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# Making All Black Lives Matter

*Reimagining Freedom in the  
Twenty-First Century*

Barbara Ransby



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When our political activism isn't rooted in a theory about transforming the world, it becomes narrow; when it is focused only on individual actors instead of larger systemic problems, it becomes short-sighted. We do have to deal with the current crisis in the short term. That's important. We have to have solutions for people's real-life problems, and we have to allow people to decide what those solutions are. We also have to create a vision that's much bigger than the one we have right now.

Patrisse Khan-Cullors, cofounder  
#BlackLivesMatter

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion briefly situates BLMM/M4BL in the context of a shifting political landscape and of a large and long Black radical history. From a discussion of the prison abolitionist politics of Ruth Gilmore, to the legacy of the 1970s Black feminist group the Combahee River Collective, to the hostile political climate that arose in the wake of the election of Donald Trump as president, this chapter explores BLMM/M4BL's current challenges and possible trajectory.

*Racial Capitalism · Abolition · Nonreformist Reforms · Intersectionality*

## EPILOGUE

These final pages offer my very personal reflections as a participant-observer in BLMM/M4BL for over two years. As a historian, I had never written about a movement in the making, and I found it a uniquely powerful, moving, and challenging experience. In the epilogue, I take off my researcher's hat and share deeply personal observations and sentiments about BLMM/M4BL and what I observed in the process of writing its story.

*Protofascism · Aislinn Pulley · Bree Newsome · Mary Hooks*

## Introduction

Black Lives Matter began as a social media hashtag in 2013 in response to state and vigilante violence against Black people, sparked by the vigilante murder of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, 2012, and the police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, 2014. The slogan has evolved into the battle cry of this generation of Black youth activists. Tens of thousands of people participated in Black Lives Matter protests in some form between 2013 and 2017. At the height of the protests a Pew poll indicated that over 40 percent of Americans were sympathetic to the Black Lives Matter movement, as they understood it.<sup>1</sup> In the same period, the term *Black Lives Matter* was tweeted over a hundred thousand times per day.<sup>2</sup> There is hardly a person in the United States who has not heard the now ubiquitous phrase.

The breadth and impact of *Black Lives Matter* the term has been extraordinary. It has penetrated our consciousness and our lexicon, from professional sports to prime time television, to corporate boardrooms, and to all sectors of the art world. The powerful phrase has resonated as a moral challenge, and as a slap in

the face, to the distorting and deceptive language of colorblindness and postracialism that gained traction in the United States after voters elected the country's first African American president in November 2008. While the symbolism was powerful, having a Black man in the White House as president did not change the material reality for some thirteen million Black people living in the United States—a reality that included economic inequality, the epidemic of mass incarceration, and various forms of unchecked state violence. The protest and transformative justice movement that emerged under the banner of the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLMM), and later the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), rejected representative politics as a stand-in for substantive change in the condition of Black people's lives. The 2014 uprising in Ferguson, Missouri, was not the beginning of that fight, but it was a pivot.

What are the forces, who are the individuals, and what are the underlying ideas that have animated, nurtured, and sustained this movement? The answer is complicated, but one important fact stands out. Black feminist politics have been the ideological bedrock of Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives. Black women have been prominent in leadership and as spokespersons, and have insisted on being recognized as such. The movement has also addressed the racism and violence experienced by the LGBTQIA communities. Organizers have enacted a Black feminist intersectional praxis in the campaigns, documents, and vision of the major BLMM/M4BL organizations.<sup>3</sup> And it is important to note that while Black feminist ideas had influenced many veteran BLMM/M4BL organizers before they entered this phase of the movement, these ideas have also circulated widely among new activists and protesters, giving women (and men) who had not previously been introduced to

Black feminism an entry point and a larger vision for change and transformation. The new activists have encountered Black feminist terms and concepts like *intersectionality* in the context of struggle, rather than simply through textbooks or in college classrooms. Finally, BLMM/M4BL organizations have championed a grassroots, group-centered approach to leadership very much akin to the teachings of Black Freedom Movement icon Ella Baker (1903–86).

This movement has also patently rejected the hierarchical hetero-patriarchal politics of respectability. Organizers have eschewed values that privilege the so-called best and brightest, emphasizing the needs of the most marginal and often-maligned sectors of the Black community: those who bear the brunt of state violence, from police bullets and batons to neoliberal policies of abandonment and incarceration. Black feminist politics and sensibilities have been the intellectual lifeblood of this movement and its practices. This is the first time in the history of US social movements that Black feminist politics have defined the frame for a multi-issue, Black-led mass struggle that did not primarily or exclusively focus on women. I use the term *Black-led mass struggle* because it is decidedly not a Black-only struggle, and it is not only for Black liberation but rather contextualizes the oppression, exploitation, and liberation of Black poor and working-class people within the simple understanding, at least in the US context, that “once all Black people are free, all people will be free.” In other words, poor Black people are represented in all categories of the oppressed in the United States. They are immigrants. They are poor and working class. They are disabled. They are indigenous. They are LGBTQIA. They are Latinx and Afro-Asians. They are also Muslim and other religious minorities, and the list goes on. So to realize the liberation

of “all” Black people means undoing systems of injustice that impact all other oppressed groups as well.

In addition to being distinct in its inclusivity, this new movement is defined by action—street protests, uprisings, and various forms of direct action—and it is at its heart a visionary movement, calling not only for reforms but for systemic and fundamental change. Many of its participants identify as abolitionists, imagining a world without prisons or police. Others envision lives without the sanctions and violence that attempt to regulate their bodies, their gender expressions, and their sexuality. And others still dare to imagine a postcapitalist society in which competition, greed, gross wealth disparity, and various forms of waste and excess do not rule the day and the billionaire class do not rule over all of us. In the spirit of Black literary genius James Baldwin, they are “demanding the impossible,” or the seemingly impossible.

Even though “Black Lives Matter” is how the movement has been most commonly referenced, the Black Lives Matter Global Network (BLMGN) is only one organization within a larger constellation of groups that fall under the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), which is both an umbrella term and a coalition that includes dozens of local and national organizations. For purposes of inclusivity I will use the combined term—Black Lives Matter Movement and the Movement for Black Lives (BLMM/M4BL)—to refer to the movement as a whole encompassing both affiliated and unaffiliated forces that have emerged or gained traction post-2012, through their protests and organizing efforts against anti-Black racism, especially as it manifests in various forms of police, state, and vigilante violence. When referring to specific organizations only, I will use those specific organizational names.<sup>4</sup>

BLMM/M4BL includes an assemblage of dozens of organizations and individuals that are actively in one another’s orbit, having collaborated, debated, and collectively employed an array of tactics together: from bold direct actions to lobbying politicians and creating detailed policy documents—most notably, the “Vision for Black Lives” platform, released in August 2016. It also includes a mass base of followers and supporters, who may not be formally affiliated with any of the lead organizations but are supportive of and sympathetic toward the spirit of the movement and are angered by the practices, policies, and events that sparked it. The different sectors don’t always agree, and there have been some partings of the ways, but for the most part there is a sense of camaraderie—that they are a political family with a critical core holding them together. Most of the organizations are now part of the M4BL coalition founded in December 2014.

The origin story of the Twitter hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has been well documented. In the wake of George Zimmerman’s acquittal for the killing of unarmed Black teenager Trayvon Martin in Florida in 2012, Oakland-based activist Alicia Garza, like millions of others, was heartbroken, frustrated, and angry when she wrote what she termed a love letter to Black people, ending it with a version of the phrase “Black Lives Matter (BLM).” She then joined forces with two sister-activists, Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors (now Patrisse Khan-Cullors), to create a hashtag and social media platform under that same banner. The term took off on Twitter and Facebook in August 2014 with the rise of collective action in Ferguson, Missouri.<sup>5</sup>

Trayvon Martin’s murder in 2012 and Zimmerman’s acquittal in 2013 sparked nationwide protests; however, it was in the context of the police killing of unarmed teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014, and the widely televised and



tweeted mass protests that followed, that the slogan Black Lives Matter migrated from the virtual world of social media to the real politics of the street. Millions around the world watched searing images on television and social media as a small midwestern Black community stood up to state violence, and the devaluation of Black life, in a way the world had not seen in decades.<sup>6</sup>

The Ferguson uprising, an organic mass rebellion sparked by Brown's death at the hands of a member of a notoriously racist local police force, was a defining moment for the early twenty-first-century Black Freedom struggle. Hundreds of people took to the streets and made them their own. They defied state power and exposed what many outside the Black community would rather ignore—the violent underbelly of racial capitalism and systemic racism. And the police did indeed show their true colors by firing teargas and rubber bullets and rough-handling peaceful demonstrators. In the summer and fall of 2014, Ferguson became the epicenter of not only Black resistance but resistance to the neoliberal state and its violent tactics of suppression and control.<sup>7</sup> It was evident that, while Brown's killing was the catalyst, the Black working class of Ferguson was angry about much more, and their anger resonated and reverberated around the country and beyond.

Three weeks after the Ferguson uprising began, Patrisse Khan-Cullors teamed up with activist Darnell Moore to organize #BLM's online followers to conduct solidarity freedom rides that would lend support to the protesters in Ferguson. Over five hundred heeded the call. The Black Lives Matter Network, later the BLMGN, grew out of that action. As of spring 2017, it had forty-three chapters in three countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada), a small paid staff, and a global profile.<sup>8</sup> But the Black Lives Matter Network and its outgrowth, the BLMGN, are only part of the story.

In parallel, and in some cases even before the formation of the BLMGN, other national and regional organizations were formed that were absolutely central to the movement organizing that has unfolded. They include the Chicago-based national Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100), with an engaged membership of young adults between eighteen and thirty-five years old, in chapters around the country; the Dream Defenders, a people of color-led multiracial group in Florida; the St. Louis-based Organization for Black Struggle; and Million Hoodies Movement for Justice, a people of color-led multiracial national group based in New York City.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, there is a whole ecosystem of local organizations that either emerged or grew larger in size and influence in response to killing after killing after killing: Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle in Baltimore, the Justice League in New York (founded before 2014), and the Let Us Breathe Collective in Chicago. Ferguson itself gave rise to Millennial Activists United, Tribe X, Hands Up United (led by charismatic young poet-activist Tef Poe), and Lost Voices (a group formed literally through protest encampments on the streets of Ferguson in the thick of the uprising.) The list goes on.

There is also a third tier of relatively new movement organizations that are serving a very special function. They nurture, sustain, and support base-building organizations while at the same time connecting them to one another through new movement infrastructures, a network of relationships, and a growing movement culture. These groups, which are less visible, often operating under the radar of the public, are doing a kind of "political quilting" that seeks to bolster awareness across movement work. They function in the interstitial spaces between organizations, providing political education and skills and tactical training

while navigating the temporal spaces between high and low periods of movement activity.<sup>10</sup>

In the twenty-first-century BLMM/M4BL moment, there are three very different groups that play the role of political quilters. They are the Blackbird team; the leadership-training organization BOLD (Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity), based largely in Miami; and the Oakland-centered BlackOUT Collective. Each group has a distinctive history and its own unique role in movement-support work. All three embrace, in one way or another, a Black feminist ethos and politics, and Black feminist women and LGBTQIA folk are prominent in their leadership.

Incidents of police violence and other forms of state and vigilante violence were the catalysts for the upsurge in Black resistance between 2014 and 2016, replicating the primary trigger mechanism for Black rebellion throughout the twentieth century. Protests were sparked and accelerated by roughly a dozen high-profile police killings over an extraordinarily intense two-year period, but they are part of a much longer trajectory.<sup>11</sup> Police violence and the lack of accountability were at the center of much of the protesters' anger, but the list of demands, and the overall analysis of most movement organizations, is far more expansive. Movement organizers have pointed out that the lack of affordable housing, low wages, the erosion of public services, the lack of jobs, and spiraling personal debt have all facilitated the slow death of tens of thousands of Black people deemed disposable to this labor-"light" economy of twenty-first-century racial capitalism, to which many are increasingly superfluous.

The election of racist and misogynist demagogue Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States in November 2016 represented an indirect backlash against the radical antiracism of BLMM/M4BL. This new administration in

Washington, with all of its belligerence and appeals to white nationalists, also challenged and impacted the movement in unexpected ways, catapulting it into a new phase of activity focused on broad-based united front and coalition work. In early 2017, the M4BL coalition was the catalyst for a cross-movement campaign under the rubric "Beyond the Moment," which both marked the fiftieth anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s historic anti-imperialist "Beyond Vietnam" speech and called for new strategies of resistance. It was launched by M4BL and anchored by the staff of Blackbird. As of December 2017, *Beyond the Moment* had evolved into a new coalition called "The Majority," which is still in formation as we go to press with this book.

So five years after Trayvon Martin's murder, this book takes stock and takes the pulse of a movement that is still very much alive but is in transition. It does not purport to be comprehensive. Rather it is an analytical overview of the evolving BLMM/M4BL that will hopefully provide the basis for further research, discussion, debate, and organizing. This is not a book about police killings but about the responses to them. It is about the central role of visionary young Black activists who, inspired by Black feminist teachings and practice, are embracing new modes of leadership as they attempt to build a movement that creates transformative possibilities.

In compiling material for this book, I have relied on personal interviews with participants in the movement; traditional and social media archives; government and civil rights reports; and an informal collection of flyers, speeches, descriptions of public programs, and other unprocessed material and ephemera, from individual organizers and activists, in the author's possession. I have also relied on my own experiences as a participant-observer at dozens of meetings, rallies, retreats, and think tanks, as well

as on personal conversations. I have taken meticulous care not to violate any confidences or expose any material that would undermine the ongoing work to which I remain committed. I am confident that I have adhered to this principle without compromising the truth-telling mission of the book.

Five recently published books have also been important resources. They are Jamala Rogers's firsthand account of the Black struggle in St. Louis and Ferguson, *Ferguson Is America: Roots of Rebellion*; Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*; Angela Y. Davis's *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*; Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton's edited collection, *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*; and Patrisse Khan-Cullors and asha bandele's *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*. Forthcoming books by Charlene Carruthers and Alicia Garza will undoubtedly shed more light on this important social movement. I express my gratitude to all of these authors—people whom I respect as friends and comrades—as well as to scholars and movement intellectuals. Most important, my gratitude goes to the leaders of BLMM/M4BL for their courage, tenacity, creativity, perseverance, and heart.

## ONE

## Roots and Recalibrated Expectations

### *Prologue to a Movement*

No movement emerges out of thin air. There is always a prologue, and a prologue to the prologue. In other words, there is always a set of conditions and circumstances that set the stage for movements to emerge. Some of that stage-setting is historical, having little to do with the activists and organizers themselves but rather with the political and economic climate and an array of social realities beyond their immediate control. But then there is human agency: what we as human beings, as oppressed people, as conscientious allies of the oppressed, do (or don't do) in response to the conditions and circumstances we encounter. Nothing is predetermined or dictated by history. However, historical conditions both create and limit possibilities for change. And all individual participants in this moment may not even be fully aware of the history on which they stand. Nevertheless, it is there. What is also there is an ever-shifting political reality that, in this case, includes the 2008 election of the nation's first Black president and its implications for Black organizing.



So what is the political genealogy of the Black Lives Matter Movement/Movement for Black Lives (BLMM/M4BL)? In the 1990s, the HIV/AIDS epidemic ravaged vulnerable populations worldwide, including Black gay men and Black intravenous drug users. In the United States, organizations emerged, often led by Black gay men and lesbians, that were intent on challenging the devastation of AIDS in Black communities but also on recognizing Black LGBTQIA folk in our communities. Organizations from Bebash in Philadelphia to the Minority AIDS Project in Los Angeles, to the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, to the National Minority AIDS Council all rose up to respond to the suffering of Black people at the center of the epidemic and to insist upon recognizing the voices and leadership of Black gay/queer folk in the fights against HIV/AIDS and for access to treatment. People like Essex Hemphill, Pat Parker, Craig G. Harris, Cheryl Clark, Barbara Smith, Joseph Beam, Gary Paul, and filmmaker Marlon Riggs, to name just a few, through their activism and art manifested the radical Black queer politics that many members of BLMM/M4BL now embrace. Cathy Cohen, herself a leader of the Black AIDS Mobilizations (BAM), points out that the central role Black feminists and Black gay/queer activists play is essential to the Black radical tradition and is too often left out. This erasure, she insists, “must be corrected.”<sup>1</sup> This legacy is a part of the political roots of BLMM/M4BL.

In August 2005, Katrina, a devastating category 5 hurricane, hit the southern Gulf coast of the United States, including the historic, predominately Black city of New Orleans. Local officials were ill-prepared, and the federal government under President George W. Bush was callously slow and inept in its response. As a result, thousands were left to suffer and fend for themselves as sewage-contaminated water flooded homes and hospitals

and washed away lives and livelihoods. Those suffering and dying in Katrina’s wake were disproportionately Black and poor. Americans watched as the US government’s blatant disregard for Black pain and death was on full display. As Milwaukee M4BL queer and gender-nonconforming organizer M. Adams put it eloquently, “Katrina and its aftermath felt particularly important to the general conscious-raising of Black folk, and the millennial generation in particular. It in some ways laid the ground to articulate the state’s negligence as violent—and it helped folk question what the function of a government/state is. It was an incredible example and symbol of many forms of structural anti-Black racism.”<sup>2</sup>

Another critical antecedent to the emergence of BLMM/M4BL goes back to June 1998 and the launch in Chicago of the Black Radical Congress (BRC), a coalition of Black left organizers and intellectuals responding to the devastating impact of neoliberal policies on the Black community, and to the dearth of responsive Black leadership.<sup>3</sup> The BRC revived coalitional Black left organizing, linked disparate radical traditions, made Black feminism central, and confronted white supremacy and racial capitalism head on. Michael Brown was only two years old in 1998. Twitter had not been invented. Facebook was in its infancy. It was another time.

I, along with Manning Marable, Leith Mullings, Bill Fletcher Jr., and Abdul Alkalimat, was one of the founders of the BRC. The concept behind the BRC was to create a Black left pole, as Fletcher described it: to make the Black radical tradition and the Black Left more visible and distinguish it from a mainstream Black political impulse that was invested in representational race politics and the integration of Black elites into existing hierarchies. For Black feminists like myself, the BRC was also a

direct response to the 1995 Million Man March, which sought to re-establish the legitimacy of male dominance in Black politics while simultaneously celebrating Black capitalism and patriarchy.<sup>4</sup> We rejected this outright and insisted there was another Black liberation agenda that had to be written and advanced. For many of us that agenda was grounded in Black feminist praxis, one that was multi-issued, anticapitalist, anti-imperialist, and affirming of the full breadth of our humanity and community. The BRC's expansive liberatory agenda was relevant not only to Black women and Black people but to all oppressed people.

In spite of its many mistakes, the BRC was an important landmark in the re-emergence of a new Black Left. One of its most significant achievements is that it managed to bring together the three large, contentious, and sometimes overlapping streams of the Black radical tradition in the US context: Black socialist and communist forces of various stripes, radical Black feminists, and revolutionary nationalists and pan-Africanists. Personalities ranged from a creatively provocative and often irascible poet, Amiri Baraka, to Combahee River Collective cofounder and lesbian feminist leader Barbara Smith. Scholar-activist Cornel West, Communist Party leader Jarvis Tyner, and North Carolina labor activists Rukiya and Ajamu Dillahunt were all active participants. Revolutionary nationalists like Makungu Akinyela, Saladin Muhammad, and Sam Anderson were also in the mix. The unity we achieved in late twentieth-century Black politics by bringing this unlikely cast of characters together was not only unprecedented but, for the time it lasted, principled. That is, it was not simply a coalition of convenience. Under Bill Fletcher Jr.'s able and persistent guidance, the BRC navigated its way through about a half dozen national planning meetings leading up to the congress that was held on the campus of the University of

Illinois at Chicago in June 1998 and that had some two thousand participants. Fletcher's tenacity, vision, and leadership in this effort cannot be overstated. A long-time labor organizer, leftist, and movement strategist, Fletcher saw a political void and was determined to help the BRC fill it. He assuaged egos, crafted potentially divisive unity documents, and chaired a number of unwieldy marathon meetings to hold us together. A significant characteristic of the BRC, as a sixteen-year precursor to BLMM/M4BL, is its gender politics, which situated a Black feminist intersectional paradigm prominently within the larger framework of Black left and radical thought.

The organization's feminist caucus represented a coming together of an amazing intergenerational group of Black feminists, including Cathy Cohen, Lisa Crooms, Sherie Randolph, Lisa Brock, Cheryl I. Harris, Fran Beal, Barbara Smith, Tracye Matthews, Leith Mullings, Lynette Jackson, Ashanki Binta, Jamala Rogers, Jennifer Hamer, Helen Neville, and dozens more. Many of the BRC participants became mentors, teachers, allies, advisors, and supporters of the BLMM/M4BL organizers in the 2010s.<sup>5</sup>

Two other organizations are also important parts of the political tradition from which BLMM/M4BL emerged: Critical Resistance (CR) and INCITE! Women of Color against Violence. The anti-state violence and prison abolition movements of which these groups are a part were largely launched and are led by Black feminists and feminists of color. The role of the two groups in setting the stage for BLMM/M4BL in particular cannot be overstated. These movement organizations, with the visionary demand for prison abolition at their center and their insistence that solutions to violence will not be found in the use of coercive state power, created a language, an analytical frame, a database, and a powerful set of narratives that indict the corrosive

and racist nature of the prison-industrial complex (PIC), in which police, sheriff's departments, and other law enforcement entities and carceral projects are embedded. They wrote books, convened conferences, and conducted trainings for a whole generation of activists. Some BLMM/M4BL leaders who are now in their thirties participated in these organizations, and many more read the books and articles written by the radical scholar-activists who led and cofounded INCITE! and CR.

CR was founded in 1997 by Angela Y. Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Rose Braz and officially launched in 1998 (the same year as the BRC) in Berkeley, California, at a conference attended by thirty-five hundred people. The group describes its vision this way: "Critical Resistance is building a member-led and member-run grassroots movement to challenge the use of punishment to 'cure' complicated social problems. We know that more policing and imprisonment will not make us safer. Instead, we know that things like food, housing, and freedom are what create healthy, stable neighborhoods and communities. We work to prevent people from being arrested or locked up in prison. In all our work, we organize to build power and to stop the devastation that the reliance on imprisonment and policing has brought to ourselves, our families, and our communities."<sup>6</sup> An understanding of the role of the police, and their often-unchecked power in the larger PIC, is one of the key precepts upon which BLMM/M4BL's anti-police violence political program is built. Prisons, as Davis puts it, facilitate the "disappearing" of people; they are the destination point, the "containers," for the new human chattel. In all of this, the police are the purveyors and enablers of the prison industry, and police violence as a consequence is a critical ingredient in terrorizing communities into submission. The analytical framework of the PIC, a term coined by Mike Davis (no relation

to Angela), and popularized and advanced in Angela Davis's 1998 article in the magazine *Colorlines*, helped to set the stage for anti-prison and anti-police violence work in the 2010s.

INCITE!, founded in 2000 and growing out of the anti-domestic violence movement, describes the evolution of its work as follows: "It is impossible to seriously address sexual and intimate partner violence within communities of color without addressing these larger structures of violence (including militarism, attacks on immigrants' rights and Indigenous treaty rights, the proliferation of prisons, economic neo-colonialism, the medical industry, and more). So, our organizing is focused on places where state violence and sexual/intimate partner violence intersect."<sup>7</sup>

A number of books have emerged from INCITE!'s work that have powerfully impacted the current organizing culture and whole generations of feminists of color and others: *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology* (2006) and *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* (2007), written and edited collectively by INCITE! members; and Beth E. Richie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation* (2012). Ruth Wilson Gilmore's landmark book on California's prison system, *Golden Gulag* (2007), and Angela Davis's *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003) were also critical foundational texts.<sup>8</sup> These influential publications collectively argue for several things. One is the ways in which overreliance on the state for protection—for example, in cases of domestic violence—has fed the buildup of the carceral state in unexpected ways. Richie cautions against reflexively calling for more arrests and longer prison sentences, even for crimes we deem deplorable, because the way in which police are trained to intervene often makes situations worse and more dangerous when poor Black people are involved. She warns organizers of the trap of foundation funding, which can derail or dilute the intended



politics of a given group.<sup>9</sup> And finally, all of these authors stress leadership by those most affected by violence—poor and working-class women of color. The centering of the most marginalized sectors of a community, the critique of prisons and police, and the skepticism about foundation funding have all carried over to the work and values of BLMM/M4BL.

The rise of mass incarceration in the 1990s and early 2000s and of the carceral state, or as Richie terms it, “the prison nation,” along with the criminalization of Black bodies, especially those of Black poor, women, and queer folks, laid the political groundwork for the grassroots campaigns and insurgent actions that have characterized the BLMM/M4BL moment. The popular success of Michelle Alexander’s 2010 book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, which appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than a year, though predated by the groundbreaking praxis of INCITE! and CR, nevertheless helped to educate and sensitize a mass audience to the injustices and inhumanity of our current carceral system. Alexander offered her readers the following provocative facts: More Black men were under the control of the criminal justice system in 2010 than had been enslaved in 1850. Even after serving their sentences, mostly for nonviolent drug offenses, former felons are relegated to the status of second-class citizenship in what Alexander calls a “racial caste system,” in which they are denied full voting rights, kept under harsh surveillance, excluded from public housing and many student-funding opportunities, and banned from certain jobs.<sup>10</sup> Alexander’s widely circulated statistics and compelling language animated the public discourse and furthered public understanding of race, policing, and prisons in the years leading up to 2014.

Angela Davis connected the temporal dots this way in her 2016 book, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*: “Over the last two decades I would say, there has actually been sustained organizing against police violence, racism, racist police violence, against prisons, the prison industrial complex, and I think the sustained protests we are seeing now have a great deal to do with that organizing. They reflect the fact that the political consciousness in so many communities is so much higher than people think.”<sup>11</sup> Angela Davis herself has done a great deal to advance critical and radical political concerns in specific and deliberate ways. She is a powerful symbol of resistance for this generation of activists, one who has also provided moral and political support to the movement in myriad ways.

It is worthwhile saying a few words about Davis as a legendary figure in Black liberation movement history, and as a Black feminist organizer, because her influence on this generation of activists has been significant. Angela Davis’s story and persona in many ways embody the Black radical internationalism of the 1960s and ’70s and the radical Black feminism that came a bit later. She first came into public view as a young communist intellectual fired from her teaching job at the University of California by then-governor Ronald Reagan because of her left-wing political views. However, she is best known as a fugitive, and then political prisoner (1970–72), who was wrongly accused of involvement in the failed rescue of another political prisoner—George Jackson, one of the activist Soledad Brothers, who had been her loving friend and comrade. Her iconic Afro and raised fist in the courtroom, in defiance of her captors, became a symbol of Black resistance for an entire generation. “Free Angela” was a movement that circled the globe.

Once an international campaign led to Angela's release in 1972, she dedicated her life's work to prisoner solidarity and prison abolition. She is unapologetic in her feminist, anti-imperialist, and anticapitalist politics. For decades, she has spoken widely and participated in a number of progressive and radical organizations. The announcement that she is going to appear in any given city immediately produces overflow crowds, even at mammoth venues that include many young people. She has a fan club of ardent admirers, to be sure. But the source of her appeal is more than that. More than most other political celebrity figures of the twentieth century, Angela Davis has used her name and her fame in the service of consciousness-raising, mobilizing, and organizing. And she has taken on controversial issues within Black progressive circles: feminist and queer politics, solidarity with Palestine, and prison abolition. She has moved the needle and the consensus on all three. When Angela Davis was a political prisoner in the early 1970s, most BLMM/M4BL organizers had not yet been born. Still, her impact on them is palpable.

Many young activists I have spoken to over the years were introduced to the concepts of the PIC and mass incarceration by listening to, or reading the writings of, Angela Davis. They paid attention *because* she was Angela Davis, but her ideas resonated and were incorporated into their own thinking and organizing. Not surprisingly, Davis was welcomed with open arms when she visited Ferguson two months after the initial uprising. Her collaborative work and her own example have helped to set the stage for the emergence of BLMM/M4BL, with its criticism of state violence, police, hetero-patriarchy, and empire and its open expressions of solidarity with Palestinians, which are reflected in several BLMM/M4BL travel delegations. Davis noted the historical significance of Ferguson when she returned a second time the

following year: "Like everyone else who identifies with current struggles against racism and police violence, I have uttered the words 'Ferguson' and 'Michael Brown' innumerable times. Both inside and outside the country—for me as for people throughout the world—the very mention of Ferguson evokes struggle, perseverance, courage, and a collective vision of the future."<sup>12</sup> Davis is on the advisory board of the Dream Defenders.

In terms of mainstream politics, one of the most significant backdrops to the emergence of BLMM/M4BL, and an important factor in understanding its historical significance, was the presidential election of 2008. Many initially considered Barack Obama's election as the nation's first African American president to be a milestone in the long march of racial progress. He won against the odds, with idealistic youth in the forefront, with a progressive populist message, and with legions of young white supporters. However, the dialectic of Obama's victory was a complicated one, as a number of provocative new books on the subject attest.<sup>13</sup> African Americans initially rallied around him, supporting him almost unanimously at the polls and defending him from criticism during his first year or so in office. There was a kind of familial protectiveness of the new commander in chief, as most African Americans struggled in disbelief that he had actually won. Most Black people were simply proud to see a Black man in the White House.

The initial reluctance to criticize Obama by Black communities was also influenced by the nasty racist backlash from the Republicans in Congress and beyond. Obama was immediately the subject of vulgar and unprecedented insults, threats, and attacks on his legitimacy and integrity. Members of the so-called birther movement (led by none other than the now forty-fifth US president, Donald Trump) raised doubts about his citizenship, and many others capitalized on Islamophobia by insinuating that



the self-proclaimed Christian was a Muslim (and thus perhaps a terrorist). The list goes on. All of these attacks prompted a defensive reflex in the Black community.

The honeymoon eventually wore off for many, and Black activists confronted the hard reality that simply having a Black family in the White House was not going to save Black families in general. And, moreover, just because Obama was being criticized and attacked from the conservative right did not mean there were no legitimate criticisms to be made by Black people and the Left in general. The ravages of mass incarceration; the erosion of decent-paying union jobs; the evisceration of public services and the overall downsizing of the economy from the 1980s to 2008; and the financial foreclosure crisis hit many Black communities very hard. Added to this were the constant specters of police violence, including harassment, racial profiling, and the killing of Black civilians. Many poor and working-class African Americans were not simply invested in the symbolism of a Black president but had placed hope in his message that resource-draining wars and policies favoring the 1 percent would end and their communities would enjoy tangible benefits. It did not pan out that way. Obama did not deliver. As journalist Jelani Cobb observed, "Until there was a black Presidency it was impossible to conceive of the limitations of one."<sup>14</sup>

Obama's election in 2008 meant many things to many people. Many white liberals hoped the election would represent some form of racial redemption, perhaps secretly hoping that we could be done with race once and for all, or at least that "resolution" of the "race problem" was within our grasp. While no reasonable person could argue that race or racism had been obliterated—that hundreds of years of white supremacy had been swept away in one fell swoop—many wanted to believe that the blatant and

unapologetic anti-Black racism of the past had been finally put to rest. To many in the mainstream, the postracial ideal was a seductive one, made all the more visually appealing by the handsome and wholesome, brown-skinned First Family. In addition to white liberals who hoped for a transcendence of race through the Oval Office, Black elites had other hopes and dreams, chief among them that the racial glass ceiling would be cracked, if not broken.

It is important to note that there has indeed been progress for some Black folk. There are more Black millionaires and billionaires, CEOs, and highly paid celebrities than ever before. Still, Black poverty and suffering remain dire. And there is simultaneously greater economic disparity within Black America than ever before. Instead of a trickle down of resources from wealthy Black people to the Black poor, the growth of a more visible, albeit small, Black political and economic elite has obscured the suffering below. If media celebrities like Oprah can earn millions, and politicians like Obama can win the White House, racial barriers to Black progress no longer exist, right? This simplistic and flawed analysis permeated popular discourse in the Obama era.

However, BLMM/M4BL challenged this notion head on. BYP100 director, and a leader in the BLMM/M4BL, Charlene Carruthers described her disillusionment with Obama: "I voted for him when he ran for senate, and I voted for him when he ran for president for the first time. It was with the understanding that there was an optimism and a sentiment of progressivism that his platform at least sought to achieve. And shortly after, there was a wakeup call, again, about the power of politicians in actually transforming society. . . . And so what I've learned and what I hope many of us learned again are the limitations of any politician to change our lives or to transform our lives."<sup>15</sup> In other words, Carruthers came into BYP100 organizing in 2013

after the murder of Trayvon Martin with diminished expectations about finding solutions through conventional political channels and with diminished confidence in mainstream Black leadership.

Echoing Carruthers's sentiments, St. Louis poet and activist Tef Poe made the following rhetorical appeal in an open letter to the president: "We know you know this is wrong, so the disconnect between your words and your personal convictions has raised many questions in the black community. Now we are organizing against you and members of your party as though we didn't vote for you to begin with. This saddens me, because we rooted for you. We love you and want to sing praises of you to our children, but first we need a statement of solidarity from you to the young black people facing the perils of police brutality. We will not get this statement, and we know it."<sup>16</sup> A coming to terms with the limits of what a Black leader at the helm of this country could, or would, really achieve for the masses of Black people set the stage for the explosion of protests and organizing that began in 2012, reemerged with even greater strength in 2014, and was sustained throughout 2016.

Finally, in addition to the decreased Black confidence in Obama, on the one hand, and the rich political legacy and language of prior Black and people of color-led resistance movements like BRC, CR, and INCITE!, on the other, there was a shift in US politics overall in the years leading up to BLMM/M4BL that created the possibility for new alliances and a base of progressive white supporters and fellow activists. That shift was represented by the massive Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement that exposed and challenged wealth disparity, the tyranny of the super-rich 1 percent of the population, and the excesses of capitalism overall. It also revived direct action and civil dis-

obedience tactics as legitimate forms of political expression. Even though there were Black, Latinx, and antiracist white forces within OWS, the movement overall failed to embrace the centrality of race and white supremacy in the matrix of injustice. It remained overwhelmingly white, and whatever antiracist analysis was present was tepid at best.<sup>17</sup> That was a significant weakness.

All of these movements and events nevertheless are important backdrops to BLMM/M4BL. Thousands of white protesters participated in BLMM/M4BL network actions and even initially joined some BLMGN chapters around the country.<sup>18</sup> It is hard to imagine that many of them had not been either part of, or influenced by, OWS in the years prior. As historian and activist Keeanga Yamahtta Taylor points out in her book *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, the 2011 execution in Georgia of Troy Davis, a Black man who many felt was unjustly convicted of murder in 1991, was another watershed moment for this generation of activists. The case inspired a nationwide protest movement and forced many people to take a closer look at the violence inherent in the current criminal justice system.<sup>19</sup>

The individual political histories of key BLMM/M4BL leaders are as important as the earlier campaigns to our understanding of the roots of this movement. The crop of thirty or so BLMM/M4BL lead organizers who have been consistently visible and pivotal to the work at the national level since 2014 have come to the movement with extensive experience in radical grassroots organizing and in the progressive nonprofit worlds. Alicia Garza, for example, worked for P.O.W.E.R. (People Organized to Win Employment Rights), a Bay Area grassroots economic justice group that works to fight gentrification and advocates on behalf of youth. She had participated in a number

of progressive and leftist campaigns in the Bay Area before 2014, including the protests after the transit-police shooting of Oscar Grant on New Year's Day 2009. Her job as a director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance continues the long-standing Black feminist charge to fight alongside poor and oppressed women. As a politically engaged queer Black woman married to a transgender man (Malachi Garza, also an activist), she has made LGBTQIA issues central to her larger political worldview and brought those politics with her to BLMGN.<sup>20</sup>

Charlene Carruthers of BYP100 worked for the Women's Media Group and Color of Change before bringing her skills to BYP100. She describes her own political evolution this way: "I grew up on the South Side of Chicago. My family could be best described as working-class. Some of my earliest experiences with power and beginning to understand the kind of world we live in were at the welfare office with my mother, or hearing my father tell stories about people he'd trained receiving promotions over him." And then she visited South Africa on a study abroad program while she was at Illinois Wesleyan University. In her words, that experience in South Africa "expanded my consciousness around what it meant to be Black on a global level."<sup>21</sup>

Born of Nigerian immigrant parents, Opal Tometi learned early on about the combined injustice of colonialism and US-based racism. She emerged as one of the most strident advocates for the rights of Black immigrants within the larger immigrant rights movement years ago, helping to form the Black and Brown Coalition of Arizona in response to the racist, anti-immigrant policies of Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio. During her time as a college student at the University of Arizona, Opal recalled, "People [undocumented immigrants trying to find safe haven] were dying in the desert just miles from my campus."<sup>22</sup>

She was motivated to get involved, and she did. As of 2017, she continues to serve as executive director of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration, a formidable national organization. It is also significant that before undertaking her work in the immigrant rights movement, Tometi worked as a caseworker for victims of domestic violence, which further solidified her emerging feminist politics.<sup>23</sup>

Patrisse Khan-Cullors has led campaigns against mass incarceration for years. She began her political activism as a teenager in Los Angeles, where she was influenced by the experiences of her own family. Her dad spent time in and out of California prisons on various drug charges and died in a homeless shelter in 2009. At age twenty, her beloved older brother was wrongfully arrested and thrown into the Los Angeles county jail, where he was beaten unconscious by guards. He was later diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Trying to make sense of how racism and the carceral state had caused so much pain and suffering in her own family, Patrisse turned to political organizing. She began volunteering, first with the LA Bus Riders Union and later with the Labor Strategy Center; both organizations are West Coast centers for multi-issue radical politics and popular education. With an irresistible smile and outgoing personality, Khan-Cullors is the kind of street organizer who inspires people to stop and listen, even when she is talking about a rather somber subject. She went on to lead the Coalition to End Sheriff Violence in Los Angeles and founded the advocacy coalition Dignity and Power Now. In the process she came out as queer and deepened her Black feminist consciousness and commitments.<sup>24</sup>

In this chapter, in truncated fashion, I have attempted to trace some of the political genealogy of BLM/M4BL—the personal stories of just a handful of its leaders, as well as some of

the conditions and circumstances and earlier phases of organizing that laid the groundwork for BLMM/M<sub>4</sub>BL and made its emergence possible. The strength, determination, and fierce agency of hundreds of dedicated young Black organizers made a possibility into a reality.

## TWO

## Justice for Trayvon

### *The Spark*

If the police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson in summer 2014 was the fire that signaled the full-blown emergence of the Black Lives Matter Movement and Movement for Black Lives (BLMM/M<sub>4</sub>BL), then the vigilante murder with impunity of young Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, in February 2012 was the spark. Trayvon Martin was a Black teenager coming back from buying snacks on a rainy Florida night in the winter of 2012, when he unknowingly stumbled into the path of George Zimmerman. An overly zealous community patrol volunteer, Zimmerman saw a young Black man wearing a hoodie sweatshirt and assumed the worst. In a crude and deadly case of racial profiling, Zimmerman saw Trayvon's skin color and profile and concluded he was up to no good. Ignoring the 911 operator's instructions not to pursue Martin, Zimmerman did so anyway, complaining, "F—king punks . . . they always get away." He eventually caught up with Martin and, under circumstances that are still unclear, shot him to death, claiming self-defense. When the story first broke and photos of the handsome, baby-faced Black teenager