, we need to address policy, yes, we need to address elections; we need to do all those things. But on the heels of building a strong community.⁵⁸

Protests *are* for everyone—but how do you determine if the protest was successful or not, and how do you draw those who showed up deeper into organizing? Basically, how do you move from protest to movement? Historian Barbara Ransby speaks to this difficulty: “While some forms of resistance might be reflexive and simple—that is, when pushed too hard, most of us push back, even if we don’t have a plan or a hope of winning—organizing a movement is different. It is not organic, instinctive, or ever easy. If we think we can all ‘get free’ through individual or uncoordinated small-group resistance, we are kidding ourselves.”⁵⁹

Not everyone rejects the need for organization. The fight against police terror has produced many new organizations and networks. At a forum at the historic Riverside Church in New York City, Asha Rosa of the Black Youth Project 100 spoke passionately on the need to be not only radical but also organized:

Organizations are longer lasting than an action, longer lasting than a campaign, longer lasting than a moment. Organizations are where we can build structures that reflect our values, and build communities that help us sustain ourselves in this work and sustain the work itself. We saw 60,000 people in the streets in New York City [for the December protest]. . . . I won’t be surprised if we don’t see 60,000 people in the streets again until it’s warm, and that’s okay. . . . There are phases in these movements. We have to sustain that and make sure there are organizations for people to get plugged into.⁶⁰

From the BYP 100, Dream Defenders, Hands Up United, Ferguson Action, and Millennials United to perhaps the most well known of the new organizations, #BlackLivesMatter (#BLM), this new era has produced an important cohort of activist organizations. Thus far, #BLM has become the largest and most visible

group, with at least twenty-six chapters. #BLM describes itself as “a decentralized network aiming to build the leadership and power of black people.” Patrisse Cullors describes its members as working “within the communities where they live and work. They determine their goals and the strategies that they believe will work best to help them achieve their goals. . . . We are deliberately taking a cautious and collaborative approach at developing a national Black Lives Matter strategy because it takes time to listen, learn and build.”⁶¹ #BLM has reinvigorated the Occupy method of protest, which believes decentralized and “leaderless” actions are more democratic, essentially allowing its followers to act on what they want to do without the restraint of others weighing in. But at a time when many people are trying to find an entry point into anti-police activism and desire to be involved, this particular method of organizing can be difficult to penetrate. In some ways, this decentralized organizing can actually narrow opportunities for the democratic involvement of many in favor of the tightly knit workings of those already in the know.

These are issues #BLM will have to resolve, but as the largest and most influential organization in the movement, its example is critical and has wider implications. Organizational autonomy and decentralization raise questions of how actions will be coordinated and the concentrated weight of the entire movement brought to bear on targeted institutions. Different locations have different issues: how are local actions woven into a coherent social movement, not just a series of disparate demonstrations with no relationship to each other? If every city, organization, and individual does whatever it/she/he feels empowered to do in the name of the movement, how will we ever transform a series of effective local actions into a national movement? There have been situations where multiple groups have been able to coordinate: the #SayHerName campaign to highlight the effects of police violence on Black women stands out as a prime example. But the larger the movement grows, the more need there will be for coordination.

The Revolution Will Not Be Funded

If the success of the movement can be judged by the greater awareness it has created across the United States of police violence and brutality, it can also be measured by the amount of financial support some movement organizations have commanded. Some organizations involved in movement organizing have nonprofit status, while others do not but are still able to generate funding from influential foundations and wealthy individuals. The Black Lives Matter movement more generally has captured the attention of the nonprofit funding and philanthropy galaxy. This includes the Soros and Ford Foundations, but also

Resource Generation, described as an “organization of wealthy people under 35 who support progressive movements.”⁶² In fact, there are philanthropic networks that exist for the sake of pressuring other foundations into donating resources to various social-justice movements. When the organizations connected to the Black Lives Matter movement were convening for a summer conference, the National Committee for Responsible Philanthropy made an appeal to other funders: “A profound transformation of the social, economic and political fabric that for decades has marginalized our Black communities is possible. The Movement for Black Lives convening will be a major step in that transformation. Any foundation that is committed to achieving real equity and contributing to the dismantling of racism has an opportunity and a responsibility to participate.”⁶³ The appeal went on to thank “funders like the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, the Levi Strauss Foundation, the Barr Foundation” for making “investing in leadership development a priority.”

These facts alone do not cast aspersions on the many organizations that receive these funds. Virtually all of the leading organizations of the civil rights movement received foundation funding, including SNCC, CORE, and SCLC. The Highlander Folk School—where many civil rights activists, including Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr., were trained in civil disobedience and other protest techniques—received much of its funding from the Field Foundation. Social justice organizations rely on any number of sources to finance their important work. But while activists may only be in search of precious dollars to continue organizing, it’s doubtful that multibillion-dollar foundations are donating for purely altruistic reasons. Indeed, historian Aldon Morris recounts funders’ dubious collusion with agents of the state in a collective effort to undermine civil rights organizing:

SNCC’s financial situation improved in the summer of 1962, when it received some funds from the Taconic Foundation, the Field Foundation, and the Stern Family Fund. Those foundations worked in close conjunction with the Kennedy Administration and shared the Administration’s view that black activists should channel their energies aimed at acquiring the vote for Southern blacks. . . . Following the tumultuous Freedom Rides, the Kennedy Administration made overt attempts to funnel the efforts of all the civil rights organizations into voter registration activities rather than disruptive protest movements. Indeed, the Kennedy Administration was adamant in opposing wide-scale civil disobedience.⁶⁴

Morris goes on to quote James Farmer, a leader of SNCC, on how “the Kennedy administration attempted to ‘cool out’ the demonstrations”: “Bobby Kennedy called a meeting of CORE and SNCC, in his office . . . and he said, ‘Why don’t you guys cut out all that shit, freedom riding and sitting-in shit, and concentrate on voter education . . . if you do that I’ll get you a tax exemption.’”⁶⁵

Organizations that depend on outside funding can face problems if their funders develop political critiques of their work. “The nonprofit system is set up for foundations to have an inordinate amount of power and control over what grassroots organizations do,” cautions Umi Selah, executive director of Dream Defenders. A former employee of a major funder for progressive Black causes also points out that many donations come “with a set of rules typically about how a funder wants to see things on the ground.”⁶⁶

Some groups have taken to collecting dues from their members and taking donations from the general public as way to offset dependence on outside funders. It is very early to understand fully the role that funders and the “nonprofit-industrial complex” will have on this movement, but they are certainly a factor, one that makes fully independent movement groups all the more necessary.⁶⁷ For example, the Ford Foundation seeks to play an important role in funding movement organizations, but despite its espoused intentions, it has played a historic role in subverting movements inside and outside the United States. Arundhati Roy writes of its deleterious impact in India in her book *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*:

The Ford Foundation has a very clear, well-defined ideology and works extremely closely with the US State Department. Its project of deepening democracy and “good governance” is very much a part of the Bretton Woods scheme of standardizing business practice and promoting efficiency in the free market. . . . It is through this lens that we need to view the work that the Ford Foundation is doing with the millions of dollars it has invested in India—its funding of artists, filmmakers and activists, its generous endowment of university courses and scholarships.⁶⁸

Perhaps the largest issue with the foundations and funders is that these organizations also attempt to politically shape the direction of the organizations they fund. The Ford Foundation, like many other funders, offers grants, but also produces “white papers,” seminars, and conferences where it puts forward political perspectives and strategies aimed at directing the organizations it is funding.

Political scientist Megan Francis, describing the relationship between the NAACP and the American Fund for Public Service, also known as the Garland Fund, suggests that not only did the Garland Fund provide enormous financial resources to the NAACP in the 1950s, it also used its influence to redirect the NAACP’s organizing focus:

So why did the NAACP move from a racial-violence focused agenda to one that centered on education? In one word: money. The Garland Fund had so much sway over the NAACP’s agenda because the Garland Fund had so much to offer the cash-strapped NAACP. In the negotiation of a grant, it quickly became apparent that the NAACP’s black leadership favored a civil rights program with an explicit focus on racial violence. . . . Faced with the possibility of losing a critical funding source, the NAACP begrudgingly complied with the Garland Fund’s requests. In the coming years,

the NAACP relegated issues of racial violence to the margins and adopted a focus on education, for which it was known for the rest of the 20th century.⁶⁹

Ultimately, funders and other philanthropic organizations help to narrow the scope of organizing to changing “policy” and other measures within the existing system.

Foundation money also “professionalizes” movements in a way that promotes careerism and the expectation that activism will be externally funded. In fact, most activism is volunteer-based, with fundraising a collective effort of the participants, not the particular expertise of grant writers. The important work of many grassroots organizations in the movement has been obscured by more financially stable organizations. Much smaller, local committees have sprung up around particular cases or to make specific demands that are tied to local situations in cities across the country.

For example, in Madison, Wisconsin, the group Young, Gifted and Black has been organizing for justice for Tony Robinson, a young Black man killed by the police in the spring of 2015. In Cleveland, community activists, including clergy, academics, and the Council on American-Islamic Relations, have come together to demand the arrest of the two officers who killed Tamir Rice.⁷⁰ In Chicago, a newly formed organization called We Charge Genocide traveled to Geneva, Switzerland, to call on international officials to compel the American government to stop police murder and brutality against African Americans. In Philadelphia, through the winter of 2014 and much of 2015, a citywide group called the Philly Coalition for REAL Justice brought together as many as sixty people twice a week to organize against police brutality. The coalition has organized thousands of people over the last year.⁷¹ In Dallas, Texas, Mothers Against Police Brutality has not only helped to organize the important fight against police brutality but has actively tried to organize solidarity between the anti-police-brutality movement and the immigrant-rights movement. In the days before a May Day rally, marchers from both movements converged holding signs proclaiming “Black Lives Matter” and chanting “Down, down deportation; up, up immigration!”⁷² These types of organizing efforts, often viewed by funders as “unprofessional,” exist around the country and are an entry point for ordinary people who want to be involved in movements.

The Demands: This Is What We Want

The absence of an independent movement organization has meant that the actual demands of the movement have been muddled. Some of this arises from the difficulty of the task itself. Police violence is a part of the DNA of the United States. As I have argued earlier, there has been no golden age of policing in

which violence and racism were not central to the job. But that does not mean that nothing can be done to rein in the policing state. The Ferguson Action website has compiled the most comprehensive list of movement demands, including demilitarizing the police, passing antiracial-profiling legislation, and collecting data documenting police abuse, among other measures.⁷³ Hands Up United, based in Ferguson and St. Louis, has called for the “immediate suspension without pay of law enforcement officers that have used or approved excessive use of force.”⁷⁴ #BLM has called on the attorney general to release the names of police who have killed Black people over the last five years “so they can be brought to justice—if they haven’t already.”⁷⁵

The demands of different organizations in the movement overlap, but what is the mechanism for acting on these demands when they are disconnected from any structure coordinated through the movement? How can we pay systematic attention to the progress made in achieving these demands or determining whether or not the demands have to be recalibrated? Connecting police violence to the vast effects of institutional racism is a strength of the current movement, but there is also a danger of submerging reforms that are attainable now into a much broader struggle to transform the very nature of American society. In other words, fighting around the demand to be “free” does not clarify the steps it will take to achieve that goal.

Demanding everything is as ineffective as demanding nothing, because it obscures what that struggle looks like on a daily basis. It can also be demoralizing, because when the goal is everything, it is impossible to measure the small but important steps forward that are the wellspring of any movement. This is not an argument for thinking small or abandoning the struggle to completely transform the United States; it is an argument for drawing a distinction between the struggle for reforms that are possible today and the struggle for revolution, which is a longer-term project. To be sure, there is definitely a relationship between the two. The struggle to reform various aspects of our existing society makes people’s lives better in the here and now; it also teaches people how to struggle and organize. Those are the building blocks that can lead to larger and more transformative struggles. In the process, people in the movement develop politically, gain experience and expertise, and become leaders. It is impossible to conceive of leaping from inactivity to changing the world in a single bound.

For example, many Black people in the South who were radicalized in the 1950s in the struggle against Jim Crow would probably not have recognized themselves ten years later. Many people whose politics began with narrow demands to end Jim Crow eventually concluded that a government invested in

racism could never achieve justice for Black people. Consider the experiences of the activists who made up SNCC, who in 1964 arrived at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City with the hope of seating Black delegates from their Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party as the delegation from Mississippi. The point was to expose and embarrass the national party for allowing the all-white Democratic Party to seat its delegation, knowing full well that Black people in Mississippi were violently disenfranchised. The SNCC activists believed if they were successful, they could break the grip of the Dixiecrats—the white Democratic Party of the South—on the electoral process throughout the South. But there was no way that Lyndon Johnson and the national Democratic Party were going to risk Southern white votes by acquiescing to the demands of civil rights activists. In the end, Johnson forced a deal down the activists’ throats that left the convention and the white supremacist wing of the Democratic Party basically intact. James Forman, the executive director of SNCC, spelled out the meaning of the defeat:

Atlantic City was a powerful lesson. . . . No longer was there any hope . . . that the federal government would change the situation in the Deep South. The fine line of contradiction between the state governments and the federal government, which we had used to build a movement, was played out. Now the kernel of opposites—the people against both the federal and state governments was apparent.⁷⁶

Narrowing the demands of the movement in order to retain focus does not mean narrowing its reach. The brilliance of the slogan “Black Lives Matter” is its ability to articulate the dehumanizing aspects of anti-Black racism in the United States. The long-term strength of the movement will depend on its ability to reach large numbers of people by connecting the issue of police violence to the other ways that Black people are oppressed.

This process is already under way, as “new guard” activists have worked to make those connections. The best example of this involves the struggle of low-wage workers to raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour. Twenty percent of fast-food workers are Black and 68 percent of them earn between \$7.26 and \$10.09 an hour.⁷⁷ In Chicago, fast-food restaurants employ 46 percent of Black workers—in New York it’s 50 percent.⁷⁸ Twenty percent of Walmart’s 1.4 million workers are African American, making it the largest employer of Black Americans. There is a logical connection between the low-wage workers’ campaigns and the Black Lives Matter movement. The overrepresentation of African Americans in the ranks of the poor and working class has made them targets of police, who prey on those with low incomes. Black and Latino/a workers are also more likely to suffer the consequences of the mounting fees and fines discussed in chapter 4. Mwendu Katwiwa of the BYP 100 in New Orleans

explains the relationship between economic and racial justice:

Too often Black youth are trapped in a singular narrative about their lived experience that does not address the structural and social conditions. . . . The #BlackLivesMatter movement goes beyond a call to end police brutality and murder against Black people—it is a recognition that Black life is valuable while it is still being lived. Valuing Black life means Black people should have access to their basic human dignity at their workplace—especially Black youth who are disproportionately impacted by unemployment and are overrepresented in low-wage jobs.⁷⁹

The movement today is in a much better position to nurture and develop a relationship with the growing low-wage-worker struggle than has been possible with the civil rights establishment. For years, Walmart and McDonald's have been reliable contributors to the CBC, NAACP, and NAN.⁸⁰ At Al Sharpton's sixtieth birthday bash, held at the Four Seasons hotel in New York, corporations were encouraged to make donations to the NAACP at various levels. The phone company AT&T pledged at the "activists level" with a full-page ad in the party program, while Walmart and GE Asset Management only pledged at the "preacher level," with half-page ads. McDonald's and Verizon pledged at the "track suit" level with a back page ad. Sharpton would not say how much each level was worth, but he did say that NAN reached its goal of raising \$1 million and that "we have no new liens. . . . We'll be operating in the black this year. The biggest debts have already settled, and the party . . . was the second big fundraiser."⁸¹ Is it any wonder Sharpton and the others have been so quiet about the fight to raise the minimum wage to \$15?

The fight for educational justice in Black communities has also gained momentum in the last several years and could be another entry point for collaboration between movements. The education justice movement has focused on three issues that disproportionately affect Black students: efforts to privatize publicly funded schools, the school-to-prison pipeline, and high-stakes testing in public schools. There is a clear relationship between privatization and "zero-tolerance policies" that cause Black children to encounter law enforcement. Privately run but publicly financed charter schools have embraced "no excuses" discipline, in which "teachers rigorously enforce an intricate set of behavioral expectations on students. Minor infractions—a hand improperly raised, a shirt untucked, eyes averted—invite escalating punitive measures: demerits, lost privileges, detention, suspension. The policing theory that gave us stop-and-frisk now underpins the disciplinary system of the education reform movement."⁸²

Zero-tolerance policies embedded in "no excuses" discipline have rapidly increased the use of suspension and expulsions as the primary disciplinary tool in public and charter schools. The rate of suspension has increased for Black students, from 6 percent in the 1970s to 15 percent today. Removal from school

is only one aspect of this; as the impulse toward suspension has increased so has the presence of police in the halls of schools. Greater police presence has resulted in the criminalization of childhood antics that in an earlier era were handled in the principal's office. Black students bear the brunt of the punitive turn in public education. When hundreds of Seattle high school students walked out in reaction to the failure to indict Darren Wilson in Ferguson, teacher Jesse Hagopian drew a connection between Black Lives Matter and public education: "These students were surely animated by the injustice in Ferguson, but . . . they have no need to travel across the country to confront the ferocity of racism. The Seattle Public Schools are under investigation by the federal Department of Education for suspension rates for black students four times higher than white students for the same infractions."⁸³ Just as corporate money mutes the participation of civil rights organizations in the struggle to raise the minimum wage, it has the same effect on their participation in the fight against corporate education reform and privatization. The NAACP and the Urban League have received *millions* of dollars from the Gates Foundation alone⁸⁴—the project of billionaire Bill Gates to transform education by championing charter schools—which has actually become a cover for attacking teacher unions and pushing standardized testing.

In both of these cases the Black Lives Matter movement has the potential to make deeper connections to and create relationships with organized labor. Black workers continue to be unionized at higher rates than white workers. The reason is simple: Black union workers make far above and beyond what nonunion Black workers make, in salary and benefits. Black workers also tend to be concentrated in the sectors most under attack by the state—federal, state, and local government, including education and other municipal jobs. Throughout the winter of 2015, Black Lives Matter activists all over the country organized actions to "shut it down," including highways, public transportation, shopping establishments—even brunch! Developing alliances with organized labor could lead to workers exercising their power to shut down production, services, and business as usual as pressure for concrete reforms concerning the policing state. The pathway for this has already been trodden. On May 1, 2015, tens of thousands of activists rallied across the country under the banner of Black Lives Matter—and in Oakland, California, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, Local 10, conducted a work stoppage that halted the flow of millions of dollars' worth of goods and prevented them from being loaded onto cargo ships. This was the first time a major union had initiated a work stoppage in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. The coalition that helped to organize the action said in a statement:

Labor is one sector of the community that can truly shut this country down. If workers refuse to work, product doesn't get made, and money doesn't exchange hands. The only way this country is going to take us seriously is if we interrupt their commerce and impact their bottom line. Simply appealing to their humanity doesn't work. If that was the case, the epidemic of Black genocide at the hands of police would have ended decades ago.⁸⁵

Broadening the reach of the movement also belies the notion that the movement is divided between old and young. Collaborating with Black workers, including Black teachers and other trade unionists, cuts across age groups and demonstrates that working-class African Americans of all generations have a vested interest in the success of the movement.

Solidarity

One important frontier of the movement also involves its capacity to develop solidarity with other oppressed groups of people. African Americans have always felt the most punishing aspects of life under American capitalism acutely. This has not meant, however, that Black people are alone in their desire to transform the harshness of society. The oppression of Indigenous people, immigrants, and nonwhite people more generally pervades American society. In profound ways, it is the secret to the conundrum of how the 1 percent can dominate a society where the vast majority has every interest in undoing the existing order. Basic math would seem to indicate that 12 or 13 percent of the population, which is what African Americans constitute, would have no realistic capacity to fundamentally transform the social order of the United States.

The challenge for the movement is transforming the goal of "freedom" into digestible demands that train and organize its forces so that they have the ability to fight for more, the movement must also have a real plan for building and developing solidarity among the oppressed. This means building networks and alliances with Latinos in opposition to attacks on immigrant rights, connecting with Arabs and Muslims campaigning against Islamophobia, and organizing with Native organizations that fight for self-determination within the United States. This is not an exhaustive list; it is only a beginning.

The struggle to build solidarity between oppressed communities, however, is not obvious. For example, when three young Muslims, Deah Barakat, Razan Abu-Salha, and Yusor Abu-Salha, were shot and killed by a white man in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and activists began the hashtag #MuslimLivesMatter, there was a backlash. Some activists described the hashtag as an "appropriation" of the ongoing Black movement:

This is not at all to undermine or belittle the injustices that other minority groups in this country deal with every day; in fact, it is quite the opposite. Every community deserves to be able to think

critically about their own positions in America, about their own challenges, about their own experiences, and in their own terms. Of course Muslim lives are under fire in our American systems. There is no question about that. However, building off the #BlackLivesMatter trend equates struggles that are, though seemingly similar, drastically different.⁸⁶

It is one thing to respect the organizing that has gone into the movement against police violence and brutality, but quite another to conceive of Black oppression and anti-Black racism as so wholly unique that they are beyond the realm of understanding and, potentially, solidarity from others who are oppressed.

In the contest to demonstrate how oppressions differ from one group to the next, we miss how we are connected through oppression—and how those connections should form the basis of solidarity, not a celebration of our lives on the margins. The American government demonizes its enemies to justify mistreating them, whether it is endless war, internment, and torture or mass incarceration and police abuse. There is a racist feedback loop, in which domestic and foreign policies feed and reinforce each other. This is why US foreign policy in the Middle East has reverberated at home. The cynical use of Islamophobia to whip up support for continued American interventions in Arab and Muslim countries inevitably has consequences for Muslim Americans. And the ever-expanding security state, justified by the “War on Terror,” becomes the pretext for greater police repression at home—which, of course, disproportionately affects African Americans and Latino/as in border regions.

In the late 1990s, a movement began to stop racial profiling against Black drivers in police stops. Major class-action lawsuits in Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Florida highlighted the extent to which African Americans were subjected to unwarranted suspicion and harassment on the nation’s interstates. New Jersey became a center of anti-profiling activism when, in the spring of 1998 during a routine police stop, an officer fired into a van filled with young African American men. Al Sharpton led a protest of several hundred people, including a five-hundred-car motorcade, onto Interstate 95. That same year, the ACLU filed a class-action lawsuit on behalf of several Black motorists who complained of racially motivated traffic stops on Interstate 95. The widespread suspicion of Blacks and Latino/as contributed to an atmosphere of intimidation and an implicit threat of violence. (This certainly seemed to be the case with the 1999 murder of Amadou Diallo, which touched off a wave of protests and civil disobedience demanding the prosecution of the cops involved.) Then, in March 1999, Republican New Jersey governor Christine Todd Whitman fired the state police superintendent when he said profiling was justified because “mostly minorities” trafficked in marijuana and cocaine.⁸⁷

The movement's momentum however, was dramatically cut short in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The US government rushed to turn tragedy into a call for national unity in preparation for a new war with Afghanistan in 2001 and later in Iraq. Moreover, federal agents justified racial profiling to hunt down Muslims and Arabs in the aftermath. No longer was this tactic subject to federal investigation and lawsuits. It became a legitimate and widely supported tool in the War on Terror. For example, in 1999, 59 percent of Americans said they believed that the police engaged in racial profiling; of those, 81 percent thought the practice was wrong.⁸⁸ Even George W. Bush, several months before 9/11, addressed a joint congressional session on the practice to declare, "Racial profiling is wrong and we will end it in America."⁸⁹ However, by September 30, 2001, Black support for racial profiling of Arabs had jumped to 60 percent, compared to 45 percent among the general population.⁹⁰ Not only was the developing struggle against racism buried under a wave of jingoism and Islamophobic racism, but the focal point of the antiracist struggle, racial profiling, was now being championed as a necessary tool to protect the United States.

When the movement reflects divisions that the American state actively promotes, it makes all of the movements against racism weaker. This does not mean the movements should paper over actual differences among various groups of people, but it does mean there is a need to understand the commonalities and overlaps in oppression while also coming to terms with the reality that there is a lot more to gain by building unity and a lot more to lose by staying in our respective corners.

Conclusion

Protests can expose these conditions and their relationship to the policing state; protests can draw in larger numbers of people; protests can compel public figures to speak against those conditions. Protests can do many things, but protests alone cannot end police abuse and the conditions that are used to justify it. The movement against police brutality, even in its current inchoate state, has transformed how Americans see and understand policing in the United States. Over the course of a year, Black people from coast to coast have led a struggle to expose the existence of an urban police state with suburban outposts. It has shown the country the depths of the lie that we live in a colorblind or postracial country. Eighty-three percent of Americans say racism "still poses a problem," up 7 percent from 2014. Sixty-one percent of whites and 82 percent of Blacks agree that "there's a need for a conversation about racism in American life."⁹¹ In less than a year, the number of white Americans who view police killings as

“isolated incidents” has fallen from 58 percent to 36 percent.⁹² At the same time, in July 2015 alone, the police killed an astonishing 118 people, the most that had been killed over the entire year thus far.⁹³ By mid-August they had killed another fifty-four. On the anniversary of Mike Brown’s death, Ferguson police shot and critically injured another Black teenager. In New York City, where there was a vibrant anti-police-brutality movement for years before the most recent iteration of the national movement, liberal mayor Bill DeBlasio has pledged to hire a thousand new police officers. This was surprising, since DeBlasio rode the success of the campaign to end stop-and-frisk into office in 2013. This is only one example of how resilient the police are as an institution, but it also shows elected officials’ reluctance to discipline them.

The movement is confronted with many challenges, but it has also shown that it will not go away easily. This has less to do with the organizing genius of organizers than with deep anger among ordinary Blacks who have been beaten, imprisoned, humiliated, and abused, all the while being blamed for their own victimization. The power of ordinary African Americans to push the movement forward was seen in June 2015 in McKinney, Texas, when the police attacked several Black children at a swimming party, including fifteen-year-old Dajerria Becton, who was manhandled by one officer in particular.

In years past, a story like this would have resulted in little if any attention. Instead, a few days later, hundreds of Black and white protestors filled the street of the small suburban development where the children had been set upon, chanting, “We want to go swimming” and “No swimming, no driving.” It must have been a powerful scene to everyone who witnessed it—and for different reasons. Many of the suburban white neighbors who supported the police were outraged but could do nothing about it; they had been rendered powerless. The police were undoubtedly intimidated by the action, so much so that the most aggressive cop, who had attacked Becton, was forced to resign days later. Most importantly, though, for the Black children who had been abused and threatened at gunpoint by the police and for their parents, to have hundreds of people show up to insist that their lives mattered must have repaired some part of the damage. For them to see the solidarity of hundreds of white people must have given them some hope that not all whites are racist and that some would even stand up and fight alongside them. The demonstration may have also validated their right to resist and stand up to racism and racist violence and affirmed that they were right to protest from the very beginning.

The Black Lives Matter movement, from Ferguson to today, has created a feeling of pride and combativeness among a generation that this country has tried to kill, imprison, and simply disappear. The power of protest has been

validated. For it to become more even more effective, to affect the policing state, and to withstand opposition and attempts to infiltrate, subvert, and undermine what has been built, there must be more organization and coordination in the move from protest to movement.

CHAPTER SEVEN

From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation

On April 12, 1865, the American Civil War officially came to an end when the Union Army accepted the unconditional surrender of the Confederacy on the steps of a courthouse in Appomattox, Virginia. The Union Army, led by 200,000 Black soldiers, had destroyed the institution of slavery; as a result of their victory, Black people were now to be no longer property but citizens of the United States. The Civil Rights Act of 1866, the first declaration of civil rights in the United States, stated that

citizens of every race and color, without regard to any previous condition of slavery or involuntary servitude, shall have the same right, in every State and Territory in the United States . . . to full and equal benefit of all laws and proceedings for the security of person and property, as is enjoyed by white citizens.¹

There was no ambiguity that the war had buried chattel slavery once and for all. Days after the surrender of the Confederacy, Abraham Lincoln rode into Richmond, Virginia, the former capital of the slaveholders, where he stood upon the stairs of the former Confederate capitol building and told a large gathering crowd of Black people days into their freedom,

In reference to you, colored people, let me say God has made you free. Although you have been deprived of your God-given rights by your so-called Masters, you are now as free as I am, and if those that claim to be your superiors do not know that you are free, take the sword and bayonet and teach them that you are—for God created all men free, giving to each the same rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.²

One hundred and fifty years later, on April 12, 2015, at nine in the morning, 217 miles north of the Appomattox courthouse, Freddie Gray, a twenty-five-year-old Black man, was arrested by the Baltimore police. His only apparent crime was making eye contact with the police and then running away. Freddie Gray was loaded into a van. By the time he emerged forty-five minutes later, his voice box had been crushed, his neck snapped, and 80 percent of his spinal cord severed.

The distance from the end of the Civil War, with the birth of Black citizenship and civil rights, to the state-sanctioned beating and torture of Freddie Gray constitutes the gap between formal equality before the law and the self-

determination and self-possession inherent in actual freedom—the right to be free from oppression, the right to make determinations about your life free from duress, coercion, or threat of harm. Freedom in the United States has been elusive, contingent, and fraught with contradictions and unattainable promises—for almost everyone.

Black people were not freed into an American dream, but into what Malcolm X described as an “American nightmare” of economic inequality and unchecked injustice. The full extent of this inequality was masked by racial terrorism. One hundred years after Emancipation, African Americans dismantled the last vestiges of legal discrimination with the civil rights movement, but the excitement of the movement quickly faded as American cities combusted with Black people who were angry and disillusioned at being locked out of accessing the riches of American society. Hundreds of thousands of African Americans participated in the uprisings in search of resolutions to the problems of lead poisoning, rat infestations, hunger and malnutrition, underemployment, poor schools, and persisting poverty. Where liberals and radicals often converged was in the demand that Blacks should have greater political control over their communities. For liberals, Black electoral politics was a sign of political maturity as the movement left the streets for the poll booth, urban governance, and community control. The problem was not “the system,” it was exclusion from access to all that American society had to offer. Some radicals were also lured by the possibility of self-governance and community control. Indeed, it was a viable strategy, given that much of Black life was controlled by white elected officials and white-led institutions. The question remained: Could the machinery wielded in the oppression of Blacks now be retooled in the name of Black self-determination?

If freedom had in one era been imagined as inclusion in the mainstream of American society, including admittance to its political and financial institutions, then the last fifty years have yielded a mixed record. Indeed, since the last gasps of the Black insurgency in the 1970s, there are many measures of Black accomplishment and achievement in a country where Black people were never intended to survive as free people. Is there no greater symbol of a certain kind of Black accomplishment than a Black president? For those who consider mastery of American politics and Black political representation as the highest expressions of inclusion in the mainstream, then we are surely in the heyday of American “race relations.” Yet, paradoxically, at a moment when African Americans have achieved what no rational person could have imagined when the Civil War ended, we have simultaneously entered a new period of Black protest, Black radicalization, and the birth of a new Black left.

No one knows what will come of this new political development, but many know the causes of its gestation. For, as much success as some African Americans have achieved, four million Black children live in poverty, one million Black people are incarcerated, and 240,000 Black people lost their homes as a result of the foreclosure crisis—resulting in the loss of hundreds of millions of dollars in Black savings. Never before in American history has a Black president presided over the misery of millions of Black people, the denial of the most basic standards for health, happiness, and basic humanity. Entertainer and activist Harry Belafonte Jr., recalled his last conversation with Martin Luther King Jr., in which King lamented, “I’ve come upon something that disturbs me deeply. . . . We have fought hard and long for integration, as I believe we should have, and I know that we will win. But I’ve come to believe we’re integrating into a burning house.”³

The aspiration for Black liberation cannot be separated from what happens in the United States as a whole. Black life cannot be transformed while the rest of the country burns. The fires consuming the United States are stoked by the widespread alienation of low-wage and meaningless work, unaffordable rents, suffocating debt, and poverty. The essence of economic inequality is borne out in a simple fact: there are 400 billionaires in the United States and 45 million people living in poverty. These are not parallel facts; they are intersecting facts. There are 400 American billionaires *because* there are 45 million people living in poverty. Profit comes at the expense of the living wage. Corporate executives, university presidents, and capitalists in general are living the good life—*because* so many others are living a life of hardship. The struggle for Black liberation, then, is not an abstract idea molded in isolation from the wider phenomenon of economic exploitation and inequality that pervades all of American society; it is intimately bound up with them.

The struggle for Black liberation requires going beyond the standard narrative that Black people have come a long way but have a long way to go—which, of course, says nothing about where it is that we are actually trying to get to. It requires understanding the origins and nature of Black oppression and racism more generally. Most importantly, it requires a strategy, some sense of how we get from the current situation to the future. Perhaps at its most basic level, Black liberation implies a world where Black people can live in peace, without the constant threat of the social, economic, and political woes of a society that places almost no value on the vast majority of Black lives. It would mean living in a world where Black lives matter. While it is true that when Black people get free, everyone gets free, Black people in America cannot “get free” alone. In that sense, Black liberation is bound up with the project of human liberation and

social transformation.

Radical Reconstructions

This book opens with a long quote from an essay Martin Luther King Jr. published in 1969. In it, he writes that the Black struggle “reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws and suggests that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced.” What would constitute the “radical reconstruction” of American society? This was a central question confronting the Black movement at the end of the last period of mass struggle. King himself had come to locate the crises confronting the United States in the “triplets” of “racism, materialism and militarism.” King and hundreds of thousands of other angry Blacks, whites, and Latino/as across the country were rapidly radicalizing in reaction to the hypocrisy, contradictions, and brutality of capitalism. From the “massive resistance” of white supremacists led by the Democratic Party in the South to the expanding war in Vietnam, to the dense poverty exposed by waves of ghetto rebellions, the US government had become an emperor with no clothes.

This unfolding radicalization was not happening in isolation: it was part of a global rebellion against an old colonial order that was rapidly coming undone. During the course of World War II, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Italy, Japan, and France all lost colonial possessions. After the war, in 1947, England went on to lose the British colony of India, which was partitioned into India and Pakistan. And 1960 became known as the “Year of Africa” when seventeen African countries achieved independence from their colonial overlords. Decolonization was achieved in various ways, from “peaceful” transference of power to armed nationalist struggles. The ensuing debates over the futures of postcolonial societies included arguments over how to transform export-based economies into ones that prioritized the needs of the local population. In several of these countries, the debates revolved around different interpretations of socialism. In many ways these debates were distorted, given the wide influence of the Soviet Union, a country that at one point had been socialist but by this period had been for many years a one-party authoritarian regime. The Soviet model of socialism was based on an extremely narrow, limited definition of “state ownership.” But who owned the state was an equally important question. There were other questions generated by those movements, including: how to win state power, political economy, and how all of this would contribute to economic development and self-determination after centuries of colonial ruin. Nonwhite, formerly colonized people around the world hailed socialism (defined in many ways) almost universally as the means for achieving their freedom and reconstructing state power in their own names.

By the end of the 1960s, many Black revolutionaries took for granted that African Americans were a colonized population within the United States. In the book *Black Power*, Carmichael and Hamilton said as much: “Black people in this country form a ‘colony,’ and it is not in the interest of the colonial power to liberate them. Black people are legal citizens of the United States with, for the most part, the same *legal* rights as other citizens. Yet they stand as colonial subjects in relation to white society.”⁴ This idea was popular because it seemed an accurate way to describe the relationship between the impoverished, largely Black urban cores in the midst of much whiter, larger metropolitan areas. Colonialism could also explain the financially predatory relationship of business to Black communities, which was almost wholly organized around extraction, with little to no investment. All of these descriptions made sense of Black oppression and exploitation and seemed to fit with what was happening to Black and Brown people all over the globe. As Stokely Carmichael wrote, “Black Power cannot be isolated from the African Revolution. It can only be comprehended within the context of the African Revolution. Thus with Black Power . . . came an intensification as the African Revolution from Watts to Soweto went into the phase of the armed struggle.”⁵

It was, however, inaccurate to describe Black Americans’ relationship to the United States as colonial, despite these obvious similarities. The profits reaped from the exploitation of Black urban dwellers were not insignificant, but neither were they the important revenue streams back to the American “metropole.” The outflow of capital from the inner city worked almost exclusively to the benefit of the layer of business owners directly involved in economically exploitative relationships with the urban ghetto, such as bankers and real-estate agents. This was not a motor of American capitalism compared to the cotton, rubber, sugar, and mineral extraction and trade that had fueled colonial empires for hundreds of years.

Being an oppressed minority population does not necessarily mean being colonial subjects. Calling Black people a colonized people drew the Black struggle into the global rebellion against the “colonial oppressors.” Malcolm X spoke to this when he recognized that it was “incorrect to classify the revolt of the Negro as simply a racial conflict of Black against white, or as purely an American problem. Rather, we are seeing today a global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, the exploited against the exploiter.”⁶ Placing the Black rebellion within the context of the “African Revolution” defied the idea that Black people were a “minority” population fighting on their own in the belly of the beast. The identification of the Black struggle with the anticolonial movement also reintroduced interpretations of socialism back into the Black

movement. There had been thousands of Black socialists, communists, and other anticapitalists in the United States for years, but the anticommunist witch hunt led by the federal government had largely destroyed any links between the socialist movement of the 1930s and the new wave of struggle in the 1960s.

By the end of the 1960s, socialism was once again on the table as a legitimate alternative to the “evil triplets” King worried about. Most Black radicals were gravitating toward some conceptualization of socialism. It was easy to see why, considering how exposed the crimes of capitalism were. The United States had been experiencing years of economic growth, yet poverty, underemployment, and substandard housing were still the norm for Black and Brown people. In a speech Malcolm X gave at the founding of his Organization of Afro-American Unity, he said:

I’m telling you we do it because we live in one of the rottenest countries that has ever existed on this earth. It’s the system that is rotten; we have a rotten system. It’s a system of exploitation, a political and economic system of exploitation, of outright humiliation, degradation, discrimination—all of the negative things that you can run into, you have run into under this system that disguises itself as a democracy. . . . And you run around here getting ready to get drafted and go someplace and defend it. Someone needs to crack you upside your head.⁷

He would go on to name that system:

All of the countries that are emerging today from under the shackles of colonialism are turning toward socialism. I don’t think it’s an accident. Most of the countries that were colonial powers were capitalist countries and the last bulwark of capitalism today is America and it’s impossible for a white person today to believe in capitalism and not believe in racism. You can’t have capitalism without racism. And if you find a person without racism and you happen to get that person into conversation and they have a philosophy that makes you sure they don’t have this racism in their outlook, usually they’re socialists or their political philosophy is socialism.⁸

Similarly, King, near the end of his life, connected the “fire” burning down the house of America to the inequities rooted deep in the country’s political economy. In 1967, King was reckoning with several questions that pierced the heart of American injustice:

“Where do we go from here,” that we honestly face the fact that the Movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. There are forty million poor people here. And one day we must ask the question, “Why are there forty million poor people in America?” And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising questions about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And I’m simply saying that more and more, we’ve got to begin to ask questions about the whole society. We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life’s marketplace. But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. It means that questions must be raised. You see, my friends, when you deal with this, you begin to ask the question, “Who owns the oil?” You begin to ask the question, “Who owns the iron ore?” You begin to ask the question, “Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that is two-thirds water?”⁹

Black women were also connecting the system of capitalism to the hardship their families experienced. Black women who had been active in the civil rights movement went on to form the Third World Women's Alliance in 1968. By the early 1970s they published the *Black Women's Manifesto*, which analyzed racism and sexism in the movement and more generally: "The system of capitalism (and its afterbirth . . . racism) under which we all live, has attempted by many devious ways and means to destroy the humanity of black people. This has meant an outrageous assault on every black man, woman and child who resides in the United States."¹⁰ Some of the women involved in the Third World Women's Alliance would also go on to form the Combahee River Collective. They too would link the oppression of Blacks and women to capitalism:

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation. . . . Although we are in essential agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.¹¹

By 1970, the Black Panther Party, an unabashed revolutionary socialist organization, was the largest and most influential Black revolutionary organization, with more than 5,000 members and 45 chapters. In 1971, the Panthers' newspaper, the *Black Panther*, reached its peak circulation at 250,000 papers a week¹²—a reach far beyond their membership. Ordinary Blacks reading the paper would have found the Panthers' outline for Black liberation mapped out with their "Ten-Point Program." Among their many demands were an end "to the robbery by the capitalists of our Black community," "decent housing fit for the shelter of human beings," "an immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people," and "land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace."¹³

Anticapitalism filtered into every aspect of Black life, including the workplace. In 1968, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, made up of former Black students and Black autoworkers in Detroit, made similar references. An organizer from that group, John Watson, said in 1968,

To struggle in our own interests means that the Black people of the ghetto must struggle to overthrow white capitalism. The struggle against capitalism is world wide [*sic*] and the revolutionary struggle of the ghetto is crucial and essential in the over all [*sic*] world revolution. If the Koreans and Vietnamese can overthrow imperialism in Asia, then Asia will be free. But if the Black Revolution can overthrow capitalism and imperialism in the US, then the whole world will be freed. This, then,

is our role.¹⁴

By the end of the 1960s, there was widespread understanding that the capitalist economy was responsible for Black hardship and that socialism was an alternative way to organize society. Organizations that called for the overthrow of the government, like the Black Panthers, were so popular that in 1969 FBI director J. Edgar Hoover declared that “the Black Panther Party, without question, represents the greatest threat to internal security of the country.”¹⁵ The popularity of the Panthers—in concert with successive years of ghetto rebellions—compelled the economic and political elite to create more space for the development of a Black middle class, but for the majority the questions of inequality and injustice remained largely unresolved.

Given the widespread advocacy of socialism, in one form or another, at the end of the last Black insurgency, it is almost odd when socialism is dismissed as incapable of explaining racism or Black oppression. Political commentator Tim Wise published in 2010 a typical critique on his blog:

Left activists often marginalize people of color by operating from a framework of extreme class reductionism, which holds that the “real” issue is class, not race, that “the only color that matters is green,” and that issues like racism are mere “identity politics,” which should take a backseat to promoting class-based universalism and programs to help working people. This reductionism, by ignoring the way that even middle class and affluent people of color face racism and color-based discrimination (and by presuming that low-income folks of color and low-income whites are equally oppressed, despite a wealth of evidence to the contrary) reinforces white denial, privileges white perspectivism and dismisses the lived reality of people of color. Even more . . . it ignores perhaps the most important political lesson regarding the interplay of race and class: namely, that the biggest reason why there is so little working-class consciousness and unity in the United States (and thus, why class-based programs to uplift all in need are so much weaker here than in the rest of the industrialized world), is precisely because of racism and the way that white racism has been deliberately inculcated among white working folks. Only by confronting that directly (rather than sidestepping it as class reductionists seek to do) can we ever hope to build cross-racial, class based coalitions. In other words, for the policies favored by the class reductionist to work—be they social democrats or Marxists—or even to come into being, racism and white supremacy must be challenged directly.¹⁶

Specificity always helps to illuminate the issues, but Wise lumps several categories of people together, only to reduce their ideas and political activity to downplaying or ignoring racism. Folding “the left,” “activists,” “social democrats,” and “Marxists” together and describing them collectively as privileging “white perspectives” while dismissing “the lived reality of people of color” obscures more than it clarifies. For one, there are important distinctions among those with a political analysis and framework for understanding the world and those who show up at demonstrations. There is also an embedded assumption that “the left” is white and effectively ignores racism—a curious

assumption, given the clear historical support and affiliation with socialism and socialists among African Americans quoted above. How did socialism go from being the greatest threat to the federal government (as it called the revolutionary socialist Black Panthers) to being perceived as “white” and marginal to the struggles of “people of color”?

To really unpack that history would involve understanding the extent of the repression the federal government exacted against its “internal enemy” as a way to break their influence among ordinary African Americans. It would also involve taking the politics of the Panthers seriously, as well as the political debates that ensued across the revolutionary left of the 1960s and 1970s over where to build their groups, how to build, and among what audience. To be sure, there were deep internecine battles over how to move forward, but the least charitable way to describe these debates is to reduce many differing political viewpoints and organizations into the generic category of “class reductionist left activist.” The revolutionary left today *is* mostly white and tiny, but today’s reality must be firmly situated in a history of massive repression, including imprisonment and state-sanctioned murder, as well as in intense political debates over strategy, tactics, and political perspectives.

As to the political content of Wise’s critique, most revolutionary socialists would agree that the most significant challenge to the development of class consciousness in the United States *is* racism and that, without a struggle against racism, there is no hope for fundamentally changing this country. It is true that the most well-known socialist-identified person in the United States is Vermont senator Bernie Sanders, who exemplifies most of what Wise is criticizing more generally in the left. But Sanders is a United States senator who has spent decades rubbing shoulders with the powerful elite. Sanders is reluctant and almost uncomfortable discussing the specific ways that racism adds another burden onto the existing oppression Black workers and the poor face. Thus, Sanders essentially argues that addressing economic inequality is the best way to combat racism. It is an old argument from the right wing of the socialist movement that was challenged and denounced by its left wing—the wing that became the Communist Party after the Russian Revolution in 1917.

The Russian Revolution gave life to an international communist movement that was much further to the left than the old Socialist Party. The emergence of revolutionary communism in the 1920s and 1930s overlapped with the rapidly developing radicalization of African Americans. Blacks were referring to themselves as “New Negroes,” as opposed to the old, victimized Negroes of the Jim Crow South. These “new” Blacks were imbued with the confidence of living in big cities, finally out from under the surveillance and intimidation of Jim

Crow. They were emboldened by their brethren having fought in the “Great War,” which President Woodrow Wilson described as an American war fought in the name of democracy. They were also embittered by the contradiction that America made public appeals to democracy while racist whites initiated pogroms across the North.

Within this overheating political cauldron, there were different Black political responses. The followers of Marcus Garvey argued that Blacks should triumphantly return to Africa. Black radicalism also flourished. The African Blood Brotherhood was small but influential in its espousal of both socialist and nationalist politics. The Communist Party (CP) also became a political pole of attraction and recruited many of the best Black revolutionaries of the era, who actively transformed the party’s political perspective on its work among African Americans. As historian Robin D. G. Kelley has argued, “If the Third International . . . proved more sympathetic and sensitive to the racial nature of American class struggle, it is largely because Black folk made it so . . . advocating a radical fusion of socialism and ‘race politics.’”¹⁷ When Black writer and literary giant Claude McKay traveled as a delegate to the Communist International in 1922, he reported:

In associating with the comrades of America, I have found demonstrations of prejudice on the various occasions when the white and black comrades had to get together, and this is the greatest obstacle that the Communists of America have got to overcome—the fact that they first have got to emancipate themselves from the ideas they entertained toward Negroes before they can be able to reach the Negroes with any kind of radical propaganda.¹⁸

The Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin directly intervened in the American CP and argued that the party should immediately begin to agitate politically among African Americans.

The shift in orientation was sharp and dramatic. Whereas the founding convention of the CP in 1919 merely stated that the “racial oppression of the Negro is simply the expression of his economic bondage and oppression, each intensifying the other,” by 1921, after Lenin’s involvement on the question, the CP now declared:

The Negro workers in American are exploited and oppressed more ruthlessly than any other group. The history of the Southern Negro is the history of a reign of terror—of persecution, rape and murder. . . . Because of the anti-Negro policies of organized labor, the Negro has despaired of aid from this source, and he has either been driven into the camp of labor’s enemies, or has been compelled to develop purely racial organizations which seek purely racial aims. The Workers Party will support the Negroes in their struggle for Liberation, and will help them in their fight for economic, political and social equality. . . . Its task will be to destroy altogether the barrier of race prejudice that has been used to keep apart the Black and white workers, and bind them into a solid union of revolutionary forces for the overthrow of our common enemy.¹⁹

By the early 1940s, thousands of Blacks had joined the CP.

In the period leading up to World War II, the politics of communism became the dominant political framework for most of the nonwhite world as hundreds of millions of people of color across the globe were inspired by Lenin's writings on the right of oppressed nations to fight for their own freedom. Lenin wrote:

The proletariat must struggle against the enforced retention of oppressed nations within the bounds of the given state. . . . The proletariat must demand freedom of political separation for the colonies and nations oppressed by "their own" nation. Otherwise, the internationalism of the proletariat would be nothing but empty words; neither confidence nor class solidarity would be possible between the workers of the oppressed and the oppressor nations. . . . On the other hand, the socialists of the oppressed nation must, in particular, defend and implement the full and unconditional unity, including organizational unity, of the workers of the oppressed nation and those of the oppressor nation. Without this it is impossible to defend the independent policy of the proletariat and their class solidarity with the proletariat of other countries.²⁰

Through the period of the Popular Front (the name for the strategy Lenin describes), the CP maintained its popularity among African Americans and many of the oppressed. But over time, the constantly shifting, contradictory positions of the CP and Soviet Union, which were now led by the increasingly tyrannical Josef Stalin, led to a mass exodus from the party after the war. In the United States during the war, the CP had embraced the Democratic Party and called for unity against Hitler at all costs. Its conclusion that American Blacks should therefore downplay the continuing fight against racial inequality would eventually erode the ranks of the CP's Black membership. But the foibles of the CP should not be conflated with the validity of anticapitalism and socialism as political theories that inform and guide the struggle for Black liberation. C. L. R. James, a Black revolutionary from the Caribbean and a collaborator of Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, continued to develop Marxist theory and its relationship to the Black struggle when he wrote in 1948—years before the emergence of the civil rights movement—about the dynamics of the Black movement and its impact on the class struggle in general:

We say, number one, that the Negro struggle, the independent Negro struggle, has a vitality and a validity of its own; that it has deep historic roots in the past of America and in present struggles; it has an organic political perspective, along which it is traveling, to one degree or another, and everything shows that at the present time it is traveling with great speed and vigor. We say, number two, that this independent Negro movement is able to intervene with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation, despite the fact that it is waged under the banner of democratic rights and is not led necessarily either by the organized labor movement or the Marxist party. We say, number three, and this is the most important, that it is able to exercise a powerful influence upon the revolutionary proletariat, that it has got a great contribution to make to the development of the proletariat in the United States, and that it is in itself a constituent part of the struggle for socialism. In this way we challenge directly any attempt to subordinate or to push to the rear the social and political significance of the independent Negro struggle for democratic rights.²¹

James's observations still resonate, especially in the context of today's movement. The Black movement is an independent force that has its own timing, logic, and perspective based on the history of racism and oppression in this country.

It is also the case that when the Black movement goes into motion, it destabilizes all political life in the United States. King argued that the Black movement “forc[es] America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. It . . . expos[es] the evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws.”²² The oppression of Black workers exposes the foundational lie of the United States as a free and democratic society more than that of any other group, with the exception of the Indigenous population. The political activism and rebellion of Black people bring that lie to the surface for all to see, throwing into question the actual nature of US society. White workers have always followed the lead of Black workers. The militant strike wave I described in chapter 2 was certainly influenced by the Black freedom struggle that had provided a powerful example of organizing and resistance for white workers in the union movement to follow. For this reason, far from being marginal to the struggles of Black people, socialists have *always* been at the center of those movements—from the struggle to save the Scottsboro Boys in the 1930s, to Bayard Rustin's role in organizing the 1963 March on Washington, to the Black Panther Party's organizing against police brutality. At the height of McCarthyism, socialists and communists were so identified with the antiracist movement that antiracist organizing was automatically assumed to be the work of communists.

The Political Economy of Racism

Capitalism is an economic system based on the exploitation of the many by the few. Because of the gross inequality it produces, capitalism requires various political, social, and ideological tools to divide the majority—racism is one among many oppressions intended to serve this purpose. Oppression is used to justify, “explain,” and make sense of rampant inequality. For example, racism developed under the regime of slavery to explain and justify the enslavement of Africans at a time when the world was celebrating the notions of human rights, liberty, freedom, and self-determination. The dehumanization and subjected status of Black people had to be rationalized in this moment of new political possibilities.

It is widely accepted that the racial oppression of slaves was rooted in the exploitation of the slave economy, but fewer recognize that under capitalism, *wage slavery* is the pivot around which all other inequalities and oppressions

turn. Capitalism used racism to justify plunder, conquest, and slavery, but as Karl Marx pointed out, it would also come to use racism to divide and rule—to pit one section of the working class against another and, in so doing, blunt the class consciousness of all. To claim, then, as Marxists do, that racism is a product of capitalism is not to deny or diminish its centrality to or impact on American society. It is simply to explain its origins and persistence. Nor is this reducing racism to just a function of capitalism; it is locating the dynamic relationship between class exploitation and racial oppression in the functioning of American capitalism.

Marx has been criticized for ignoring the issues of race in his own day, but there is evidence that Marx was well aware of the centrality of race under capitalism. He did not write extensively on slavery and its racial impact, but he did write about how European capitalism's emergence was rooted in the pilfering, rape, and destruction of natives, colonial subjects, and Black slaves. He famously wrote that “the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of Black skins, signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.”²³ Marx also recognized the degree to which slavery was central to the world economy:

Direct slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, *etc.* Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that has given the colonies their value; it is the colonies that have created world trade, and it is world trade that is the pre-condition of large-scale industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance. Without slavery North America, the most progressive of countries, would be transformed into a patriarchal country. Wipe out North America from the map of the world, and you will have anarchy—the complete decay of modern commerce and civilization. Cause slavery to disappear and you will have wiped America off the map of nations. Thus slavery, because it is an economic category, has always existed among the institutions of the peoples. Modern nations have been able only to disguise slavery in their own countries, but they have imposed it without disguise upon the New World.²⁴

Thus within Marxism there is a fundamental understanding of the centrality of slave labor to national and international economies.

But what about race? Marx did not write prolifically on race, but one can look to his correspondence and deliberations on the American Civil War to get some idea about his views of racial oppression and how it operated within capitalism and his opposition to it. For example, in *Black Reconstruction*, W. E. B. Du Bois quotes at length a letter Marx penned, as head of the International Workingmen's Association, to Abraham Lincoln in 1864, in the midst of the Civil War:

The contest for the territories which opened the epoch, was it not to decide whether the virgin soil of immense tracts should be wedded to the labor of the immigrant or be prostituted by the tramp of the slave driver? When an oligarchy of 300,000 slave holders dared to inscribe for the first time in the annals of the world "Slavery" on the banner of armed revolt, when on the very spots where hardly a century ago the idea of one great Democratic Republic had first sprung up, whence the first declaration of the rights of man was issued . . . when on the very spots counter-revolution . . . maintained "slavery to be a beneficial institution". . . and cynically proclaimed property in man "the cornerstone of the new edifice" . . . then the working classes of Europe understood at once . . . that the slaveholders' rebellion was to sound the tocsin for a general holy war of property against labor. . . . They consider it an earnest sign of the epoch to come that it fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead his country through the matchless struggles for the rescue of the enchained race and the Reconstruction of a social order.

Marx personally opposed slavery and he furthermore theorized that slavery and the intense racism that flowed from it not only resulted in the oppression of slaves but also threatened the stability of the white working class by creating a downward pressure on wages in general. It was impossible to compete with the free labor of the enslaved.

This did not mean white workers were sympathetic to the cause of the slaves—with a few notable exceptions, they were not. Marx was not, however, addressing the issue of consciousness; he was describing the objective factors that created the *potential* for solidarity. He wrote in *Capital*, "In the United States of America, every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the Black it is branded." Marx grasped the modern dynamics of racism as the means by which workers who had common objective interests could also become mortal enemies because of subjective, but nevertheless real, racist and nationalist ideas. Looking at the tensions between Irish and English workers, with a nod toward the American situation, Marx wrote:

Every industrial and commercial center in England possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself. He cherishes religious, social and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude is much the same as that of the "poor whites" to the "niggers" in the former slave states of the USA. The Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money. He sees in the English worker at once the accomplice and stupid tool of the English rule in Ireland. This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organization. It is the secret by which the capitalist maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it.²⁵

From this we can see a Marxist theory of how racism operated after slavery was

ended. Marx was highlighting three things: first, that capitalism promotes economic competition between workers; second, that the ruling class uses racist ideology to divide workers against each other; and, finally, that when one group of workers suffer oppression, it negatively affects all workers and the class as a whole.

White Supremacy for Some, Not Others

If white working-class people do not benefit from capitalist exploitation, then why do they allow racism to cloud their ability to unite with nonwhite workers for the greater good of all working people? The answer requires understanding how a white identity was created as a corollary to the racism directed at African Americans.

One benefit of the North American form of racial slavery to enslavers and the ruling class generally was that it deflected potential class tensions among white men. American freedom for whites was contingent on American slavery for Blacks. Historian Edmund Morgan explains that slavery was

the primary evil that men sought to avoid for society as a whole by curbing monarchs and establishing republics. But it was also the solution to one of society's most serious problems, the problem of the poor. Virginians could outdo English republicans as well as New England ones, partly because they had solved the problem: they had achieved a society in which most of the poor were enslaved.²⁶

The enslaved could not easily rise up; if and when they did, all white men could unite to subjugate them. Whites who were small farmers and those who were big planters had nothing in common except that they were not slaves, and that eased the potential tensions between them.

When slavery ended, an evolving strategy of “white supremacy” functioned in a similar way to blunt the political and economic tensions that existed among white men in the South, as chapter 4 describes. Broadly, “white supremacy” was the response to the supposed threat of “Negro domination”—the idea that the end of slavery and the reforms of Reconstruction would reverse the roles of Blacks and whites. Poor whites were recruited to the “lost cause” of white supremacy in order to preserve their own privileged spot in the hierarchy or risk their own demise with the ever-present threat of “negro domination.” But the rallying cry of “white supremacy” was intended to obscure, not elucidate. “White supremacy” was not a coherent strategy “but involved ad hoc responses to chaotic circumstances.”²⁷ In its original iteration it was intended to remove Blacks from political power, without which they would be more vulnerable to economic coercion. Above all, “white supremacy did not mean that whites were to be supreme.” Instead, it was a political strategy intended to manipulate racial

fears as a means of maintaining class rule for the landed elite of the cotton-rich Black Belt.²⁸ White supremacy has historically existed to marginalize Black influence in social, political, and economic spheres while also obscuring major differences in experience in the social, political, and economic spheres among white people. Like slavery, this was necessary to maximize productivity and profitability while dulling the otherwise sharp antagonisms between the richest and poorest white men.

What does this have to do with the world today? The political strategy of uniting all whites around white supremacy and a commitment to politically and economically marginalizing or excluding Black people does not exactly resemble the country we live in today. This does not mean that white men are not in an overwhelmingly powerful position in the institutions that control the political and economic destiny of this country. But the actual legacy of the political project of white supremacy expresses itself by obscuring the class antagonism among whites. “White people” are typically regarded as an undifferentiated mass with a common experience of privilege, access, and unfettered social mobility. These perceptions have largely been facilitated by the academic distillation of a “white” identity into an aspirational category of “whiteness.”

“Whiteness” is therefore not necessarily embodied in white people; it can apply to anyone—Black, Latino, Asian, and, yes, white people. In some ways, this distinction between whiteness and white people was intended, importantly, to allow for distinction and differentiation. But when “acting white” is invoked to explain the actions of reactionary nonwhite political actors, like Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas, it is being used to transpose class and race, further distorting the existence of class differences. In this way, “whiteness” is an adaptation of the American left to the myth that the United States is a classless society. Nonwhite people in positions of power are accused of “performing whiteness” instead of exercising their class power—as if Clarence Thomas or Barack Obama are acting in ways they do not wholly intend to. Moreover, it invariably collapses important distinctions among whites into a common white experience that simply does not exist. This has huge implications in the struggle to build solidarity among the oppressed and exploited and in creating the alliances and coalitions that must be built to challenge the plutocracy at the helm of the country.

More than 19 million white Americans fall below the poverty line, nearly double the number of poor Black people. Black people are overrepresented among the ranks of the poor, but the sheer number of poor white people also destabilizes assumptions about the nature of American society. The poverty rate

among working-class whites has grown from 3 percent to 11 percent since 2000.²⁹ Even though the recession increased Black poverty, the gap between white and Black poverty has narrowed—not because Blacks are doing better, but because whites are doing worse.³⁰ In fact, 76 percent of whites have experienced poverty at some time in their lives. Four out of five American adults struggle with “joblessness, near-poverty, or reliance on welfare for at least part of their lives.”³¹ Despite the ubiquitous “common sense” of “white privilege,” most ordinary whites are insecure about the future. Whites’ pessimism about the economic future is at a twenty-five-year high, with millions believing that they cannot improve their living standards. This pessimism is rooted in the erosion of their economic situation.³²

Far and away, African Americans suffer most from the blunt force trauma of the American criminal justice system, but the pervasive character of law-and-order politics means that whites get caught up in its web as well. African Americans are imprisoned at an absurd rate of 2,300 for every 100,000 Black people. White people, on the other hand, are incarcerated at a rate of 450 people per 100,000. The difference speaks directly to the racial disparities that define American criminal justice, but it is worth noting that the rate at which white people in the United States are incarcerated is still higher than the incarceration rates of almost every other country in the world.³³ It’s also unquestionable that Blacks and Latino/as experience death at the hands of police at much greater rates than whites, but *thousands* of white people have also been murdered by the police. This does not mean the experiences of whites and people of color are equal, but there is a basis for solidarity among white and nonwhite working-class people.

This more complicated picture of the material reality of white working-class life is not intended to diminish the extent to which ordinary whites buy into or accept racist ideas about Blacks. It is also true that, by every social measure, whites do better than African Americans on average, but that does not say much about who benefits from the inequality of our society. For example, in a country with four hundred billionaires, what does it mean that 43 percent of white households make only between \$10,000 and \$49,000 a year?³⁴ Of course, an even larger number of Black people make this pitiful amount—65 percent—but when we only compare the average incomes of working-class Blacks and whites, we miss the much more dramatic disparity between the wealthiest and everyone else.

If it isn’t in the interest of ordinary whites to be racist, why do they accept racist ideas? First, the same question could be asked of any group of workers. Why do men accept sexist ideas? Why do many Black workers accept racist

anti-immigrant rhetoric? Why do many Black Caribbean and African immigrant workers think that Black Americans are lazy? Why do most American workers of all ethnicities accept racist ideas about Arabs and Muslims? In short, if most people agree that it would be in the interest of any group of workers to be more united than divided, then why do workers hold reactionary ideas that are an obstacle to unity?

There are two primary reasons: competition and the prevalence of ruling-class ideology. Capitalism creates false scarcity, the perception that need outstrips resources. When billions are spent on war, police-brutality settlements, and publicly subsidized sports stadiums, there never seems to be a shortage of money. But when it comes to schools, housing, food, and other basic necessities, politicians always complain about deficits and the need to curb spending and cut budgets. The scarcity is manufactured, but the competition over these resources is real. People who are forced to fight over basic necessities are often willing to believe the worst about other workers to justify why they should have something while others should not.

The prevailing ideology in a given society consists of the ideas that influence how we understand the world and help us make sense of our lives—through news, entertainment, education, and more. The political and economic elite shape the ideological world we all live in, to their benefit. We live in a thoroughly racist society, so it should not be surprising that people have racist ideas. The more important question is under what circumstances those ideas can change. There is a clash between the prevailing ideology in society and people's lived experience. The media may inundate the public with constant images and news stories that describe Blacks as criminals or on welfare, but an individual's experience with Blacks at work may completely contradict the stereotype—hence the insistence from many whites that they are not racist because they “know Black people.” It can be true in that person's mind. People's consciousness can change and can even contradict itself.

This is also true for African Americans, who can harbor racist ideas about other Black people while *simultaneously* holding antiracist ideas. After all, Black people also live in this racist society and are equally inundated with racist stereotypes. The development of consciousness is never linear—it is constantly fluctuating between adhering to ideas that fit a “common sense” conception of society and being destabilized by real-life events that upend “common sense.” The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci explains the phenomenon of mixed consciousness this way:

The active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity which nonetheless involves understanding the world in so far as it transforms it. His

theoretical consciousness can . . . be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousness[es] (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all fellow workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. The person is strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices of all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over.³⁵

Whether or not a group of workers has reactionary, mixed, or even revolutionary consciousness does not change its objective status as exploited and oppressed labor. The achievement of consciousness is the difference between the working class being a class in itself as opposed to a class for itself. It affects whether or not workers are in a position to fundamentally alter their reality through collective action. As one writer observed, “Only a collective can develop a systematic alternative world view, can overcome to some degree the alienation of manual and mental work that imposes on everyone, on workers and intellectuals alike, a partial and fragmented view of reality.”³⁶

Just because white workers, to take a specific example, may at times fully accept reactionary ideas about African Americans does not change the objective fact that the majority of the US poor are white, the majority of people without health insurance are white, and the majority of the homeless are white. It is true that Blacks and Latino/as are disproportionately affected by the country’s harsh economic order, but this is a reality they share with the majority of white workers. The common experience of oppression and exploitation creates the potential for a united struggle to better the conditions of all. This is obviously not an automatic process, nor is it a given that essentially economic struggles will translate to support or struggle for the political rights of Blacks to be free of discrimination and racism. Political unity, including winning white workers to the centrality of racism in shaping the lived experiences of Black and Latino/a workers, is key to their own liberation.

Tim Wise’s observations reduce these real issues to an abstract accusation of “privileging” class over race. But our movement has to have theoretical, political, and strategic clarity to confront challenges in the real world. When, in 2012, Chicago’s Black public school CEO Barbara Byrd Bennett was scheming with mayor Rahm Emanuel to close more than fifty schools located exclusively in Black and Latino/a neighborhoods, should Black teachers, students, and parents have united with Bennett, who has certainly experienced racism and sexism in her life and career, but who was also leading the charge to undo public education in Chicago? Or should they have united with the thousands of white teachers in Chicago schools and the vice president of the Chicago Teachers Union, a white, heterosexual man, to build the movement to save public

education in the city?

Probably very few people in history have had as much racist invective directed at them as Barack Obama has—hating him is basically shorthand for racism now. But he has also championed policies that absolved the banks and Wall Street of any responsibility for crashing the economy; as a result, since 2007 ten million people have been displaced from more than four million homes by the foreclosure crisis.³⁷ Should Black workers put that aside and unite with Obama out of racial solidarity and a shared “lived experience,” or should they unite with ordinary whites and Latino/as who have also lost their homes to challenge a political program that regularly defends business interests to the detriment of all working-class and poor people? In the abstract, perhaps these are complicated questions. But in the daily struggles to defend public education, fight for real healthcare reform, or stop predatory foreclosures, these are the concrete questions every movement faces.

The “blind spot” of class within the framework of people like Tim Wise not only leaves them incapable of explaining class division among the oppressed, it also underemphasizes the material foundation for solidarity and unity within the working class. Instead, the concepts of solidarity and unity are reduced to whether or not one chooses to be an “ally.” There’s nothing wrong with being an ally, but it doesn’t quite capture the degree to which Black and white workers are inextricably linked. It’s not as if white workers can simply choose not to “ally” with Black workers to no peril of their own. The scale of attack on the living standards of the working class is overwhelming. There is a systematic, bipartisan effort to dismantle the already anemic welfare state. When, in 2013, \$5 billion cut was cut from food stamps, it had a direct and deleterious impact on the lives of tens of millions of white working-class people.

In this context, solidarity is not just an option; it is crucial to workers’ ability to resist the constant degradation of their living standards. Solidarity is only possible through relentless struggle to win white workers to antiracism, to expose the lie that Black workers are worse off because they somehow choose to be, and to win the white working class to the understanding that, unless they struggle, they too will continue to live lives of poverty and frustration, even if those lives are somewhat better than the lives led by Black workers. Success or failure are contingent on whether or not working people see themselves as brothers and sisters whose liberation is inextricably bound together.

Solidarity is standing in unity with people even when you have not personally experienced their particular oppression. The reality is that as long as capitalism exists, material and ideological pressures push white workers to be racist and all workers to hold each other in general suspicion. But there are moments of

struggle when the mutual interests of workers are laid bare, and when the suspicion is finally turned in the other direction—at the plutocrats who live well while the rest of us suffer. The key question is whether or not in those moments of struggle a coherent political analysis of society, oppression, and exploitation can be articulated that makes sense of the world we live in, but that also champions the vision of a different kind of society—and a way to get there.

No serious socialist current in the last hundred years has ever demanded that Black or Latino/a workers put their struggles on the back burner while some other class struggle is waged first. This assumption rests on the mistaken idea that the working class is white and male, and therefore incapable of taking up issues of race, class, and gender. In fact, the American working class is female, immigrant, Black, white, Latino/a, and more. Immigrant issues, gender issues, and antiracism *are* working-class issues.

Conclusion

Racism in the United States has never been just about abusing Black and Brown people just for the sake of doing so. It has always been a means by which the most powerful white men in the country have justified their rule, made their money, and kept the rest of us at bay. To that end, racism, capitalism, and class rule have always been tangled together in such a way that it is impossible to imagine one without the other. Can there be Black liberation in the United States as the country is currently constituted? No. Capitalism is contingent on the absence of freedom and liberation for Black people and anyone else who does not directly benefit from its economic disorder. That, of course, does not mean there is nothing to do and no struggle worth waging. Building the struggles against racism, police violence, poverty, hunger, and all of the ways in which oppression and exploitation express themselves is critical to people's basic survival in this society. But it is also within those struggles for the basic rights of existence that people learn how to struggle, how to strategize, and build movements and organizations. It is also how our confidence develops to counter the insistence that this society, as it is currently constructed, is the best that we can hope to achieve. People engaged in struggle learn to fight for more by fighting for and winning something. But the day-to-day struggles in which many people are engaged today must be connected to a much larger vision of what a different world could look like. Political scientist and radical Michael Dawson argues for “pragmatic utopianism” that “starts where we are but imagines where we want to be . . . based on the utopian imaginings of a much different America—one we are repeatedly told was impossible to obtain—combined with the hardheaded political realism that generated the strategies and tactics necessary to

achieve their goals.”³⁸

Is this neoliberal, gentrified, overpriced, under-resourced society the best our species can create? The *Black Women’s Manifesto* provided a very succinct idea of what the “new world” would look like:

The new world that we are struggling to create must destroy oppression of any type. The value of this new system will be determined by the status of those persons who are presently most oppressed—the low man on the totem pole. Unless women in any enslaved nation are completely liberated, the change cannot really be called a revolution. . . . A people’s revolution that engages the participation of every member of the community, including men, and women, brings about a certain transformation in the participants as a result of this participation. Once you have caught a glimpse of freedom or tasted a bit of self-determination, you can’t go back to old routines that were established under a racist, capitalist regime.³⁹

It is the struggle itself that can compel people to push for more.

In the summer of 2014, the Black working class of Ferguson “caught a glimpse of freedom and tasted a bit of self-determination” when they stood down the police and National Guard and stayed in the streets for Mike Brown. Their local struggle inspired Black people around the country to take to the streets and stand down the police. What began as a narrowly conceived demand for justice for Mike Brown has erupted into a movement largely identified by the slogan “Black Lives Matter.” It reflects the political maturation of this stage of the movement. The next stage will involve progressing from protests aimed at raising awareness or drawing attention to the crisis of police violence to engaging with the social forces that have the capacity to shut down sectors of work and production until our demands to stop police terrorism are met. The movement has shown that violent policing does not exist in a vacuum: it is a product of the inequality in our society. The police exert their authority in a fundamentally disordered society. The clearer we can see these threads connecting police mayhem to the disorder in our society, the clearer we can express our need for a different kind of world. This is not simply wishful, utopian thinking. The quotes from Black radicals and revolutionaries throughout this chapter show that this is a familiar conclusion at which those intimately involved in social movements arrive.

At the beginning of this book, I asked why this movement has appeared in this moment, even though police violence and terrorism have been such a common feature of Black life throughout American history. In doing so, I have examined the ideological and political forces that often dramatically slow the fight for Black rights in particular. Historically, the insistence that Black deprivation is rooted in Black culture and in Black people has deflected attention away from the systemic roots of racism, compelling African Americans to look inward

instead of making demands on the state and others. But this is a fluid and contradictory process, especially when looking inward reveals that most Black people are working harder than everyone else and still not getting ahead. The space within that contradiction is explosive. We saw it explode in the 1960s, and we can still smell the smoke today. I also explain “colorblindness” not as an aspiration but as a political tool intended to deny the responsibility of the state and free-market capitalism for the disparities that perpetuate racial and economic inequality for African Americans. When we cannot see the historical and contemporary uses of racism, it can be used to further dismantle the public institutions that often stand as the last buffer between poor and working-class people and the street. The hopes initially vested in Obama, who has instead acted to silence and quell Black rebellion, have brought the question to the fore: Can we get free in America?

No one knows what stage the current movement is in or where it is headed. We are very early in the most current rendering of the Black awakening. But we do know that there will be relentless efforts to subvert, redirect, and unravel the movement for Black lives, because when the Black movement goes into motion, it throws the entire mythology of the United States—freedom, democracy, and endless opportunity—into chaos. For the same reasons, the state ruthlessly crushed the last major movement of the Black freedom struggle. The stakes are even higher today because what seemed then like an alternative—greater Black inclusion in the political and economic establishment—has already come and failed. In this sense, the election of Obama completed that political project and has brought us back to this point.

Today, American life is much bleaker for the vast majority of people. The challenge before us is to connect the current struggle to end police terror in our communities with an even larger movement to transform this country in such a way that the police are no longer needed to respond to the consequences of that inequality. As the Black revolutionary C. L. R. James wrote on the historic and transformative power of the Black movement:

Let us not forget that in the Negro people, there sleep and are now awakening passions of a violence exceeding, perhaps, as far as these things can be compared, anything among the tremendous forces that capitalism has created. Anyone who knows them, who knows their history, is able to talk to them intimately, watches them at their own theatres, watches them at their dances, watches them in their churches, reads their press with a discerning eye, must recognize that although their social force may not be able to compare with the social force of a corresponding number of organized workers, the hatred of bourgeois society and the readiness to destroy it when the opportunity should present itself, rests among them to a degree greater than in any other section of the population in the United States.⁴⁰

Notes

Introduction

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and continue the struggle to demand justice. They have provided a way out of the darkness of police terror and violence. Those of us who take up the banner for freedom and justice are forever indebted to the bravery of these survivors.

About the Author



Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes on Black politics, social movements, and racial inequality in the United States. Her articles have been published in *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society*, *Jacobin*, *New Politics*, the *Guardian*, *In These Times*, *Black Agenda Report*, *Ms.*, *International Socialist Review*, *Aljazeera America*, and other publications. Taylor is assistant professor in the department of African American Studies at Princeton University.

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