

**when [REDACTED]  
they [REDACTED]  
call you [REDACTED]  
a [REDACTED]  
terrorist [REDACTED]**

A BLACK LIVES MATTER MEMOIR

**patrisse khan-cullors  
AND  
asha bandele**



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*For my ancestors, and for my mother, Cherice Simpson; my fathers, Gabriel Brignac and Alton Cullors; for all my siblings; and for my new family, Janaya Khan and Shine Khan-Cullors, this book is from you and for you. Thank you for holding me down and reminding me why I am able to heal.*

—PATRISSE

*For Nisa and for Aundre and for all of our children, the ones who survive, the ones who do not.*

*And for Victoria, who deserves the sun, the moon, the stars and Coney Island. And Victoria, who first believed, who has always believed.*

—asha

*And for the movement that gives us hope, and the families in whose names we serve, we will not stop pushing for a world in which we can raise all of our children in peace and with dignity.*

—PATRISSE AND asha

# introduction

## WE ARE STARDUST

*I write to keep in contact with our ancestors and to spread truth to people.*

SONIA SANCHEZ

**Days after the elections of 2016, asha sent me a link** to a talk by astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson. We have to have hope, she says to me across 3,000 miles, she in Brooklyn, me in Los Angeles. We listen together as Dr. deGrasse Tyson explains that the very atoms and molecules in our bodies are traceable to the crucibles in the centers of stars that once upon a time exploded into gas clouds. And those gas clouds formed other stars and those stars possessed the divine-right mix of properties needed to create not only planets, including our own, but also people, including us, me and her. He is saying that not only are we in the universe,

but that the universe is in us. He is saying that we, human beings, are literally made out of stardust.

And I know when I hear Dr. deGrasse Tyson say this that he is telling the truth because I have seen it since I was a child, the magic, the stardust we are, in the lives of the people I come from.

I watched it in the labor of my mother, a Jehovah's Witness and a woman who worked two and sometimes three jobs at a time, keeping other people's children, working the reception desks at gyms, telemarketing, doing anything and everything for 16 hours a day the whole of my childhood in the Van Nuys barrio where we lived. My mother, cocoa brown and smooth, disowned by her family for the children she had as a very young and unmarried woman. My mother, never giving up despite never making a living wage.

I saw it in the thin, brown face of my father, a boy out of Cajun country, a wounded healer, whose addictions were borne of a world that did not love him and told him so not once but constantly. My father, who always came back, who never stopped trying to be a version of himself there were no mirrors for.

And I knew it because I am the thirteenth-generation progeny of a people who survived the hulls of slave ships, survived the chains, the whips, the months laying in their own shit and piss. The human beings legislated as not human beings who watched their names, their languages, their Goddesses and Gods, the arc of their dances and beats of their songs, the majesty of their dreams, their very families snatched up and stolen, disassembled and discarded, and de-

spite this built language and honored God and created movement and upheld love. What could they be but stardust, these people who refused to die, who refused to accept the idea that their lives did not matter, that their children's lives did not matter?

Our foreparents imagined our families out of whole cloth. They imagined each individual one of us. They imagined me. They had to. It is the only way I am here, today, a mother and a wife, a community organizer and Queer, an artist and a dreamer learning to find hope while navigating the shadows of hell even as I know it might have been otherwise.

I was not expected or encouraged to survive. My brothers and little sister, my family—the one I was born into and the one I created—were not expected to survive. We lived a precarious life on the tightrope of poverty bordered at each end with the politics of personal responsibility that Black pastors and then the first Black president preached—they preached that more than they preached a commitment to collective responsibility.

They preached it more than they preached about what it meant to be the world's wealthiest nation and yet the place with extraordinary unemployment, an extraordinary lack of livable wages and an extraordinary disruption of basic opportunity.

And they preached that more than they preached about America having 5 percent of the world's population but 25 percent of its prison population, a population which for a long time included my disabled brother and gentle father

who never raised a hand to another human being. And a prison population that, with extraordinary deliberation, today excludes the man who shot and killed a 17-year-old boy who was carrying Skittles and iced tea.

There was a petition that was drafted and circulated all the way to the White House. It said we were terrorists. We, who in response to the killing of that child, said Black Lives Matter. The document gained traction during the first week of July 2016 after a week of protests against the back-to-back police killings of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge and Philando Castile in Minneapolis. At the end of that week, on July 7, in Dallas, Texas, a sniper opened fire during a Black Lives Matter protest that was populated with mothers and fathers who brought their children along to proclaim: We have a right to live.

The sniper, identified as 25-year-old Micah Johnson, an Army reservist home from Afghanistan, holed up in a building on the campus of El Centro College after killing five police officers and wounding eleven others, including two protesters. And in the early morning hours of July 8, 2016, he became the first individual ever to be blown up by local law enforcement. They used a military-grade bomb against Micah Johnson and programmed a robot to deliver it to him. No jury, no trial. No patience like the patience shown the killers who gunned down nine worshippers in Charleston, or moviegoers in Aurora, Colorado.

Of course, we will never know what his motivations really were and we will never know if he was mentally unstable. We will only know for sure that the single organ-

ization to which he ever belonged was the U.S. Army. And we will remember that the white men who were mass killers, in Aurora and Charleston, were taken alive and one was fed fast food on the way to jail. We will remember that most of the cops who are killed in this nation are killed by white men who are taken alive.

And we will experience all the ways the ghost of Micah Johnson will be weaponized against Black Lives Matter, will be weaponized against me, a tactic from the way back that has continuously been used against people who challenge white supremacy. We will remember that Nelson Mandela remained on the FBI's list of terrorists until 2008.

Even still, the accusation of being a terrorist is devastating, and I allow myself space to cry quietly as I lie in bed on a Sunday morning listening to a red-faced, hysterical Rudolph Giuliani spit lies about us three days after Dallas.

Like many of the people who embody our movement, I have lived my life between the twin terrors of poverty and the police. Coming of age in the drug war climate that was ratcheted up by Ronald Reagan and then Bill Clinton, the neighborhood where I lived and loved and the neighborhoods where many of the members of Black Lives Matter have lived and loved were designated war zones and the enemy was us.

The fact that more white people have always used and sold drugs than Black and Brown people and yet when we close our eyes and think of a drug seller or user the face most of us see is Black or Brown tells you what you need to know if you cannot readily imagine how someone can be doing

no harm and yet be harassed by police. Literally breathing while Black became cause for arrest—or worse.

I carry the memory of living under that terror—the terror of knowing that I, or any member of my family, could be killed with impunity—in my blood, my bones, in every step I take.

And yet I was called a terrorist.

The members of our movement are called terrorists.

We—me, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi—the three women who founded Black Lives Matter, are called terrorists.

We, the people.

We are not terrorists.

I am not a terrorist.

I am Patrisse Marie Khan-Cullors Brignac.

I am a survivor.

I am stardust.

# 1

## COMMUNITY, INTERRUPTED

*We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be . . . black, but by getting the public to associate the . . . blacks with heroin . . . and then criminalizing [them] heavily, we could disrupt [their] communities . . . Did we know we were lying? Of course we did.*

JOHN EHRLICHMAN, RICHARD M. NIXON'S  
NATIONAL DOMESTIC POLICY CHIEF, ON THE  
ADMINISTRATION'S POSITION ON BLACK PEOPLE

**My mother, Cherice, raises us—my older brothers Paul and Monte, my baby sister Jasmine, and me—on a block that is the main strip in my Van Nuys, California, mostly Mexican neighborhood. We live in one of ten Section 8 apartments in a two-story, tan-colored building where the paint is peeling and where there is a gate that does not close properly and an intercom system that never works.**

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## A CALL, A RESPONSE

*Freedom, by definition, is people realizing that they are their own leaders.*

DIANE NASH

**If we know nothing else, we know that in the wake** of the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killer, we have to change the conversation. We have to talk very specifically about the anti-Black racism that stalks us until it kills us.

We begin to plan. Alicia and I start going back and forth on Facebook, and separately, she is also having conversations with Opal. I say, during one of our discussions, We should build a political project.

Yes! Comes her reply. This is more than a hashtag.

This is about building power. This is about building a movement, we agree.

All over, everyone has already been talking about the life

of a Black child, a life that mattered. In 2012, the Dream Defenders embarked on their incredible 40-mile trek to the statehouse and occupied it, and the Miami Heat took their iconic photo with their hoodies on. A collective of New Yorkers including Thenjiwe McHarris and Daniel Maree launched the Million Hoodies Movement to push for dignity and justice for us; and in Chicago, Black Youth Project 100, a Queer Black Feminist organization of 18 to 35 year olds, dedicated itself to leadership development. And what we need now, in this early phase, is to press forward with a wholesale culture shift.

And it has to begin internally within our own progressive movement. There are people close to us who are worried that the very term, Black Lives Matter, is too radical to use, alienating, even as we all are standing in the blood of Black children and adults. We continue to push, to be undeterred.

In New York, in the wake of the acquittal, Opal helps organize a major march across the Brooklyn Bridge that culminates in a 1,000-person sit-in in Times Square, the crossroads of the world.

In Oakland, Alicia leads protesters through the downtown business area, where they are set upon by police. The media ignores the hundreds of people who are still in pain from the murder of Oscar Grant in 2009 and who are peacefully marching. Instead they focus on one or two who are not peaceful and they wholly ignore law enforcement, who attack everyone.

And in Los Angeles, working primarily with women, many of them students from Cal State, I begin planning



what will become the largest march I've ever planned up until that point. I put a call out on Facebook for people to come to St. Elmo's Village to meet—I haven't yet been run out of it by the second raid—and Thandisizwe Chimurenga, one of our most beloved local journalists and radio hosts, helps get people to come. She brings Melina Abdullah, who teaches Black Studies at Cal State, and Melina brings her students, and together we form the core of what will become the organizing committee for our march, indeed for who we are in LA; it is the beginning of the build-out of our Black Lives Matter—Los Angeles DNA.

We have an initial list of demands:

- Federal charges need to be brought against Trayvon Martin's killer
- Marissa Alexander, imprisoned for attempting to defend herself against her husband, a known abuser, has to be pardoned
- There can be no more new jail or prison construction in LA
- We have to have community control over all law enforcement

We decide, for that first march, to go to Beverly Hills, to Rodeo Drive, where the wealthiest and mostly white people shop and socialize. All the other marches had been in Black communities, but Black communities know what the crisis is. We want to say before those who do not think

about it what it means to live your whole life under surveillance, your life as the bull's-eye.

And as we plan the march, I reach out to all my contacts and others to theirs: the Strategy Center, unions, the Community Coalition. Years later a friend, a veteran organizer, will ask me about security for the march, how we ensured our protection. She will weep when she hears my answer: we didn't think about that.

That is how they will disrupt the narrative, the work, she says. That is what J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI planned when he created the Counterintelligence Program. That one generation would be dead, jailed or too traumatized to be able to pass on what is needed to make us safe.

But in the meetings we have in the Village, our focus is how to get across the message of building power and ensuring healing that we want to bring. In my home, we, mostly women, talk about what we deserve. We say we deserve another knowing, the knowing that comes when you assume your life will be long, will be vibrant, will be healthy. We deserve to imagine a world without prisons and punishment, a world where they are not needed, a world rooted in mutuality. We deserve to at least aim for that.

We agree that there is something that happens inside of a person, a people, a community when you think you will not live, that the people around you will not live. We talk about how you develop an attitude, one that dismisses hope, that discards dreams.

We deserve, we say, what so many others take for



granted: decent food, food beyond the 7-Elevens and Taco Bells that populated the neighborhood that brought me forth. We deserve healthy, organic and whole food that nourishes the body and the brain, that allows for both the full course of energy and the full rest of sleep at the end of a day well-lived and balanced with service, love and dreaming. We deserve to know life without the threat of heart attacks at 50, or strokes or diabetes and blindness because the food we have access to and can afford is a loaded gun.

And shelter. We deserve that too. Not the shelter that's lined with asbestos in the walls, or walls that are too thin to keep out the cold. Not the shelter with pipes that pour lead-based water onto our skin, down our throats in Flint, in North Dakota, in New York, in Mississippi. In places that never make the news. We deserve the kind of shelter our hard work demands, homes that are safe and non-toxic and well-lit and warm. And a shelter that is not a cage, whether that cage is a prison or its free-world equivalent. A shelter where our gifts are watered, where they have the space to grow, a greenhouse for all that we pull from our dreaming and are allowed to plant.

We deserve to be our own gardeners and deserve to have gardeners. Mentors and teachers who bring the sunlight, the rain, the whispered voices above the seedling that say, Grow, baby, grow.

We deserve love. Thick, full-bodied and healthy. Love.

And we take that message to the people in Beverly Hills, on Rodeo Drive, the idea that, in this place and in this time,

when hate and the harshest version of living dominate, when even the worst assaults are blamed on the victims, when bullying has become ever present, limitless, we have come to say that we can be more than the worst of the hate. We say that this is what we mean when we say Black Lives Matter.

And with a bullhorn in my hand, wearing my black tank top and purple skirt, which is my uniform these days, and with the ever-present helicopters hovering over us, I say that they, those who come for brunch, have to confront the police presence today but that this is our everyday. I say that we were not born to bury our children, we were born to love and nurture them just like they were, and, because of this, finally we had to acknowledge that in fact this is what we had been forced to do and we had been forced to do it for too long, for centuries too long. We say that those children, now our dead, now our Ancestors, are calling to us, Trayvon is calling to us and asking that we remember so that we at last make the change that deserves to be made, that has to be made. I ask the people who are lunching, perhaps spending more on a single lunch than many of us spend to feed our families for an entire week, to remember the dead and to remember that once they were alive and that their lives mattered. They mattered then and they matter now.

And then I ask the people there on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills to please just stop for a moment, to hold space for Trayvon Martin, to hold space for his parents left in grief and an unspeakable pain. And when I do that it seems like

the police are going to pounce; they move in closer and closer and I am scared. But I ask again for a moment of remembrance for Trayvon, and as far as I can tell, every single person within reach of my voice, and all of them white as far as I can see, puts down their champagne glass and their silver fork and stops checking their phone or having their conversation and then every last one of them bows their head.

For months, the conversations continue, mostly, although not exclusively, with women. Many of us are Queer, some are Trans. We commit to guiding principles:

- Ending all violence against Black bodies
- Acknowledging, respecting and celebrating difference(s)
- Seeing ourselves as part of the Global Black family and remaining aware that there are different ways we are impacted or privileged as Black folk who exist in different parts of the world
- Honoring the leadership and engagement of our Trans and gender non-conforming comrades
- Being self-reflective about and dismantling cisgender privilege and uplifting Black Trans folk, especially Black Transwomen, who continue to be disproportionately impacted by Trans-antagonistic violence
- Asserting the fact that Black Lives Matter, all Black lives, regardless of actual or perceived sexual identity, gender identity, gender expression, economic status, ability,

- disability, religious beliefs or disbeliefs, immigration status or location
- Ensuring that the Black Lives Matter network is a Black women-affirming space free from sexism, misogyny, and male-centeredness
- Practicing empathy and engaging comrades with the intent to learn about and connect with their contexts
- Fostering a Trans- and Queer-affirming network. And when we gather, we do so with the intention of freeing ourselves from the tight grip of heteronormative thinking or, rather, the belief that all in the world are heterosexual unless s/he or they disclose otherwise.
- Fostering an intergenerational and communal network free from ageism. We believe that all people, regardless of age, show up with the capacity to lead and learn.
- Embodying and practicing justice, liberation and peace in our engagements with others.

In our separate locations, we continue to meet, to think through how to infuse art and culture in our work, youth organizing, meetings and other logistics. We begin a list of local demands and add to the evolving national demands, which begin, not surprisingly, with slashing police budgets and investing in what actually keeps communities safe: jobs, good schools, green spaces. In every demand and in the faces of the people I meet in the streets, in the work, I see my mother and my brothers, my father and my sister. I am clear, we are clear, that the only plan for us, for Black people

living in the United States—en masse, if not individually—is all tied up to the architecture of punishment and containment. We are resolute in our call to dismantle it.

We are firm in our conviction that our lives matter by virtue of our birth, and by virtue of the service we have offered to people, systems and structures that did not love, respect or honor us. And while we are cultivating this idea in our respective meetings and our respective teams, we, Alicia, Opal and I, do not want to control it. We want it to spread like wildfire.

But if our goal is to change the culture, to even get people to believe in and speak the words Black Lives Matter, that first year is one of fits and starts. We are able to talk about the horrors as they roll out with regularity. We hashtag names again and again.

Renisha McBride, a 19-year-old girl, was in a car accident on November 2, 2013. Dazed and in pain, she knocked on the door of Theodore Wafer of Dearborn, Michigan. He answered her cry for help with the business end of a shotgun, killing this hurt and unarmed young woman without a thought.

John Crawford, a 22-year-old father, picked up a toy gun in the toy section of a Walmart in Beavercreek, Ohio, two days before Michael Brown was killed. He was shot and killed by an off-duty police officer who was not indicted.

There was the stunning public murder of Eric Garner on July 17, 2014, in New York City, and there was his haunting callout: *I can't breathe, I can't breathe.*

These moments, in particular Mr. Garner's murder because it was videoed by bystanders and went viral, animate our pain and rage and resolve but we still are speaking of the killings in individual terms. Each its own horrific, not yet seen as part of a movement that says Black Lives Do Not Matter.

It is a year and four days after Trayvon's killer was acquitted and Black Lives Matter was born, and we are still hard at work trying to get people to see that as much as there is a progressive movement for justice, there are those working just as hard for the opposite outcome, an outcome where only the fewest of lives matter at all.

We know that if we can get the nation to see, say and understand that Black Lives Matter, then every life would stand a chance. Black people are the only humans in this nation ever legally designated, after all, as not human. Which is not to erase any group's harm or ongoing pain, in particular the genocide carried out against First Nation peoples. But it is to say that there is something quite basic that has to be addressed in the culture, in the hearts and minds of people who have benefited from, and were raised up on, the notion that Black people are not fully human.

And if few were willing to accept this before—the American Movement *Against Black Lives*—August 9, 2014, changed that.

In Ferguson, Missouri, on that date, an 18-year-old boy named Michael Brown was chased by a police officer, Darren Wilson. We don't know why. Later, reports would accuse Mike Brown of a scuffle at a convenience store,

but whatever truth there may or may not have been to that story, what is true is that that scuffle was not known when Wilson, like Trayvon Martin's killer, gave chase. Wilson would claim that, upon confronting the teenager, who was headed to college in a matter of weeks, he felt that his life was in danger. But Mike Brown was unarmed and autopsy reports confirm that not only was he shot in the hand and chest—presumably enough to stop him if he was charging at Wilson, which witnesses dispute—but also he was shot in the top of his head. Twice.

Mike Brown's body was left in the hot Missouri sun for four and a half hours following his murder.

Mike Brown, who in so many ways reminds me of Monte. Size, color, age when the police came for him to kill him: these all read as my brother. These stories read as unique, as shocking to so many in this country, but to the people I know, these are the public assaults—when they are not outright executions—of our family, of the people who loved and nurtured us. I know it could always have been my brother left there on a street for hours, not only killed by a cop, but dishonored by a force of them.

Because what the autopsy did not reveal is that Darren Wilson's actions were part of a long chain of abuses visited upon the mostly Black, under-resourced and poor people who were and are the 21,000 residents of the city of Ferguson, a community in which the poverty rate is double that of nearby St. Louis. Law enforcement had, for decades, been able to do anything they wanted to do because who

would speak up for a bunch of poor Black people? Who cared?

So horrifically were Black people treated that *The Atlantic* would run a 6,000-word report, following the Department of Justice's report on the ongoing abuses in Ferguson, in which journalist Conor Friedersdorf would write that,

For years, Ferguson's police force has meted out brutality, violated civil rights, and helped Ferguson officials to leech off the black community as shamelessly as would mafia bosses.

Cops were pushed, required, not only to stop people—read: Black people—for the most minor incidents not related to public safety but also to issue as many citations as possible. It became a game—who could issue the most? Each citation carried a fine, and those fines made up the municipal budget. And there was no chance of fighting this economic warfare—because doing so could also lead to a person's arrest and jailing. The police chief sat over the municipal court.

In one case, a Black woman (almost all the cases involve Black people) ended up jailed over a first-time parking infraction. She was issued two citations that carried hundreds in fines and fees. She was poor and at times homeless, which caused her to miss court dates, which caused her to be arrested and spend time in jail. She tried to make partial payments, but without the ability to work out a payment

plan, she was subject to arrest. Eventually the court relented and let her make payments, although seven years after the parking infraction, she is still in debt to the city of Ferguson for more than \$500.

Friedersdorf reported another case that was cited in the DOJ report of a young Black man who lost his job after an arrest. In that case, the reporter shared that:

In the summer of 2012, a 32-year-old African-American man sat in his car cooling off after playing basketball in a Ferguson public park. An officer pulled up behind the man's car . . . and demanded the man's Social Security number and identification. Without any cause, the officer accused the man of being a pedophile, referring to the presence of children in the park, and ordered the man out of his car for a pat-down, although the officer had no reason to believe the man was armed. The officer also asked to search the man's car.

The man objected, citing his constitutional rights. In response, the officer arrested the man, reportedly at gunpoint, charging him with eight violations of Ferguson's municipal code. One charge, Making a False Declaration, was for initially providing the short form of his first name (e.g., "Mike" instead of "Michael"), and an address which, although legitimate, was different from the one on his driver's license. Another charge was for not wearing a seat belt, even though he was seated in a parked car.

At the moment Jim Crow's back was broken, American politicians found myriad other ways—all legislated, all considered legal—to ensure that the terrorism that had always been the primary experience of Black people living in the United States continued. And for a long time it continued with the broad silence of the people most harmed, which is to say, us. We did not rise up in numbers as we were written off as thugs, crack hos, welfare queens.

We used those terms ourselves! Our politicians and preachers used those terms! If slavery and Jim Crow made public spectacle of our torture—people beaten, whipped, lynched and dismembered for all to see—the last part of the twentieth century and start of the twenty-first century silenced us with false promises that if we just shut the fuck up and did what we were told, maybe we'd be Oprah or Puffy or LeBron, or, dare we say it, Barack Obama, when the truth was that the overwhelming majority of us spent a good portion of our time battling white supremacy, whether we knew it or not.

Because in Ferguson, like in cities across America, not only could the police extort Black people through the citation process for minor infractions, they also had at their disposal the huge unwieldy set of laws that made up what is known as asset forfeiture, a three-billion-dollar industry invented as part of the architecture of the drug war.

Asset forfeiture allowed law enforcement to seize property simply if they said that they suspected someone of being involved with the drug trade. They needed no proof or indictment even to seize cash, cars and homes, and police



across the nation routinely did, leaving the burden of evidence on the person who was robbed. The victim had to prove that they had never done anything, something almost impossible to do. But even when they managed to fight and win their case, the legal barriers to reclaiming property were and are extraordinary, leaving the police, who were free to keep 80 percent of what they seized, to go on buying sprees. And what did they purchase most often? Military equipment. Another way of saying this is that the police in Ferguson stole from the residents and then used that money to buy the tanks, tear gas and machine guns that on August 9 would be turned against those very same residents.

And the images that first come out stun us; in particular, one.

There is a young Black girl and she is standing in front of a tank. A *tank!*

And in her hands she is holding a sign.

It reads simply this: Black Lives Matter.

We are a generation called to action.

# 14

## #SAYHERNAME

*We have chosen each other  
and the edge of each other's battles  
the war is the same  
if we lose someday  
women's blood will congeal  
upon a dead planet  
if we win  
there is no telling*

AUDRE LORDE

**We know we have to go to Ferguson. We have to go** in solidarity. Alicia and Opal and I are talking, along with Darnell Moore, the professor and master communicator, about how we can be in service. Darnell will help build out the Black Lives Matter network, but that will come later and Ferguson is burning now.