

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.¹ In the same period, the term *Black Lives Matter* was tweeted over a hundred thousand times per day.² 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.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵

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.⁶

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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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.