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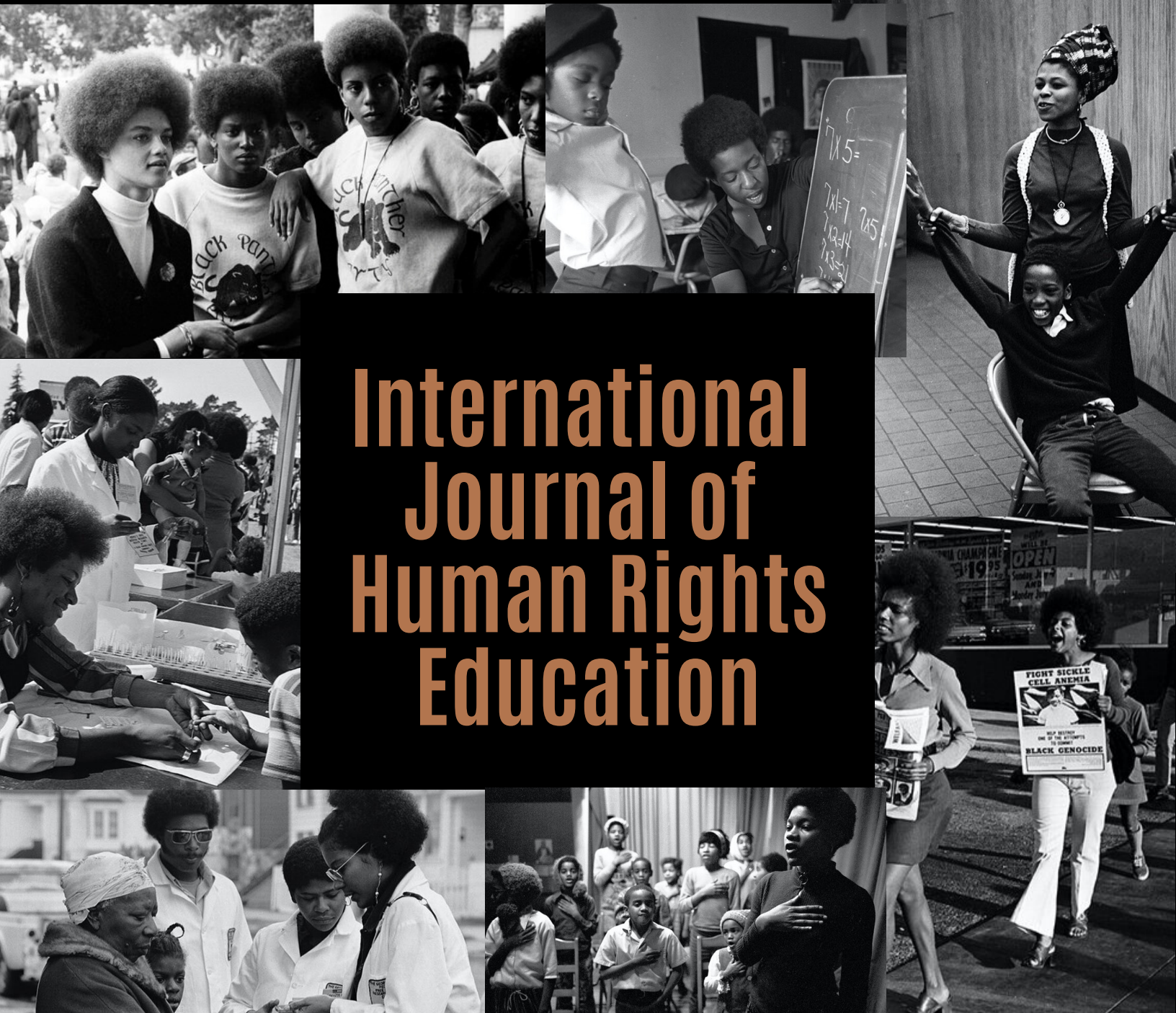


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International Journal of Human Rights Education

Photographs by Stephen Shames

Special Issue Human Rights Education & Black Liberation

Monisha Bajaj, Susan Roberta Katz, and Lyn-Tise Jones

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Editorial Introduction:

Human Rights Education & Black Liberation

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Oppressed people, whatever their level of formal education, have the ability to understand and interpret the world around them, to see the world for what it is, and move to transform it. ~ Ella Baker (as cited in Ransby, 2003, p. 7)

Situating Black activism and movement building in its historical context, this special issue of the *International Journal of Human Rights Education* features articles, essays, commentaries, and book reviews that put the longstanding call for Black lives to matter and the quest for Black liberation in conversation with human rights education as a field of scholarship and practice. In this introduction, we first review how movements for Black liberation, primarily in the United States, have drawn on human rights frameworks to seek greater justice; we then introduce the five original articles, five community-based commentaries/notes from the field pieces, and five book reviews/excerpts that comprise this special issue.

Human Rights, Education & Black Liberation: Past & Present

After the adoption of the historic Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations (U.N.) General Assembly and The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (the “Genocide Convention”) in December 1948, organizations in the United States petitioned the U.N. on multiple occasions to address egregious rights violations in the United States against Black Americans. These violations included the widespread discrimination in every sector of social, economic and political life, segregation, and the brutal lynchings committed by vigilantes often with state-sanctioned support (Anderson, 2003). Organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Civil Rights Congress, and activists such as W.E.B. DuBois, William Patterson, Walter White and Paul Robeson prepared a petition to the U.N. in 1951 (titled “[We Charge Genocide](#)”) that argued that lynchings; widespread police brutality; health, educational and economic disparities; and political disenfranchisement all constituted the

legal definition of genocide as per the U.N. Genocide Convention that came into force that same year. As historian Carol Anderson (2003) notes,

Human rights, especially as articulated by the United Nations and influenced by the moral shock of the Holocaust, had the language and philosophical power to address not only the political and legal inequality that African Americans endured, but also the education, health care, housing, and employment needs that haunted the Black community. (p. 2)

Despite the demands being brought forth and the legitimacy of the arguments, the United States clamped down on critiques to its domestic rights violations in the midst of the Cold War. These charges were never taken up by the United Nations (Eleanor Roosevelt—former U.S. First Lady and the first Chair of the United Nations’ Human Rights Commission—was dismissive of these efforts despite her professed support of racial justice).

Yet, further engagement with human rights frameworks continued, often by changing the discourse used from human rights to “civil rights” as was done by many leaders and strategists in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement (Anderson, 2003). Educational researchers Carl Grant and Melissa Gibson (2013) argue that this shift led to a sacrificing of the holistic nature of human rights demands:

The language of human rights proved a powerful vehicle, both domestically and internationally, to challenge U.S. inequities and injustices. This power was the very reason that Roosevelt and the other U.S. representatives worked so hard to prevent African Americans from linking their domestic struggle with human rights. Opponents knew that doing so might open the United States to international critique. Unfortunately, the tangle of Cold War politics eventually led the NAACP and other civil rights leaders to abandon this human rights platform for the limited equality afforded by civil rights alone. (Grant & Gibson, 2013, p. 89)

Other leaders at the time deliberately took on human rights language precisely *because* of the international linkages and expansive framework it provided. In 1964, Malcolm X wrote in a [letter](#) to the *Egyptian Gazette* that "Our common goal is to obtain the human rights that America

has been denying us. We can never get civil rights in America until our human rights are first restored. We will never be recognized as citizens there until we are first recognized as humans.” [The resistance to and embrace of human rights frameworks in distinct moments by racial justice movements is discussed further in this special issue by Loretta Ross and Monisha Bajaj, as well as by Balthazar Beckett and Salimah Hankins in their articles.]

Two years later in 1966 in Oakland, California, the Black Panther Party (BPP) released its foundational [Ten-Point Program](#) that outlined a vision for economic, social, and racial justice, summarizing these demands in Point Ten “Land, Bread, Housing, Education, Clothing, Justice, and We Want Some Peace”—all of which encompass the vision of political, civil, social, and economic equal rights elaborated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The legacy of the Black Panther Party’s efforts to bridge human rights, education, and Black liberation included the Black Panther’s Oakland Community School directed by BPP leader Ericka Huggins. This pioneering school offered culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017) for children of color and operated from 1973 to 1982. [The BPP legacy is also discussed in Brian Davis’ oral history with Candice Elder, in the essay by Linda Garrett in this special issue, and in the introduction of the Women of the Black Panther Party Activity Book included in this issue co-written by Ericka Huggins and Angela LeBlanc-Ernest].

The legacy of the BPP also informs current grassroots efforts, such as the Know Your Rights Camps (first started in 2016 and now happening across the country and even internationally), which offer a tailored form of human rights education to youth. Launched by professional football player Colin Kaepernick, the Know Your Rights Camps seek to “advance the liberation and well-being of Black and Brown communities through education, self-empowerment, mass-mobilization and the creation of new systems that elevate the next generation of change leaders.” These day-long camps offer a “10-Point System,” phrased as affirmations, that focuses on equipping youth of color with knowledge as well as a community of care to

withstand a system in which prejudice and racial violence still abound.¹ Camps include workshops and guest presentations by community leaders such as Ericka Huggins and Attallah Shabazz, the daughter of Malcolm X, and each camper is gifted with a copy of Malcolm X's autobiography along with a DNA kit for finding out more about their heritage.

Also in the contemporary period, the Movement for Black Lives' foundational principles include empathy, dignity, restorative justice, and globalism. One year after the vigilante murder of unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin in 2012, his killer was acquitted; soon after, activists Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media. It was widely utilized by those frustrated by the lack of accountability for racial violence. The Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) formed in 2014 as a "space for Black organizations across the country to debate and discuss the current political conditions; develop shared assessments of what political interventions were necessary in order to achieve key policy, cultural and political wins; and convene organizational leadership in order to debate and co-create a shared movement wide strategy" (from M4BL's [website](#)). M4BL has noted human rights abuses that still plague Black Americans, such as the fact that they are three times more likely to be killed at the hands of the police than White Americans even when they are more likely to be unarmed (Ojo, 2020).

Current movements for racial justice follow earlier movements that were deeply transnational and global. Activists like Bree Newsome Bass (who brought down the confederate flag in Charleston after the massacre of nine Black worshippers by a White supremacist in 2015) cited the #RhodesMustFall movement in South Africa (which sought to bring down monuments of British colonizer and imperialist Cecil Rhodes) as inspiration

¹ The 10-point system includes: 1. You have the right to be free; 2. You have the right to be healthy; 3. You have the right to be brilliant; 4. You have the right to be safe; 5. You have the right to be loved; 6. You have the right to be courageous; 7. You have the right to be alive; 8. You have the right to be trusted; 9. You have the right to be educated; 10. You have the right to know your rights. From <https://kaepernick7.com/pages/know-your-rights-camp>

for her action. The family of Michael Brown, an unarmed teenager killed by police in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, and the family of George Floyd, an unarmed man choked to death by police in Minnesota in 2020, have brought these human rights violations to the United Nations and demanded international investigation into the U.S.' discriminatory policing practices (as discussed in Beckett and Hankins' article in this special issue). Like in decades past, international scrutiny is one way to 'educate' about human rights alongside various other formal, non-formal, informal, and community-based educational strategies. This special issue defines education in its broadest sense and explores the classroom, community, and public pedagogies of human rights education.

The *International Journal of Human Rights Education* decided in June 2020 amidst the global uprisings after the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor—and the vigilante killing of Ahmaud Arbery—to pull together an expedited special issue on the intersections of human rights education and Black liberation. As an online, open-access journal that seeks to democratize knowledge in the field of HRE, we also seek to be relevant and contribute to the ongoing conversations on education, human rights, and social justice in a timely fashion. The special issue co-editors met through our work in a shared geographic location: San Francisco. Monisha Bajaj and Susan Roberta Katz are faculty members at the University of San Francisco and lead a unique Master's program and doctoral concentration in Human Rights Education; Lyn-Tise Jones is a community activist and serves on San Francisco's Human Rights Commission, first founded in 1964 in response to demands from civil rights groups about widespread discrimination against African-Americans in the city.

In this special issue, contributors reimagine and envision Black liberation and how human rights education frameworks, methodologies, and praxis can advance it. The contributing authors put a heavy emphasis on engaged scholarship and scholar-activism that illuminates the intersection of HRE and Black liberation from a variety of perspectives. We are delighted with the scope, methodological diversity, and intellectual strength of the pieces in this special issue. A note on language: the co-editors decided along with the entire editorial team at the IJHRE from this

issue forward to adhere to the American Psychological Association’s (APA) stylistic practices to [capitalize all racial groups](#) (as the journal adheres to APA style). We understand that debates are ongoing about the appropriate way to capitalize racial groups; we agree with scholar Eve L. Ewing in [her article](#) advocating for the capitalization of all racial groups including “White” that “when we ignore the specificity and significance of Whiteness — the things that it is, the things that it does — we contribute to its seeming neutrality and thereby grant it power to maintain its invisibility” (Ewing, 2020). Where racial groups are not capitalized in citations that are directly quoted in the pieces in the special issue, we have not changed their original usage.

As with all of our issues, we have a variety of formats, including articles, notes from the field/community-based commentaries, book reviews, artwork, and, new for this issue, a poetry and multi-media piece created by special issue co-editor Lyn-Tise Jones on the themes of this issue. [Please click on the link below or scan the QR in the footnote² to view this original multi-media poem, excerpted below.]

[There Is NO side of Neutrality](#)

Written by: Lyn-Tise Jones

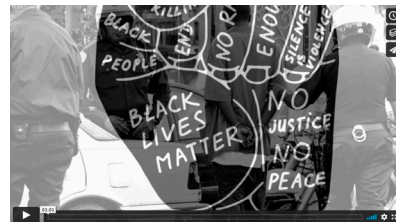
I was born into activism

My skin color declared me an activist

All of my life has been dedicated to the painful art of resistance

Activism or pessimism

There is no side of neutrality



² <https://vimeo.com/ijhre/vol5>

In Black skin, you do not have an option to choose, you can only choose to ignore, or dissolve into pessimism, or fight as an activist marching towards the ever moving target towards freedom

Tired of explaining what it's like to be in this Black skin

Crushed by the debilitating blow of never getting my brother back

The cops killed him and that's a fact because he was born a Black man with a target on his back

Our birth certificates need to be changed to being born in "A state of emergency"

When our Black babies leave the hospital, our worse fear is how will our Black baby come back

Multiple gunshots left my brother dead and now my mother is all messed up in the head

He was unarmed but harmed

Wrong color. Wrong place. Wrong time.

Special Issue Contents

The first article of this special issue, after this editorial introduction, entitled “My Life’s Work Is to End White Supremacy’: Perspectives of a Black Feminist Human Rights Educator,” features one of the founders and leaders of the field of human rights and reproductive justice in the United States, Loretta J. Ross. An activist, scholar, and leader in human rights *and* human rights education (as the former director of the National Center for Human Rights Education based in Atlanta), Loretta Ross—through an interview with the *International Journal of Human Rights Education’s* Editor-in-Chief Monisha Bajaj—discusses her upbringing, human rights work, and contributions to “bringing human rights home” to the United States, as well as advancing reproductive justice (a term she helped coin some four decades ago) locally and globally. Loretta Ross was also a founding member

of one of the leading human rights organizations in the United States: the US Human Rights Network.

In the next article of this special issue, “Until We Are First Recognized as Humans: The Killing of George Floyd and the Case for Black Life at the United Nations,” Balthazar Beckett from the American University of Cairo and Salimah Hankins, Executive Director of the US Human Rights Network (USHRN), discuss the history of the USHRN, which was officially launched in 2003 and is comprised of some 300 member organizations. The authors detail how the organization draws on the internationalist legacy of leaders such as Malcolm X and brings issues of racial violence in the United States to international justice mechanisms. Examples of this work include facilitating the testimony of the family of Michael Brown, Jr. before the UN Committee Against Torture and, more recently, garnering international attention to the 2020 police killing of George Floyd, and other instances of disproportionate state violence towards people of African descent to demand accountability and justice.

In the wake of the death of unarmed teenager Michael Brown, Jr. at the hands of police in August 2014 and subsequent lack of justice, an organization grew out of the organizing and protests in Ferguson, Missouri. Scholar and activist, David Ragland, in his article entitled “Truth-Telling as Decolonial Human Rights Education in the Movement for Black Liberation,” discusses the antecedents and formation of the Truth Telling Project of Ferguson (TTP), which he co-founded with others,³ to engage brutal histories of racial violence through community-centered storytelling. Initially intended to be a South-African inspired “truth and reconciliation” process, the group eventually decided to focus on truth-telling and historical reckoning due to the historical amnesia around racial violence, as discussed in the article. Drawing from the fields of peace and human rights education, Ragland discusses how the central principle of human dignity informs the TTP’s work and larger vision.

³ Another of the founders of the TTP was Cori Bush who in 2020 was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, the first Black woman from Missouri to serve in the U.S. Congress.

Like in Ferguson, Candice Elder also responded to injustices in her community of Oakland, California, by creating an organization to address them: the East Oakland Collective (EOC). Drawing on the history of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, the EOC seeks to address racially disparate poverty and an increasing unhoused population. In this oral history with Candice Elder conducted by emerging human rights education scholar Brian Davis, entitled “Housing as a Human Right: Black Epistemologies in Deep East Oakland,” an insightful and rich conversation ensues that sheds light on economic and social rights enshrined in the U.N.’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These include the right to food and the right to housing, and what happens when the government fails to ensure these rights. As Davis details through this interview with Elder, organizations such as EOC are stepping in to fill this gap and—at the same time—are bringing international attention to these violations. For example, EOC co-hosted the U.N.’s Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing in 2018 to tour homeless encampments in Oakland and San Francisco, which were subsequently found by the U.N. to be “cruel and inhuman treatment and a violation of multiple human rights” (United Nations, 2018, p. 12).

From the community to the classroom, scholar and community activist Stacey Ault discusses in her article entitled “Critical Post-Traumatic Growth among Black Femme High School students within the School-to-Prison Pipeline: A Focus on Healing,” a participatory action research project with young Black women in Sacramento, California, that speaks back to the School-to-Prison Pipeline, or the disproportionate criminalization of youth of color in educational institutions. Through the Queens Speak project, Ault highlights the voices of the participants and elaborates a framework she created for “Critical Post Traumatic Growth.” The author explains the tenets of this framework through the research process and the findings collectively generated with her co-researchers/participants in the study. Combining explorations of identity, exercising creativity (participants collectively wrote and recorded songs), and fostering agency, Queens Speak was a transformative intervention that heightened critical consciousness for the Black youth and educators involved.

The five notes from the field/community-based commentary pieces similarly speak to the creativity and agency of individuals doing the work in community to resist the forces of domination and oppression.

Inspired by James Baldwin's *My Dungeon Shook: A Letter to My Nephew* (1963), Linda Garrett penned "It Is Well with My Soul" to share the creation story of the Black Panther Party with her own nephew Jay, as well as with a new generation of Black youth. Garrett poignantly writes of how the essence of the Party's Ten Point Party Platform is as resonant and relevant today as it was in the 1960s-1970s. She urges young people facing all forms of anti-Black racism today to reject the media distortions of the Black Panther Party and to heed their call to take action and, most importantly, to serve the people through building relationships with local communities under siege. What is particularly beautiful and poetic is the way that Garrett interweaves the story of the Party's founders, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, with the life story of her beloved nephew—a charismatic student athlete with much potential as a grassroots organizer.

In their commentary piece, written amidst the California wildfires, the Covid-19 pandemic, and ongoing systemic anti-Black violence, Aaminah Norris and Babalwa Kwanele discuss "complex grief as an interconnected web." Elaborating on this interconnected web in their article entitled "(Un)Hidden Grief and Loss Inform the Movement for Black Lives," the authors identify 11 subsets of complex grief including structural and overt racism, dehumanization, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma, among others that the authors delineate. Weaving together poetry, analysis of the factors that cause complex grief, and "upstream solutions," Norris and Kwanele offer insights for educators, social workers, and members of all communities seeking to counter and dismantle anti-Blackness.

Brandie Bowen, Ellen Sebastian Chang, and Yvette Aldama, in their piece entitled "House/Full of Blackwomen: The Insistence Movement," discuss this "site-specific ritual performance project that strikes back by building a bridge that links the promises of universal human rights to direct realities of Black people," conceived by Amara Tabor Smith and co-director Ellen Sebastian Chang. The transformative art produced by the House/Full of Blackwomen interrogates and critically analyzes issues facing Black

women in the Northern California Bay Area, such as gentrification and displacement, sex trafficking, and racism. Through their narrative, woven together with images and links to videos of their performances, this commentary piece shines light on the House/Full of Blackwomen as a “portal to the world as it should be,” a “world honors human rights as a living guide to our collective liberation.”

Emma Fuentes and Colette Cann, professors of International & Multicultural Education at the University of San Francisco, describe how they recently initiated and developed a new doctoral concentration in Racial Justice and Education. This concentration, officially launched in Fall 2020, builds upon their department’s early foundation in Freirean critical pedagogy since the 1970s as well as the pioneering graduate program in Human Rights Education that began in 2008. It responds not only to the growing interest and commitment of doctoral students, like Gertrude Jenkins and Eghosa Hamilton (authors included in this special issue), in targeting anti-Black racism in their research and praxis, but also to the urgent need of the current moment in dismantling White supremacy.

In their piece entitled “Making Us Matter and the Work of Spirit Revival,” Eghosa Obaizamomwan Hamilton and T. Gertrude Jenkins, students in the Racial Justice in Education concentration discussed by Fuentes and Cann in the previous piece, share their experiences with marginalization as Black educators in schooling contexts that have not historically served Black students well. Seeking to “re-spirit” their communities, Hamilton and Jenkins co-founded Making Us Matter, a weekend online educational program in which students of color can “experience full humanization and visibility.” The program also enlists Black educators and offers them the opportunity to create culturally-informed, social justice curricula. Drawing on Critical Race Theory, the program seeks to connect Black students and educators from across the United States and with a goal of international linkages in the future. In this commentary piece, student and educator voices are presented to demonstrate the power of this liberatory educational model created by the authors.

The four book reviews and one book excerpt in this special issue highlight ground-breaking publications by activist-scholars whose critical

analysis of anti-Black violence and creative visions for racial justice and social transformation have far-reaching implications for education at all levels. Written by four doctoral candidates at the University of San Francisco whose own public scholarship focuses on Black liberation, the book reviews all address the multiple ways in which Black lives in the United States have always been vulnerable to exploitation and aggression from pervasive White supremacy and, at the same time, have inspired and led the most important social movements in U.S. history, from Abolition to Black Lives Matter.

First, Heather Streets depicts how award-winning author Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor in *Black Lives Matter to Black Liberation* (2016) skillfully uses a historical lens to trace the roots of racist violence against Black bodies and to examine how and why it has persisted, even during the administration of the country's first Black president. Although written in 2016, Streets notes that Taylor's arguments are extremely relevant today: "Armed with the tools of a historical framework provided by Taylor, it is our responsibility to figure out the 'how,' which is to build a nation where Black lives truly matter."

In the second book review, Robert Alexander looks at Bettina Love's highly regarded book, *We Want To Do More than Just Survive*, and how she calls for "abolitionist teaching" that aims to get to the very root of what is wrong with U.S. schooling rather than simply managing inequalities through gradual reforms. A long-time educator himself, Alexander finds deep inspiration in Love's "freedom dreaming" to imagine a world free of oppression: "Abolitionist teachers are visionaries who fight for their students' freedom, for justice, for the end of gun violence, for the end of the prison industrial complex, and even for students they've never met."

Similarly inspired by Charlotte Carruthers' 2018 book, *Unapologetic: A Black Queer and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements*, Bay Area school leader Whitneé Garrett-Walker describes this book as a "love letter, and a field notebook for all of us to follow." Garrett-Walker highlights the powerful healing message of Black queer feminism that Carruthers delivers in this book—so essential at a time when images of Black death overpower our daily lives via the media: "Given this beautiful work, what will we decide

to do with the new world that is on the horizon? Will we continue down a path that seeks to reify all forms and systems of oppression, or will we seek to reimagine new possibilities of a new world in which all who *live* are seen as whole and equal participants of the new world?”

In his review, Joseph Ruben Adams covers the Rethinking Schools’ anthology, *Teaching for Black Lives*, which aims to bring principles of Black liberation into the daily lives of teachers and students in public classrooms. This collection of writings is intended to be a handbook for humanizing education and a guide for transforming multiple dimensions of schooling—from the curriculum to discipline policies—that kill the spirit of Black children. As Adams succinctly describes, “*Teaching for Black Lives* editors, Dyan Watson, Jesse Hagopian and Wayne Au, structurally designed the book to illustrate to educators how they should make their classrooms and schools a site of resistance to White Supremacy and anti-Blackness. Fundamentally, this book serves to make classrooms and schools a place of hope and beauty as educators explore Blackness.”

Artist and long-time West Oakland resident, Jichristina Vest, is unveiling a mural devoted to women of the Black Panther Party (BPP) on the outside wall of her home on February 14, 2021. This mural commemorates the indomitable women who were the bedrock of the BPP—educating children at the Oakland Community School, registering voters, serving breakfast in communities across the country—and doing so much more in the spirit of leading hearts and minds. To accompany the mural, Jilchristina and James Shields created the *Women of the Black Panther Party Activity Book*, designed to teach young people of all ages about the powerful work that continues to inspire grassroots organizing to this day. Two of these BPP women leaders, Ericka Huggins and Angela LeBlanc-Ernest, were advisors for this activity/coloring book and authored the Introduction reprinted here. They remind us: “Members of the Black Panther Party (BPP) were young, ambitious, and filled with love for all people, committed to change locally and internationally. The fight for human rights was the goal.”

Through these individual contributions, and the collective impact of their insights and perspectives, this special issue of the *International Journal of Human Rights Education* illumines the multiple intersections of human

rights education and Black liberation for scholars, practitioners, activists, and students. Human rights educators argue that effective HRE practice includes addressing the cognitive, affective, and action-oriented dimensions of learning. As such, we hope that readers gain new knowledge and insights from this special issue; feel deeply the simultaneous grief, resistance, and hope contained in these pages; and are inspired into action towards greater racial justice and collective liberation.

We express our deep gratitude to the IJHRE editorial team for their dedication and hard work in producing this expedited special issue [Maria Autrey, Ria DasGupta, Jazzmin Gota, Michiko Kealoha, Lina Lenberg, and David Tow, along with Monisha Bajaj and Susan Katz who also serve on the IJHRE team]; our reviewers for this issue; and to Jilchristina Vest for securing permission to use the images of the Black Panther Party (by Stephen Shames) and the mural of the Women of the Black Panther Party on the front and back cover of the issue respectively.

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“My Life's Work Is to End White Supremacy”: Perspectives of a Black Feminist Human Rights Educator

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Abstract

This article highlights the contributions and thinking of scholar and activist Loretta Ross on the intersection of human rights, Black feminism and education for liberation. This essay is organized into themes, drawing from Ross' writings,¹ scholarship that discusses her contributions, and an hour-long conversation between Ross and Monisha Bajaj, Editor-in-Chief of the International Journal of Human Rights Education. Ross explores her own history and introduction to the human rights movement, her radical re-shaping of the field of reproductive justice, and her vision for human rights education after more than five decades of advancing it through her many books and other writings, advocacy, and grassroots activism.

Keywords: Black feminism, economic and social rights, human rights education, reproductive justice, international advocacy, White² supremacy, Civil Rights Movement

¹ Sections of this article draw from Ross, Loretta J. (2006) A Personal Journey from Women's Rights to Civil Rights to Human Rights, *The Black Scholar*, 36(1), 45-53, and an hour-long conversation held on Zoom between Loretta Ross and IJHRE Editor-in-Chief Monisha Bajaj on July 23, 2020. Once the interview was transcribed, the themes were generated and compiled by Bajaj and verified by Ross for accuracy with her final approval to publish. Copyright for this piece rests with Loretta J. Ross under the *International Journal for Human Rights Education's* Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License.

² Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups in our articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.

In this article, Loretta Ross—a pioneering human rights activist and educator—shares perspectives from her journey in the struggle for greater racial equity in the United States. Written mostly in first person through her own voice (as gathered through her writings and through an interview with the International Journal of Human Rights Education’s Editor-in-Chief, Monisha Bajaj), the following sections cover the themes that emerge, namely: (1) her early life and development of a political consciousness; (2) human rights activism; (3) human rights education; (4) reproductive justice; (5) “bringing human rights home” to the United States; and (6) advice for young activists and scholars. The following sections illuminate Ross’ life-long commitment to making the personal political, and advancing human rights and racial justice in the United States.

Early Life and Development of a Political Consciousness

As a revolutionary Black feminist, my goals are to challenge silences about African-American women, to confront myths about our bodies and our right to self-determination, and to help others not silently endure the human rights violations I survived. As bell hooks said, to move from silence into speech is a revolutionary act (hooks, 1989). My life's work is to end male and White supremacy. Arguably, White supremacist politics in the United States most dramatically affect African-American women, whether one is looking at the destruction of the welfare state, population control policies, limits on reproductive rights, or the miseducation of our children (Ross, 2006, p. 45).

I was not particularly politically conscious as a child during the 1950s and 1960s. My family was religious, conservative, and in the military. I was the sixth child and second daughter in a poor, Black Texas family of eight children with five boys and three girls. My father emigrated from Jamaica as a child with his family in the 1920s. At sixteen, without a high school diploma, he joined the Army, probably lying about his age, because it was the only way to survive during the Depression. He served in three wars, was critically wounded several times, and retired from the Army after 26 years. He was still in his mid-forties so he became a postal worker for another 20

years until he retired a second time in the 1980s. My mother came from a hog-raising farm family in central Texas. Her family moved to Texas in 1867 from a peanut plantation near Selma, Alabama after the Civil War. She was a domestic worker until her seventh child, my sister Toni, who was severely disabled by polio, spinal meningitis, and epilepsy. Mom believed that faith healers saved Toni's life. We had a patriarchal, nuclear family with clearly defined gender roles. We moved quite a bit because of the Army, but we were luckier than most because we had both parents at home. We did not always have enough to eat or new clothes to wear, but we had plenty of love and deep family roots (Ross, 2006, pp. 45-46).

My nearly 50-year journey as a Black feminist was not a conscious choice but grew from a determination not to work on my hands and knees like my mother. I remember how White women hired Black domestic workers based on the number of scars on their knees. This proved they cleaned floors that way (Ross, 2006, p. 46).

My body was a metaphor for many of the gender-based crises in the Black community. Not to dwell on the horror, but I was kidnapped from a Girl Scout outing and raped when I was 11, my first experience of sexual trauma, although I lacked the feminist words at that time to describe the experience. Through incest committed by a much older cousin, I became pregnant when I was 14 and had my only child, a son. I did not know how widespread incest was in the African-American community at the time. I just knew that it had happened to me. At age 15, we had to fight for my right to stay in high school because it was common in the 1960s to force pregnant girls or teen mothers out of school. This was my first lesson in winning against a powerful institution. Despite these traumatic events, I was a reasonably good student with wonderfully supportive parents. I won a scholarship to Howard University in 1970, when I was 16, to study chemistry and physics, intending to become a doctor. I was gang-raped at a party my freshman year and had an abortion. A few years later I was sterilized by a malfunctioning birth control device (an IUD) from Howard University's health services (Ross, 2006, p. 46).

It was at Howard University that I first heard feminist language with which to describe my experiences and realized that violence against Black

women was more common than anyone knew. I learned that one out of four Black women would experience incest or be raped in their lifetimes, and ninety-five percent of the time, their violators were Black men. I found that even Black doctors sometimes sterilized poor Black women, carrying out the population control plan of White supremacists. I was lucky to be in Washington, DC at the time because the city legalized abortion three years before the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision. Otherwise, I would have had three children at age 16 (I aborted twins), and been unable to take care of my son. By the time I was 23, I was a rape survivor, an incest survivor, a victim of sterilization abuse, and a single parent. In short, I had experienced both gender-based and state violence (Ross, 2006, p. 46).

My earliest memory of human rights was 1970 in Toni Cade Bambara's book *The Black Woman* (which had essays by her and authors like Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker). I was 16 years old, but like anything else, when you're not ready for the knowledge, I didn't necessarily pay attention to it.

So, my first conscious memory of human rights was when I started monitoring hate groups in 1990 and my boss was Dr. C.T. Vivian (a civil rights leader who worked closely with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.), who unfortunately recently passed away. C.T. surprised the hell out of me when he told me that Dr. King never meant to build a civil rights movement, that he meant to build a human rights movement. I said, "What are you talking about?" Because everything I knew about Dr. King at that point was that it was "Reverend-Dr.-Martin-Luther-King-Jr.-Civil-Rights-Leader"—like it was all one word. And Dr. Vivian told me to look up his last Sunday sermon on March 31st, 1968, which was four days before he was assassinated. And in it, he called upon us to build a human rights movement. And I wondered, "Why isn't this known?" Everybody told me that Dr. King had a dream; nobody told me he had a plan.

There is a tendency of people to think that human rights is overseas, and civil rights is what we fight for here. But we can go back to Frederick

Douglass' 1854 speech³ to the words of Malcolm X⁴ to Martin Luther King Jr.'s last sermon to find mentions of the need to focus on human rights in the struggle for Black liberation in the United States.

Human Rights Activism

Howard University was a cauldron of student protests during the 1960s and 1970s, and I became an activist. While I was vice-president of my freshman class, police tear-gassed one of our protests. Fellow students gave me my first political books like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* edited by Alex Haley. It was this heady mixture of Black nationalism and Black feminism that initially defined my politics. There was limited political space for radical Black women within either the Black nationalist or White feminist movements. [The Combahee River Collective statement](#) was still seven years away.⁵ We Black feminists felt poised between two distinct

³ Frederick Douglass—born enslaved and escaped to later become a writer, abolitionist, and diplomat—wrote the following in 1854, “Human rights stand upon a common basis; and by all the reason that they are supported, maintained and defended, for one variety of the human family, they are supported, maintained and defended for *all* the human family; because all mankind have the same wants, arising out of a common nature” (Douglass, 1854, p. 34). Accessed at <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mfd.21036/?sp=34&loclr=blogflt>

⁴ One of Malcolm X's most well-known quotes about human rights was from his article “Racism: The Cancer that is Destroying America,” in the Egyptian Gazette (Aug. 25 1964): “The common goal of 22 million Afro-Americans is respect as human beings, the God-given right to be a human being. Our common goal is to obtain the human rights that America has been denying us. We can never get civil rights in America until our human rights are first restored.” Accessed at: <http://malcolmxfiles.blogspot.com/2013/07/letter-to-egyptian-gazette-august-25.html>

⁵ The Combahee River Collective statement was published in 1977 by a group of Black Feminists who had been meeting regularly since 1974. It stated that “we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.” Accessed at: <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/>

movements that did not fully represent our unique intersectional experiences (Ross, 2006, p. 46).

I became involved in anti-apartheid⁶ activism, and I joined a Marxist-Leninist study group and began a lifelong study of Black history. We studied the liberation and anti-imperialist movements of Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean, and linked our domestic activism to global peoples' movements. Through the study group, I met two women who had a major impact on my political future. The first was Yulanda Ward, a Howard University student, and the second was Nkenge Toure, then a member of the Black Panther Party. Yulanda was a student activist who organized many of our activities while she was an eighteen-year-old freshman and connected us with community activists in other cities. She helped us occupy empty buildings owned by the government, demanding that they be renovated to house homeless families and introduced us to advocacy for prisoner's rights (Ross, 2006, p. 47).

Nkenge Toure was the second woman who changed my life. Nkenge had been in the Black Panther Party as a high school student in Baltimore. She invited me to work at the DC Rape Crisis Center (RCC) where she was the Executive Director. Founded in 1972, the RCC was the first rape crisis center in the United States. Black women were the majority of the staff because its predominantly White Board of Directors prioritized hiring from the Black community. I replaced Nkenge as the Executive Director in 1979. This is where the trauma in my life crystallized into a commitment to fighting the oppression of women, particularly male violence and sterilization abuse against Black women (Ross, 2006, p. 48).

Through the RCC, I became involved with the United Nations' (UN) World Decade for Women, which was launched at the UN Conference on

⁶ Apartheid was a system of complete segregation based on racist beliefs about the superiority of White people. It was implemented in South Africa and South West Africa (now known as Namibia) from 1948 until the early 1990s. Global activism, particularly in the United States, helped impose sanctions on the apartheid government of South Africa that ultimately helped lead to a negotiated transition to democracy.

Women in 1975 in Mexico City and promoted equal rights and greater opportunities for women worldwide. I had traveled on study tours to Nicaragua, the Philippines, El Salvador, and Cuba, but going to the second UN World Conference for Women in Copenhagen in 1980 was consciousness-raising mostly because of the absence of radical African-American women there. Nkenge and I organized the International Council of African Women (ICAW) from 1982-1989 as a vehicle to encourage more radical and progressive African-American women to go to the third UN World Conference for Women in 1985 in Nairobi, Kenya (Ross, 2006, p. 48).

The Center for Democratic Renewal (CDR, formerly called the National Anti-Klan Network) was founded under the leadership of Rev. C.T. Vivian as the first Black-led anti-hate group organization in the United States in response to the 1979 massacre of five anti-Klan⁷ demonstrators in Greensboro, North Carolina. Even though the murders were videotaped, the perpetrators were acquitted by an all-White jury. I worked as CDR's Program Director beginning in 1991 with experts on the far right, Leonard Zeskind and Daniel Levitas, who helped me understand the relationship between the civil rights and anti-fascist movements. I had experienced racism like most African-Americans, but I had not formally studied the organized White supremacist movement as I did for five years at CDR—its racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, and homophobia. White supremacist ideas infect every important social policy issue in the United States in the debates on immigration, welfare, affirmative action, abortion, and crime. While I knew this intellectually, it is quite different to actually go to Klan rallies and talk to neo-Nazis and militia members and hear their views echoed by the White House. It was very difficult to explain to my parents why I went to Klan rallies (Ross, 2006, p. 50).

The missing perspectives of African-American women weaken the anti-racist/anti-fascist movement because links between movements of the

⁷ The Ku Klux Klan (also known as “the Klan”) is a White supremacist/terrorist organization in the United States that is responsible for numerous hate crimes and murders since its founding in the 1860s.

Right may be overlooked in analyses. The lack of a racialized gender perspective hampered the development of a more complete picture of their activities. I initiated CDR's Women's Watch Project in August 1992, with the research assistance of Heidi Dorow, to investigate individual and organizational links between the anti-abortion and the White supremacist movements. I believed it was possible to cross-reference our research on the White supremacist movement with data the pro-choice movement collected on the anti-abortionists. As a Black feminist, I was convinced that the anti-abortion movement would copy the terrorist tactics of the white supremacists. In fact, Dr. David Gunn was murdered in Florida in March 1993 only months after beginning this cross-checking research. This progression had not yet been explored by anti-fascist researchers, but anti-abortionists had moved from prayers to blockades, from wanted posters to kidnappings, and then onto the brutal murders of doctors who perform abortions. My feminist perspective helped recognize the parallels between the racists and the anti-abortionists long before either the pro-choice or anti-fascist organizations discovered how individuals and ideas moved between the porous membrane separating the two movements (Ross, 2006, p. 51).

Human Rights Education

In 1996—along with Shulamith (Shula) Koenig (founder of the People's Movement for Human Rights Education), C. T. Vivian, and Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, a Sudanese Muslim law professor at Emory University—we co-founded the National Center for Human Rights Education (NCHRE) in Atlanta. I served as director for 9 years and in that time, we distributed over a million copies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

The Center decided that our first focus would be on offering human rights trainings and strategic retreats for social justice activists in the United States. These are people who are already concerned about social justice so they didn't have to be persuaded to fight against oppression. We wanted to give them new tools. Obviously, we could have focused on the

media or college students, but we thought that we would get the most leverage by focusing on social justice activists. We developed all kinds of human rights training programs aimed at different wings of the social justice movement for economic justice, LGBTQ⁸ rights, civil rights, youth activism, environmental justice and so on. We developed a training curriculum for each of those sectors and our job was to just get there, deliver it, and give them a human rights framework for them to situate their social justice work in.

The very first program we had was at a Georgia Public Library in Atlanta here every Wednesday night for three months. We would have community based human rights education and invite people representing different sectors of social justice work. But within our first two weeks, homeless people started walking in off the street because it was open to everyone. And then people surprised me by driving from around the state to get there. There was one woman who drove from rural Georgia for two hours each way to come every Wednesday night. It turned out that she was planning to run for office for her local school board and she wanted to use the human rights framework. Even after the three months of community-based trainings were over, people didn't want us to stop. They asked, "Why can't we continue this every Wednesday night for the rest of our lives? What else can we do to continue these conversations?"

The other thing we tried to do was piggyback onto other conferences. If I heard that someone from the feminist movement was presenting at a conference, then I would submit a proposal to do a human rights education workshop there. When people invited me to keynote, I would always make it a human rights education presentation no matter what the topic was by tying issues together.

We engaged in advocacy as well. We met a member of the Clinton administration in the State Department, which of course handles human rights treaties for the United States. She listened to me and Shula very patiently making the case that if you're going to revise the federal education

⁸ LGBTQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer.

standards for children in the United States, wouldn't it be natural to make sure that every child knows the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as easily as they know the Pledge of Allegiance? She said, "I think that's a wonderful idea, but I don't think that will suit our policy agenda." And I remember pausing, trying to figure out, "Okay, what is she actually saying?" And then I blurted out, "You mean welfare reform?" because at that time, President Clinton had proposed and later passed welfare reform that reduced public assistance benefits for the poor in the United States. And she said, "Yes." I said, "Wait a moment. Are you telling me that President Clinton doesn't want the American public taught about human rights because he's about to institute a policy that would violate human rights?" And she said, "Well, I wouldn't say it that way." And I said, "Well, I will. That's what I'm hearing." It became clear to me that even a Democratic administration lacked the vision that we had in terms of the possibilities of institutionalizing human rights education.

Along with Ed O'Brien, founder of [Street Law](#), Kristi Rudelius-Palmer of the University of Minnesota Human Rights Center, and Nancy Flowers and Janet Schmidt of Amnesty International's Human Rights Education Network, we co-founded Human Rights USA in 1997 with NCHRE as one of the anchor organizations of this new network funded by Larry Cox at the Ford Foundation. [Later, NCHRE also helped to launch the U.S. Human Rights Network, which established itself formally as its own organization in 2003.] Human Rights USA did a survey that tried to ascertain what the American public knew about human rights. And it turned out that over 90% of the American public had never heard of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We released the survey results in 1998 on the 50th anniversary of the UDHR. That survey made our job even clearer. With Human Rights USA, we sought to connect local human rights organizations around the country and give them tools so they could take the human rights temperature in their city and issue a human rights report card annually. We started one in Atlanta, and it ultimately lost momentum. There's a couple of other places that still do this, and the most successful one that is still ongoing is in St. Louis run by Jamala Rogers of the

Organization for Black Struggle. Every year on December 10th, they issue a new human rights report card to the city.

It was important that I was mentored by Shula because she had founded human rights education projects in 22 different countries. As a result, I was able to meet with people from Latin America, Asia, and all over sub-Saharan Africa, which enabled me to not have to start from scratch as the Director of NCHRE. At that time, the human rights movement was dominated by lawyers who would talk about the lack of justiciability, meaning if we can't litigate human rights in the court system, why use human rights as a framework? It was Mallika Dutt, who was at the Ford Foundation before she founded [Breakthrough](#), who really simplified it for me. She said the power of human rights, first of all, is its moral power. We have to keep on convincing people that they are entitled to human rights, and then we infuse it into the political system. And then, finally, and only after those first two steps are taken, do we try to infuse it into the legal system. That made me realize that the lawyers who were poo-pooing us were really approaching it from the wrong end. And it was one of my mentors at CDR, Leonard Zeskind, who told me a long time ago when we were talking about passing the first hate crime reporting bill, that the laws are only going to be as good as the people make them be. He said, "Look at those statutes they were using to go after the Klan. They were written right after the Civil War. But it took a Civil Rights Movement [nearly a century later] to make America use its own laws."

In 1997, NCHRE became one of the founding members of the [SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective](#) originally organized by sixteen women of color-led groups. Although NCHRE was not a formal "reproductive rights" organization, it was included as a founding organization to provide human rights education to the other SisterSong members. In 2003, I helped organize SisterSong's first national conference on reproductive health and sexual rights issues, which drew more than 600 participants. Representing SisterSong, I served as national co-director (the first woman of color) of the April 2004 March for Women's Lives in Washington, DC, the largest women's rights march in United States history, with more than one million participants. Another significant event

in my life was that the first book that I had officially co-authored was published in November 2004 by South End Press, *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organizing for Reproductive Justice*. Written with co-authors Jael Silliman, Marlene Gerber Fried, and Elena Gutierrez, *Undivided Rights* is the first detailed study of women of color reproductive health organizations during the 1980s and 1990s. The SisterSong Collective rapidly grew after the events of 2004, and I decided to leave NCHRE to provide leadership to SisterSong. The Collective hired me to become its national coordinator and to open its first national office in January 2005, at which time I transitioned out of NCHRE by selecting a new executive director. This move felt like completing a full circle because I was organizing on women's rights again (Ross, 2006, p. 52).

Reproductive Justice

A decade before I became director of SisterSong, I had been part of a group of activists advocating for a more expansive definition of reproductive rights and justice. Together with 11 other Black women,⁹ we coined the term “reproductive justice” at the 1994 Illinois Pro-Choice Alliance Conference in Chicago as a response to the Clinton administration’s proposed health care reforms at that time. As I have written elsewhere, “As a Black feminist, I am committed to focusing on the powerful role of colonialism and White supremacy in determining reproductive destinies” (Ross & Solinger, 2017, p. 2). The definition of reproductive justice, that I detail in the first chapter of my book with Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*, is as follows:

Reproductive justice is a contemporary framework for activism and for thinking about the experience of reproduction. It is also a

⁹ The women involved in coining the term “reproductive justice” and developing its frameworks were: Toni M. Bond Leonard, Reverend Alma Crawford, Evelyn S. Field, Terri James, Bisola Marignay, Cassandra McConnell, Cynthia Newbille, Loretta Ross, Elizabeth Terry, ‘Able’ Mable Thomas, Winnette P. Willis, and Kim Youngblood.

political movement that splices reproductive rights with social justice to achieve reproductive justice. The definition of reproductive justice goes beyond the pro-choice/pro-life debate and has three primary principles:

- (1) the right not to have a child;
- (2) the right to have a child; and
- (3) the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments.

In addition, reproductive justice demands sexual autonomy and gender freedom for every human being. At the heart of reproductive justice is this claim: all fertile persons and persons who reproduce and become parents require a safe and dignified context for these most fundamental human experiences. Achieving this goal depends on access to specific, community-based resources including high-quality health care, housing and education, a living wage, a healthy environment, and a safety net for times when these resources fail. Safe and dignified fertility management, childbirth, and parenting are impossible without these resources.

The case for reproductive justice makes another basic claim: access to these material resources is justified on the grounds that safe and dignified fertility management, childbirth, and parenting together constitute a fundamental human right... Reproductive justice uses a human rights framework to draw attention to—and resist—laws and public and corporate policies based on racial, gender, and class prejudices. (Ross & Solinger, 2017, pp. 9-10)

I brought my experience and perspectives in the fields of reproductive justice and human rights in 2005 to SisterSong—a network of women of color and allied organizations and also hundreds of individual members—when I became its director. We challenged the pro-choice movement to move away from its myopic focus on abortion to embrace the human-rights based "reproductive justice" framework offered by SisterSong

that built on the definitions many of us had been involved in elaborating earlier, namely: the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, social, and economic well-being of women and girls, based on the full achievement and protection of women's human rights. We argued for the right to have—and not to have—a child, and the necessary enabling conditions to realize these rights. We believe that the ability of any woman to determine her own reproductive destiny is directly linked to the conditions in her community, and these conditions are not just a matter of individual choice and access. A reproductive justice analysis focuses on better lives for women, healthier families, and sustainable communities (Ross, 2006, pp. 52-53).

Throughout my entire career, I have sought to connect reproductive justice to human rights in the United States and to explore how we can learn from and leverage international connections to advance justice for women of color.

“Bringing Human Rights Home” to the United States

I was amongst the generation of women of color—along with people like Jaribu Hill who had started the Mississippi Workers' Center for Human Rights—who were reclaiming control of the definition of human rights from organizations like Amnesty International (Amnesty) and other more mainstream organizations that seemed to not want to bring the lens of criticism to the United States. They were much more comfortable in describing human rights violations overseas, but never wanted to do it here. So our tagline back in the 1990s with the National Center for Human Rights Education became, "Bringing Human Rights Home." A lot of others have since borrowed that phrase that we coined back in the early 1990s.

We had an earth-shattering meeting back in 1996 with Pierre Sané, who was originally from Senegal and served as the Secretary-General of Amnesty International from 1992-2001. Pierre came to the United States and Ajamu Baraka (then leading Amnesty, Intl. Southeast Region) arranged for us at NCHRE to meet with him at the Georgia Citizens Coalition on Hunger (the Coalition), which was also run by Black women. We had previously done human rights education trainings for the Coalition for their campaign

to raise George's minimum wage. The Coalition had started out as a welfare rights organization and then expanded beyond that to talking about all the causes of hunger in terms of poverty, welfare, gentrification, and the need for living wage jobs. To give a little background, the state of Georgia said they didn't have to pay the federal minimum wage at the time because they said that they were only obligated to pay the federal minimum wage for people who worked at companies that received federal support. If you worked, for example, at a McDonalds that didn't receive federal support, they paid \$2 less than the federal minimum wage. There had been a 10-year campaign to lift Georgia's state minimum wage of \$3.25 to the federal minimum of \$4.75, which was already low. It was just ridiculous where we started. Pierre Sané heard this whole presentation by the Georgia Citizens Coalition on Hunger and he decided that Amnesty was going to embrace economic, social, and cultural rights globally for the first time. He said to us, right there in the parking lot, "We're going to change." That probably doesn't seem like a big deal to anybody else, but for me it felt like a big deal. It took organizations like Human Rights Watch another decade to develop a focus on economic and social rights.

After that, Amnesty started doing reports on economic, social, and cultural rights; they started saying that women's rights are human rights and rape is a human rights violation—words that we hadn't heard from Amnesty prior to that. That is one of the impacts Black women had on the international human rights movement and organizations like Amnesty.

We were also influenced by the international arena as well in terms of advancing racial justice work here in the United States. Back in the 1950s, there was a struggle between Walter White who was at the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and scholar and activist, W.E.B. DuBois about using the human rights framework, and them getting called communists for doing so. Carol Anderson has written about this in her book *Eyes Off the Prize* (2003). For decades, people used the term "civil rights" as opposed to "human rights," despite mentions about the need for human rights by leaders such as Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X in their speeches and writings, as mentioned earlier in this article.

This changed when we got to the United Nations' World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa in 2001. That's when U.S. racial justice organizations realized how far behind they were in world discussions on racism and White supremacy, because the rest of the world was effectively using the human rights framework to talk about the African diaspora. Delegates from the United States had this realization and said, "Ah, we want to talk about reparations, but we don't have the volumes of books that people have bought from place like Brazil, Jamaica, Senegal and elsewhere," where they had done their homework and were already using the human rights framework. I think the U.S. civil rights leaders, frankly, were embarrassed. They didn't want to listen to us Black women in the U.S. human rights movement, but they witnessed how they were so disregarded in Durban for not having prior knowledge of the expansive human rights framework. It really just made clear that if you followed the U.S.' lead, you were going to be out of step with the rest of the world.

After Durban, that's when more openings for discussions on human rights within the civil rights movement really started taking place. I remember being asked to brief the Board of the NAACP, and I brought the speech by Frederick Douglass using human rights. I brought the speech by Martin Luther King Jr. that I mentioned before about human rights. Then you could put it all in plain sight the role of human rights in the struggle for Black liberation. All these years since the "We Charge Genocide" petition in 1951 that was brought before the United Nations by leaders such as William L. Patterson and Paul Robeson (and signed by many leaders including W.E.B. DuBois), which argued that the widespread lynchings, police brutality, and overall disenfranchisement of Black Americans was a form of genocide as defined by the then brand new United Nations Convention on Genocide (adopted in 1948). In the 1950s, these leaders were then "red-baited" and called communists, and dismissed by U.S. officials. Resistance is always going to be deemed as communist. That's what we're hearing now with the allegations by the Dept. of Justice against the Black Lives Matter movement; they are called "cultural Marxists." White supremacy is strikingly unoriginal in its attacks!

I spoke to civil rights leaders in the register they were capable of hearing, using these moments in Black history where movements and leaders had demanded human rights and sought to bring international attention to what was happening in the United States. People in the Global South had realized much earlier than I did that Black Americans are part of the Global South when you look at international law—the South within the North. The representation of Americans in these international conferences that I have been attending since the 1970s was always dominated by the White perspective, whether at the International Conferences on Women (in Mexico City in 1975, in Copenhagen in 1980, in Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995) or the UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (1994). There were so many conferences sponsored by the UN where we would fight to get the voices of Black women in particular and women of color in general into the conversation; a lot of our global comrades had only ever heard White perspectives that could not as authentically represent the realities of Black women.

The 1970s, 1980s and 1990s for me were a time of greater cross-racial global solidarity than even I'm seeing today. It was routine as a Black feminist activist to go to the Philippines to oppose the Marcos regime or go to Nicaragua and ally oneself with the Sandinistas, or go fight against apartheid in South Africa. Those were, for me, a very natural part of the global struggle against patriarchy and White supremacy. I see much less emphasis on global solidarity now amongst feminists.

Advice for Young Activists and Scholars

Something I tell young activists is that “A group of people moving in the same direction thinking the same thing is a cult. A group of people moving in the same direction thinking different things is a movement” (Ross, as cited in Levenstein 2020, p. 4). I believe that what distinguishes activists is our determination to fight against oppression, rather than merely enduring it. Fighting male and White supremacy is a therapeutic privilege because life is good but the world is crazy. It is even more of a privilege to have a career in social justice organizations when most people

do not have that option. We all have people on whose shoulders we stand (Ross, 2006, p. 45).

Look at the impact that Black Lives Matter is having on changing people's attitudes and perspectives. We have laws, but they have to be enforced, and that requires changing people's mind and hearts. You can only get the policies and the laws changed through social impact. You don't lead with the law.

Young scholars and activists should not let themselves get dissuaded by the people who think they know everything. For example, in law schools, you're basically taught a perspective that you don't take a case that you don't think you can win. But in human rights, you take all the cases that you don't think you can win because you never know if just that one dissenting judge will be a platform for future cases. Justiciability is not the standard you use when deciding what to litigate if you use a human rights plan, but that's not how they're taught in law schools.

Because of this, you may find people with a learned helplessness coming into graduate programs, where you see these very large problems and students are largely convinced that there's nothing they can do about them. As a result, they think let's just do incremental changes that are possible because the larger paradigm shift doesn't seem to be possible. I would advise that young scholars and activists instead think outside the box. You fight for human rights, even if you're not going to win at first. Elie Wiesel, the Jewish Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate, said once, "there are times when you can't do anything about injustice, but there should never be a time that you fail to protest it." This is a lesson I've also learned through a lifetime of activism and that I'd share with emerging scholars and activists in the field of human rights. Always use your platform and raise your voice for justice.

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“Until We Are First Recognized as Humans”: The Killing of George Floyd and the Case for Black Life at the United Nations

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Following the brutal killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, members of the human rights movement in the United States understood instantly that justice within the American legal system, which has a long history of shielding police officers and racist vigilantes from prosecution, was anything but certain. To enhance the chances of having the individual officers (Derek Chauvin, J. Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane, and Tou Thao) prosecuted for Floyd's death, but also to have demands for systemic change heard and amplified, the United States Human Rights Network (USHRN) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) worked with the families of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Michael Brown, and others to set in motion a process that gained the support of domestic and international human rights organizations; international human rights bodies, such as the African Group/Group of African States (GAFS), consisting of fifty-four African nations; and, finally, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) itself. In fact, the urgent debate held at the United Nations in Geneva in June 2020 marked an unprecedented moment in the institution's long history. This was the first time that a Western country had been held accountable, at this level, for flagrant human rights violations occurring within their borders and at the hands of their government.

But movements, as Jacqueline Dow Hall (2005) reminds us, have long histories, and it usually takes generations of activists to build organizations and processes that result in such achievements. Resolution A/HRC/RES/43/1 is no exception to this. To fully appreciate how this milestone was made possible, it is necessary to study the genealogies of some of the key institutions and historical forces that were instrumental in this process, such as the decades-long Black internationalist grassroots organizing embodied by USHRN. What once began with a series of "kitchen table" talks came to establish processes that routinely enable those affected by racism and structural inequality in the United States to appeal to the United Nations, a process that activists—especially African Americans—had aspired to since the foundation of the League of Nations (LON) in 1920. A close reading of Resolution A/HRC/RES/43/1 not only reveals these long-standing efforts to allow African American victims of oppression to seek

redress in Geneva, but also time-honored connections between these United States-based activists and Pan-African organizations abroad, such as the African Group and its parent organization, the African Union (AU).

It is thus no coincidence that the June 2020 resolution explicitly references the pivotal July 1964 convening of the African Union's predecessor, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), in Cairo, Egypt. In so doing, the recent resolution beckons us to acknowledge the lasting legacy of mid-century Black internationalist thinkers—and especially of Malcolm X (el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz), whose advocacy on behalf of African Americans at that very meeting of the OAU in Cairo was crucial to the convening's then and now historic resolution on racial discrimination in the United States. In other words, Malcolm's words to African Heads of State in 1964 and the spirit that informed them still echo powerfully today—both in the recent testimonies of families of victims of police and in the long overdue acknowledgement of these crimes by the United Nations. “You in the United Nations are your brothers and sisters’ keepers in America,” George Floyd’s brother testified in front of the United Nations in June of 2020, echoing Malcolm X’s appeal to the OAU 56 years earlier, where he proclaimed that “you are the shepherd of all African peoples everywhere” (Malcolm X, 1965, as cited in Breitman, 1990, p. 73). From W.E.B. Du Bois’ Pan-African Congress to Malcolm’s Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) to today’s efforts by organization like USHRN, from the League of Nations to the United Nations, from the OAU to the AU: Resolution A/HRC/RES/43/1 had been over a century in the making.

From Kitchen Tables to Geneva: A Brief History of the United States Human Rights Network

The evolution of the United States Human Rights Network (USHRN), which played a central role in sending out a call to international partners to bring George Floyd’s case to the United Nations, offers an excellent example for the decades-long organization-building work that activists and advocates have dedicated themselves to—and is thus worth studying closely. A network, firmly rooted in the U.S. South, of more than

three hundred grassroots and advocacy-based organizations, USHRN uses a member-centered community organizing approach to bring attention to those most impacted by human rights violations in the United States, particularly Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQIA+) communities, people with disabilities, immigrants, and the poor. Though the roots of the organization reach back far, connecting to what Jacqueline Dowd Hall (2005) has labeled “the long civil rights movement” (p. 1233) and what Michael West and William Martin have identified as century-old “contours of the Black international” (2009, p. 1), the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing, where prominent American figures proclaimed that “women’s rights are human rights” (Chozick, 2015), is considered a seminal moment in the network’s genealogy. After attending the conference, women from across the United States created their own organizing spaces, by beginning to have “kitchen table” conversations around the country. Led predominantly by women of color, the conversations were aimed at leveraging and expanding the existing domestic human rights advocacy in the United States. Up until then, this discourse was primarily centered on (1) issues of sovereignty and self-determination in Indigenous communities; (2) abolition of the death penalty; and (3) Black communities who had transitioned away from a human rights platform towards a civil rights platform due to external pressures. At the time, there was no multi-issue, intersectional grassroots movement to demand human rights accountability in the United States. Connecting southern, feminist approaches to discourses of universal human rights, advocates aimed at making a case that women’s rights are human rights and to show that human rights are relevant in the United States (Thomas & Dharmaraj, 2000).

These “kitchen table” talks were a precursor to the formation of the United States Human Rights Network. The first broad-based meeting of women from across the country who were human rights experts occurred in the summer of 1999 in Mill Valley, California, just north of San Francisco. Twenty-two women, mostly women of color, gathered to employ an intersectional and explicitly feminist approach to human rights at a time

when such efforts were dismissed as fringe “women’s issues” (Thomas & Dharmaraj, 2000). The goal was to put those most impacted by human rights abuses at the forefront of the movement in order to effect local policy changes. What came out of those meetings was an agenda that focused on: (1) showing that human rights are relevant in the United States, (2) increasing the visibility of marginalized groups, and (3) securing funding to further the movement work. With this agenda, several priorities emerged. The strategic approach looked at focus areas which included: (1) increasing education and awareness of human rights issues, (2) providing human rights trainings, (3) engaging in human rights advocacy, (4) strategic litigation, and (5) academic scholarship (Thomas & Dharmaraj, 2000). By the year 2000, after the first “kitchen table” talks and the Mill Valley convening, more people—including people of all genders, non-human rights experts, and those working on a variety of other issues—were utilizing a human rights framework to address local issues, including (1) mass incarceration, (2) gender-based violence, (3) reproductive rights, and (4) economic justice (Dharmaraj, 2019). Much of this early work was also in response to the increasing misogyny, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and other forms of intolerance that were gaining traction in state houses across the United States at the close of the twentieth century. Among other backlashes, the 1990s had seen the passage of “welfare reform,” the “crime bill,” and draconian immigration bills (ASPE, 1996). In California, Proposition 209 banned Affirmative Action programs, while Proposition 187, an anti-immigrant bill, rendered undocumented immigrants ineligible for public benefits.

Following that initial meeting, the group sent 36 women to the “World Conference against Racism” (WCAR), held in Durban, South Africa, in Fall 2001 (see GANHRI, 2001), where they argued that the fact that the United States did not have a national human rights agenda—something that continues to this day—was a key problem. The work of the group after Durban was to expand the movement to be a more inclusive space; this resulted in more men, people of color, queer people, people with disabilities, and other groups entering into the domestic human rights movement space (Dharmaraj, 2019). A second key gathering, the United

States Human Rights Leadership Summit, “Ending Exceptionalism: Strengthening Human Rights in the United States,” held in July 2002 at Howard University Law School and organized by the group that organized the “kitchen table” conversations, brought together leading activists from a variety of different disciplines and issue areas to assess human rights work in the United States and identify ways to strengthen the domestic human rights agenda. The Summit broke new ground, fostering dialogue and strategic thinking across issue areas as well as sectors of work. Summit participants agreed that a “network” would be the most useful way to enable a broad array of organizations and individuals to work collaboratively to strengthen human rights efforts in the United States. These women of color, feminists, and human rights activists envisioned a grassroots movement that demanded human rights accountability in the United States, led by those most impacted by human rights violations and those who have been traditionally marginalized and excluded from the debate.

The United States Human Rights Network (USHRN) officially formed in 2003 after a series of meetings involving more than 60 of the most prominent and influential human rights and social justice activists in the United States. Since then, the network has served as an anchor to build the collective power of communities across the country and to expand the base of a bold, vibrant, and broad-based people-centered human rights movement. Over the years, USHRN has established itself as a space for groups to come together, share, learn and act towards realizing human rights in the United States. That said, the network’s efforts were met by resistance. After some progress in terms of its commitment to human rights, the United States was poised to start a period of horrific backsliding in its commitment to human rights, from the careful effort to undermine rights in the pursuit of power under the George W. Bush administration (see Frederici, 2010), to the shaky and mixed human rights legacy of the Obama years, and the outright disdain for international human rights displayed by the administration under Donald J. Trump (see LCCHR, 2019).

Currently, USHRN is national movement based in Atlanta, Georgia, and is made up of more than 300 member and partner organizations

working on multiple human rights issues and is led by people most directly impacted by human rights violations; comprised primarily of grassroots and community-based groups and individuals working collectively across issue areas. Importantly, USHRN works to engage, build the capacity and leadership, and foreground the voices and experiences of marginalized people in its efforts to build and grow a human rights movement. It does this by: (1) engaging, connecting and mobilizing communities across issue areas, constituencies, and regions to uphold and defend human rights; (2) building the capacity and leadership of grassroots groups and individuals to effectively apply the human rights framework in developing strategy and making long-term structural shifts to achieve justice; (3) raising the visibility of local human rights concerns and activism to shape public discourse locally, nationally, and internationally; and (4) facilitating effective collective action to secure human rights. These strategies are aimed at strengthening the national infrastructure to build and grow a people-centered human rights movement in the United States for advancing the human rights of marginalized people and Peoples.

“It’s Like the Wild Wild West”: Making the Case for Black Life in Geneva

Importantly, today USHRN is the primary organization coordinating the participation of social justice and human rights groups in using the international human rights mechanisms, primarily with the United Nations, to hold the United States government accountable. USHRN has special “Consultative Status” to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). This is the highest status granted by the United Nations to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), thereby allowing them to participate in the work of the United Nations and paving the way for impacted people to directly advocate before U.N. bodies (see ECOSOC, 2020). USHRN primarily does this by coordinating U.S. civil society’s participation in periodic reviews for the U.N. treaties that the U.S. Government has ratified. The reviews of the United States’ compliance of its human rights obligations provide a unique opportunity for advocates to hold the U.S.

government accountable on a world stage. These reviews, including the preparatory and follow-up phases, provide excellent opportunities for coalition-building and awareness-raising for the advancement of human rights in the United States. USHRN facilitates engagement in different parts of the reviews, including the submission of “shadow” or “stakeholder” reports, which are alternatives to the U.S. government’s reports to the United Nations, and participation of USHRN working groups, which inform the advocacy with the U.N.

During the treaty reviews, the United States submits a report outlining its compliance with its treaty obligations. These reports generally paint a rosy, often inaccurate, and uninformed picture (with little-to-no engagement with grassroots groups) of the conditions in the United States with respect to human rights. To counter this, USHRN organizes the alternative report submissions by U.S. civil society (grassroots and advocacy-based groups) and official testimonies before various U.N. Committees to give an accurate picture of human rights violations occurring in the United States. Advocates who are USHRN members and who are interested, willing, and able to engage with the mechanisms to advance their work domestically, travel to Geneva for the reviews. USHRN has provided travel funding and other support for these, mostly grassroots groups, in the past. That said, many human rights defenders in the United States understand that international human rights spaces can be challenging and were not necessarily designed for grassroots advocacy. With the United States Human Rights Network acting as a bridge to these international spaces, advocates—especially those most impacted by human rights abuses—see the value of being able to tell their stories to an international audience because it affords them a legal framework that is not available within U.S. jurisprudence and validates their experiences as being counter to basic human rights principles.

To give one example of a year in the organization’s recent history: In March of 2014, USHRN led a delegation to Geneva to testify before the United Nations Human Rights Committee regarding the United States’ implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). In August, it led another delegation to the United Nations

Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination's review of the United States government's record under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (commonly known as ICERD or CERD). During the review process, the Committee received reports and heard testimony from over one hundred organizations. Among the civil society delegation were people directly impacted by human rights violations, including Ron Davis and Sybrina Fulton, Black parents whose respective sons (Jordan Davis and Trayvon Martin) were shot to death by White¹ vigilantes in Florida—one of many states with “Stand Your Ground” laws, which allow civilians to use deadly force when they believe they are under attack.

Addressing the killing of his son, Jordan Davis, aged 17, by armed vigilante Michael Dunn on November 23, 2012, Ron Davis said,

Regardless that my son didn't have a weapon, regardless that my son never touched a hair on his head, regardless that my son never even got out of the car to touch his car... in their mind, they say that they fear someone for whatever reason, they're able to take action... I think that's a human rights violation, that people can fear you in their mind even though you're not taking action against them, and they can still take action against you and try to get away with it.

(Davis as quoted in Edwards, 2014, para. 15)

Lamenting the limits to legal recourse for African Americans whose children had been killed by vigilantes in the United States, Davis noted that “[s]eventy percent of people who claim Stand Your Ground get off (are not convicted) in Florida,” noting that “it's like the Wild Wild West” (Davis as quoted in Nebehay, 2014, para. 12). This sense that the U.S. legal system did

¹ *Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups in our articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.*

not adequately address—and in many cases did not even protect—racist violence was further supported by Trayvon Martin’s mother, Sybrina Fulton, who stated that “[a]lthough ‘Stand your Ground’ may seem like it’s a neutral law on the surface ... it really isn’t, the way it is applied in the USA.” Later that same year, in November, another delegation led by USHRN testified in Geneva, as the parents of Michael Brown (the unarmed Black teenager who was killed by Ferguson, Missouri by police officer Darren Wilson) and other impacted families testified before the Committee Against Torture (CAT). During the same review, Martinez Sutton spoke about the killing of his sister, Rekia Boyd, an unarmed Black woman shot and killed by Dante Servin, an off-duty Chicago police detective. And Breanna Champion of the organization We Charge Genocide (WCG) testified about the beating of her brother by police, as the WCG delegation stood in protest of the murder of Dominique Franklin Jr. at the hands of the Chicago police.

“You in the United Nations Are Your Brothers and Sisters’ Keepers:” The Case of George Floyd at the United Nations

Following the killing of George Floyd and the global outrage that saw protestors fill streets across the globe, the United States Human Rights Network, the ACLU, and Professor Gay McDougall, a former member of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), drafted a letter to the U.N. Human Rights Council, requesting a Special Session and asking the United Nations to mandate an independent commission of inquiry into the “extrajudicial killings and violent law enforcement responses to protests, including the attacks against protestors and journalists.” This letter from June 8, 2020 (click [here](#) for the full text of the letter), also calls for “a United Nations investigation into the firing of tear gas by President Trump in violation of international standards on the use of force” (ACLU, 2020, para 1). Within 48 hours, more than 650 organizations from 66 countries signed onto the letter, as well as the families of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Philando Castile, and Michael Brown, urging member states of the United Nations Human Rights Council to urgently convene a Special Session on the situation of human rights in

the United States, in order to respond to the unfolding grave human rights crisis borne out of the repression of nationwide protests (ACLU, 2020, para. 2).

Why an international commission of inquiry for the United States? E. Tendayi Achiume, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Racism, states the following in support of this effort by civil society:

Because the systemic racism in law enforcement in the United States is a human rights crisis of existential proportions, and the domestic legal and policy regimes that ought to be relied upon to put an end to this crisis have never been able to do so. (para. 5)

“For Black people in the United States,” Achiume further notes, “the domestic legal system has utterly failed to acknowledge and confront the racial injustice and discrimination that is so deeply entrenched in law enforcement.” The point, Achiume argues,

is not that an international commission of inquiry will solve the problem of systemic racism in law enforcement in the United States. Instead, it is that victims of systemic racism in the United States, who face the daily, unabated and genuine risk of death in encounters with law enforcement deserve the assistance and expertise of an international human rights investigative body to chart a just path forward. (para 9)

In response to this letter, on June 12, 2020, the African Group, the arm of the African Union that represents the continent’s 54 U.N. member states, called on the United Nations Human Rights Council (click [here](#) to see the letter at the end of this article by Dieudonné Désiré Sougouri, representative of Burkina Faso) to organize an urgent debate, which is functionally the same as a special session, on racism and police violence, “in the context of global mobilization after the death of George Floyd in the United States” (AFP, para. 1). On June 15, USHRN, ACLU, and its partner in Geneva, the International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), began to advocate with member states of the Human Rights Council for the passage of a strong resolution put forth by the African Group which had two important elements: It strongly condemned

the continuing racial discriminatory and violent practices perpetrated by law enforcement agencies against Africans and of People of African Descent and structural racism endemic to the criminal justice system, in the United States of America and other parts of the world recently affected.

It also demanded the establishment of

an independent international commission of inquiry, to be appointed by the President of the Human Rights Council to establish facts and circumstances related to the systemic racism, alleged violations of International Human Rights Law and abuses against Africans and of People of African Descent in the United States of America and other parts of the world recently affected. (click [here](#) to see the draft resolution, also at the end of this article).

Testifying via video before the Human Rights Council on June 17, 2020, Philonise Floyd, George Floyd's brother, said,

My family and I have had to watch the last moments of his life when he was tortured to death including the eight minutes and forty-six seconds one officer kept his knee on my brother's neck. The officers showed no mercy, no humanity, and tortured my brother to death in the middle of the street in Minneapolis with a crowd of witnesses watching and begging them to stop—showing us Black people the same lesson yet again: Black lives do not matter in the United States of America.

He further argued, "I am my brother's keeper. You in the United Nations are your brothers and sisters' keepers in America. You have the power to help us get justice for my brother." "I'm asking you to help him. I'm asking you to help me. I'm asking you to help us, Black people in America," Floyd added, asking for an independent commission to investigate police conduct in the United States (United Nations News, 2020, para. 5).

Two days later, on June 19, the UNHRC, in its 43rd session, debated a resolution condemning racial discrimination in the United States. The final resolution, (A/HRC/RES/43/1), passed unanimously without a vote; it advocated "[t]he promotion and protection of the human rights and

fundamental freedoms of Africans and of people of African descent against excessive use of force and other human rights violations by law enforcement officers” (para. 6). In so doing, the document specifically evokes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (OHCHR, 1966/1976), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD, 1969), and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT, 1987). Specifically, the resolution

[s]trongly condemns the continuing racially discriminatory and violent practices perpetrated by law enforcement agencies against Africans and people of African descent, in particular which led to the death of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 in Minnesota, as referred to in PP9, and the deaths of other People of African Descent and further condemn the structural racism in the criminal justice system. (A/HRC/RES/43/1, 2020, para. 19)

The Human Rights Council further expressed that it was

[a]larmed at the resurgence of violence, racial hatred, hate speech, hate crimes, neo-Nazism, neo-Fascism and violent nationalist ideologies based on racial or national prejudice, including the resurgence of racial superiority ideologies that incite hatred and violence against Africans and people of African descent, (2020, para. 5)

albeit without naming a specific geographic/national context for these ideologies and acts of violence. The document further “*[d]eplores* the recent incidents of excessive use of force and other human rights violations by law enforcement officers against peaceful demonstrators defending the rights of Africans and of people of African descent” and “[r]equests the High Commissioner for Human Rights, with the assistance of relevant Special Mandate Holders, to prepare a report on systemic racism, violations of international human rights law against Africans and people of African descent by law enforcement agencies.”

However, as observers noted, the resolution's text "was watered down during closed-door negotiations from an initial draft explicitly calling for a U.N. commission of inquiry on racism in the United States and elsewhere" (Nebehay, 2020, para. 7). Although specific allegations against systemic racism within the United States were conspicuously vague in the final resolution, repeated references to the gruesome murder of George Floyd serve to highlight both the historical and geographic context that called for the passing of this document. Thus, the resolution "[w]elcom[es] all statements made by the special procedures regarding the killing of George Floyd" (A/HRC/43/L.50, 2020, para. 1). In the latter statement, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, noted,

The voices calling for an end to the killings of unarmed African Americans need to be heard. The voices calling for an end to police violence need to be heard. And the voices calling for an end to the endemic and structural racism that blights U.S. society need to be heard. (UN, 2020, para. 2)

ISHR delivered a statement by the ACLU, USHRN and other civil society groups reminding the human rights body that

American policing has never been a neutral institution. The first U.S. city police department was a slave patrol, and modern police forces have directed oppression and violence at Black people to enforce Jim Crow, wage the War on Drugs, and crack down on protests. (click [here](#) to see the full letter, also at the end of this article, from June 17, 2020).

The statement ended by asking for an Independent Commission of Inquiry and by stating,

The protesters around the world are demanding radical change; now is the time for accountability, for reimagining public safety and the role of police in a democratic society. It's time to dismantle structural racism and invest in people and communities of color. (ISHR, 2020)

“Our Freedom Struggle Has Then Become Internationalized”: Malcolm X’s Ground-breaking Advocacy in Cairo

Compellingly, Resolution A/HRC/RES/43/1 is also “[t]aking note of the historic resolution on racial discrimination in the United States of America adopted at the first ordinary session of the Assembly of African Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity, held in Cairo from 17 to 24 July 1964,” (2020, para. 5) which marked a pivotal moment in the long history of African Americans seeking redress for human rights violations within the United States. That resolution came to pass, the way it was worded, in large part because of the sustained efforts by Malcolm X, who was aided, during his stay in Cairo, by other members of a sizable African American expatriate community there—including by David Graham Du Bois, the son of Shirley and stepson of W.E.B. Du Bois.

After leaving the Nation of Islam on March 8, following his break with Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X spent most of 1964 in Africa and the Middle East, forging alliances with other anti-colonial thinkers. Writing (in revealing stenography style) in his journal in Lagos, Nigeria, on May 10, he notes, for instance, “Independent nations could pressure ‘justice’ for 22 million Amer (Africans)” (p. 46). Four days later, he notes, “Audience with [Kwame] Nkrumah at noon (for an hour)—well informed, concerned about AA [Afro-American] plight, unity of Afro-American people of African descent (Pan-Africanism) is key to problem” (p. 52, information in brackets was added by the editors of Malcolm’s journal). Malcolm’s experimenting here with different conventions—from “Amer (Africans)” to “Afro-American people of African descent”—illustrates quite well the connections he aimed to forge between Black communities in the United States and Africans. Like Ron Davis in 2014 and Philonise Floyd in 2020, Malcolm understood that the key to getting redress for injustices against African Americans in the United States was to appeal to allies abroad.

From Ghana, he thus reflects, also in May of 1964, on “seven days of overwhelming success building bridges of goodwill and better understanding at all levels of Ghanaian government and social circles concerning the true plight of the 22 million Afro-Americans” (p. 58). And

upon his return to Cairo (where he had already spent significant time that spring) from New York, he emphasizes “the need for the African Heads of State to intervene [on] behalf of the American Negroes in bringing our problem (human rights violations) before the UN or America’s heading for racial bloodbath” (p. 70). While other Black activists and their allies were lobbying Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration to pass civil rights laws, Malcolm’s focus had shifted towards the rhetoric and mechanisms of human rights legislation.

Thus, in an essay, entitled “Racism: The Cancer That Is Destroying America,” published in the *Egyptian Gazette* on August 25, 1964, Malcolm notes that his “first concern is with the oppressed group of people to which I belong, the 22 million Afro-Americans, for we, more than any other people on earth today, are deprived of these inalienable *human rights*” (p. 303, *italics in the original*). “The universal law of justice,” Malcolm expressed his faith in human rights law, “is sufficient to bring judgment upon the American whites who are guilty of racism. The same law will also punish those who have benefited from the racist practices of their forefathers and have done nothing to atone for the ‘sins of their fathers’” (p. 303). Elaborating on this, he notes,

The common goal of 22 million Afro-Americans is respect as *human beings*, the God-given right to be a human being. Our common goal is to obtain the *human rights* that America has been denying us. We can never get civil rights in America until our *human rights* are first restored. We will never be recognized as citizens there until we are first recognized as *humans*. (p. 304, *italics in the original*)

Malcolm’s skepticism of civil rights legislation is profound. “The present American ‘system’ can never produce freedom for the black man,” he explains, because “[t]he American ‘system’ (political, economic, and social) was produced from the enslavement of the black man, and this present ‘system’ is capable only of perpetuating that enslavement” (Malcolm X, 1964, as cited in Boyd & Al-Shabazz, 2013, pp. 304-305).

As long as the freedom struggle of the 22 million Afro-Americans is labeled a civil rights issue it remains a domestic problem under the jurisdiction of the United States, and as such, bars the intervention

and support of our brothers and sisters in Africa, Asia, Latin America, as well as that of the well-meaning whites of Europe. (p. 305)

He concludes, proposing that “once our struggle is lifted from the confining civil rights label to the level of *human rights*, our freedom struggle has then become *internationalized*” (p. 305).

Back in Cairo, Malcolm was accepted as an observer to the First Ordinary Session conference of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) (formed the year before in Addis Ababa) that took place from July 17 to 21, 1964. Malcolm’s status as an observer allowed him to submit a memorandum, entitled “Appeal to African Heads of State,” to the OAU delegates. Malcolm’s letter argues,

Since the 22 million of us were originally Africans, who are now in America not by choice but only by a cruel accident in our history, we strongly believe that African problems are our problems and our problems are African problems. (p. 73)

“We also believe,” he continues, “that as heads of the Independent African states you are the shepherd of *all* African peoples everywhere, whether they are still at home on the mother continent or have been scattered abroad” (p. 73). Malcolm’s memorandum was distributed on the first day of the conference, July 17, 1964, just one day after 15-year-old African American James Powell was shot and killed by New York Police Department officer Thomas Gilligan, causing people in Harlem (and later Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood) to rise up over the course of multiple days—at the very same time that African leaders convened in Cairo. “We, in America,” Malcolm concludes,

are your long-lost brothers and sisters, and I am here only to remind you that our problems are your problems. As the African-Americans ‘awaken’ today, we find ourselves in a strange land that has rejected us, and, like the prodigal son, we are turning to our elder brothers for help. We pray our pleas will not fall upon deaf ears. (p. 73)

After distributing his memorandum, Malcolm noted about his attendance of the conference itself that “all the Heads of State seem to avoid mentioning the US & its racism,” which only furthers his awareness of “the

importance of building bridges of communication, understanding & cooperation between Africans & Afro-Americans” (p. 86).

Although he himself was not able to speak at the conference and despite his skepticism, Malcolm X’s lobbying on behalf of African Americans was successful, as the OAU adopted a resolution on “Racial Discrimination in the United States” (AHG/Res. 15.I); it stated that “[c]onsidering that one hundred years have passed since the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in the United States of America” and “[n]oting with satisfaction the recent enactment of the Civil Rights Act designed to secure for American Negroes their basic human rights,” but also showed itself “[d]eeply disturbed, however, by continuing manifestations of racial bigotry and racial oppression against Negro citizens of the United States of America” (p. 123).

Just how groundbreaking and defiant both this resolution and Malcolm’s advocacy were becomes obvious when we situate both within the context of the African American freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. Describing how, towards the end of World War II,

African American leadership, led by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), had already decided that only human rights could repair the damage that more than three centuries of slavery, Jim Crow, and racism had done to the African American community. (Anderson, 2003, p. 1)

Carol Anderson (2003) shows how successive American administrations, in the context of the Cold War, “systematically eliminated human rights as a viable option for the mainstream African American leadership” (p. 5). Post-war and Cold War policies, such as the Truman Doctrine, McCarthyism, and the creation of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, along with the persecution of Black scholars and activists that both criticized American domestic and foreign policies internationally, sought to limit the scope of Black internationalism. Daulatzai (2012) argues,

By policing Blackness and containing it within a nationalist framework, the new Cold War calculus fractured the potential for diasporic solidarities and an anti-imperialist critique, in turn

bolstering empire and creating a new kind of imperial citizen as the United States became a global superpower. (p. 15)

What Malcolm X did when he charged White American hegemony (domestic and global) in Cairo was to go up against this Cold War orthodoxy. “In the past the civil rights groups in America have been foolishly attempting to obtain constitutional rights from the same Government that has conspired against us to deny our people these rights,” he observed in his 1964 essay, adding that “[o]nly a world body (*a world court*) can be instrumental in obtaining those rights which belong to a human being by dint of his being a member of the human family” (p. 305). Like Medgar Evers, who drew connections between Kenya’s Mau Mau struggle and American Jim Crow, and like Martin Luther King, Jr., who understood that the lives of Black Americans and Vietnamese anti-colonial fighters were intertwined, Malcolm’s human rights struggle was cut short, of course, when he was assassinated on February 21, 1965.

Commenting on her father’s work towards “re-defin[ing] the American civil rights movement to include a Human Rights agenda,” Malcolm X’s daughter, Ilyasah Al-Shabazz, (2013) reminds us that

Malcolm’s father [Earl Little] had been beaten, tied to trolley tracks, and eventually slaughtered by an oncoming train for gathering signatures on a petition to bring the United States up on charges before the League of Nations—for violating the human rights of twenty-two million African Americans. (p. 180)

As Shabazz here indicates, Black internationalist struggles for human rights have a long legacy in the United States. Scholars like Michael West, William Martin, James Meriwether, Brenda Plummer, and Alex Lubin, among others, have established Black internationalism as the understanding that African American freedom struggles in the United States were tied to the politics of imperialism and decolonization abroad since the days of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Though they shared different Black internationalist agendas—from Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and W.E.B. Du Bois’ Pan-African Congress to Malcolm’s Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Black

Panther Party after its founding in 1966—organizations dedicated to Black freedom understood that color-lines were global and so were anti-racist struggles. Resolution A/HRC/RES/43/1, in its uneasy rhetoric “of Africans and of people of African descent” (para. 17) that at times avoids naming U.S. law enforcement and American Jim Crow specifically, nonetheless reflects this spirit.

Unfinished Business: The Aftermath of Resolution A/HRC/RES/43/1

By appealing to a “world court,” Malcolm X argued, anti-racist activists can “take the racist American Government before the World Court and have the racists in it exposed and condemned as the criminals that they are” (1964, as cited in Boyd & Al-Shabazz, 2013, p. 305). Arguably, few recent American governments have been as openly racist as the administration of Donald J. Trump. While the administration’s domestic response to the killing of George Floyd (and related cases) and the unprecedented, multiracial mass protests was characterized by threats of military intervention and Nixonian law-and-order rhetoric, it also attempted to block efforts of getting the United Nations involved. Exactly two years after the United States left the Human Rights Council in June of 2018 (see Harris, 2018), the U.S. State Department worked hard to water down and render meaningless the proposed resolution. Behind the scenes, they sought to strip the resolution of all references to George Floyd, Minnesota, and the United States and also to remove any follow-up from the High Commissioner in order to shield the United States from scrutiny. Latin American and European countries also pressured the African Group to dilute the text of the resolution (El Hosseiny, 2020). The situation was volatile, and there are reports that the United States was in panic mode as the “State Department [under Mike Pompeo] was scrambling to avert a public relations disaster, dispatching its diplomats to pull strings and call in favors” (Toosi, 2020, para. 3).

Thus, advocates working behind the scenes in Geneva report that many of the countries objecting to a resolution holding the United States accountable in more specific ways for its Jim Crow remnants are the same

actors who lead U.N. independent commissions of inquiry around the world to hold other countries, particularly in the Global South, the Middle East and Latin America, accountable for their human rights violations. Though the same criteria should apply to the United States, it quickly became clear that this process “was not about merit or principles, it was about power and politics” (El Hosseiny, 2020). That said, while many Western states defended the United States, Southern African states, including Namibia, Botswana, and South Africa, for instance, sought to hold the United States accountable for its human rights violations. Tellingly, during the urgent debate, Namibia was the only country to condemn racism and police violence in the United States, while South Africa urged countries to stand on the right side of history by not diminishing, minimizing, or making general blanket statements because that, in itself, is a form of racism (El Hosseiny, 2020). The historic nature of these efforts should not be undersold since special sessions and urgent debates are very rare occurrences. While the Council has held only four previous urgent debates and 28 special sessions since its first meeting in June 2006, the debate on June 17 and the ensuing resolution are exceptional for addressing—for the first time—a human rights situation in a P5 country (P5 refers to the permanent members of the Security Council: Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States). Although neither the request for the debate nor the resolution says that it is about the United States, both are clearly about the country (Splinter, 2020).

Following the Human Rights Council Resolution passed on Juneteenth—a holiday celebrated amongst many African Americans to mark the emancipation of those who had been enslaved in the United States—USHRN worked with the ACLU to write a new letter to the High Commissioner calling for her mandated report on systemic racism and violations of international human rights law against Africans and people of African descent by law enforcement agencies to be meaningful and contribute to true accountability. Supported by Mothers Against Police Brutality, 144 family members of people killed by the police (including family members of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Oscar Grant, Philando Castile, and Michael Brown Jr.), and over 360 civil society groups from

across the globe signed on to the letter (click [here](#) to see the full letter which is also at the end of this article) by early August (USHRN, 2020). The letter called for an “inclusive process for producing the report with maximum meaningful participation and engagement from directly impacted communities and other relevant stakeholders” (ACLU, 2020, para. 3).

Importantly, the letter called for “inclusive outreach to communities of color and the creation of meaningful, safe, and accessible opportunities for consultation. It must also involve modalities to provide testimonies, evidence, and other relevant information and materials to encourage unhindered reporting from those fearing retaliation” (para. 6). The letter also called for the High Commissioner’s report to “respect the memory of George Floyd and other victims of police violence” while outlining “steps and measures that must be taken to dismantle structural racism and bring the country’s criminal legal system in line with international human rights norms” (2020, para. 6). As a response, the High Commissioner is working with the United States Human Rights Network, ACLU, and other advocates to ensure inclusivity in the process. In November of 2020, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) issued a call for submission to help the U.N. address issues of systemic racism and police violence globally.² On February 18, 2021, OHCHR undertook a public consultation with civil society organizations working on issues of systemic racism against people of African descent, including but not limited to the area of law enforcement, to make interventions followed by brief remarks/exchange by/with OHCHR. The submissions and hearing of testimonies will be used to inform the High Commissioner’s report to the U.N. Human Rights Council in June 2021.

This type of engagement is unprecedented, so the world is waiting to see what happens next. As Black communities in the United States continue to be ravished by the untethered spread of COVID-19, police

² More information can be found here: <https://www.idpad.org/ohchr-report>

killings, voter suppression during the recent election, and other issues, we are reminded that Malcolm X, and those who would come after him, saw value in linking our struggles with those of marginalized communities around the world. By internationalizing our issues, we receive inspiration from, and we inspire those people around the world whose voices have yet to be heard, but who are ready and willing to speak. We hear you.

Note: After the references are the complete copies of letters and other documents sent to the United Nations by USHRN that were mentioned in the text of the article.

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June 8, 2020

To Members of the United Nations Human Rights Council

Re: Request for the Convening of a Special Session on the Escalating Situation of Police Violence and Repression of Protests in the United States

Excellencies,

The undersigned family members of victims of police killings and civil society organizations from around the world, call on member states of the UN Human Rights Council to urgently convene a Special Session on the situation of human rights in the United States in order to respond to the unfolding grave human rights crisis borne out of the repression of nationwide protests. The recent protests erupted on May 26 in response to the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, which was only one of a recent string of unlawful killings of unarmed Black people by police and armed white vigilantes.

We are deeply concerned about the escalation in violent police responses to largely peaceful protests in the United States, which included the use of rubber bullets, tear gas, pepper spray and in some cases live ammunition, in violation of international standards on the use of force and management of assemblies including recent U.N. Guidance on Less Lethal Weapons.

Additionally, we are greatly concerned that rather than using his position to serve as a force for calm and unity, President Trump has chosen to weaponize the tensions through his rhetoric, evidenced by his promise to seize authority from Governors who fail to take the most extreme tactics against protestors and to deploy federal armed forces against protestors (an action which would be of questionable legality).

Our greatest concern is that the violence and counter-violence are diverting the gaze of the global community away from the pain being expressed by a nation in mourning over the callous manner of the 8 minutes and 46 seconds that ended George Floyd's life while a group of police stood and watched, about the death of more than 100,000 souls from the coronavirus – [disproportionately killing Black, Brown and Indigenous Peoples](#) – and about how injustice never ends and equality never comes. There is serious concern that the tear gas and police-induced havoc will obscure the legitimate passion of these demonstrations. The voices of the demonstrators must be heard. Their demand is that the endemic racism, hatred, fear and disparity finally be confronted.

News media reported that [seven people were struck by gunfire at a protest in Louisville](#); at least one person – David McAtee, who was serving food to protesters at a demonstration – was killed by police gunfire in Kentucky. In Ohio, [pepper spray](#) was used on large crowds. Reports by [journalists on social media](#) indicate that rubber bullets were used in numerous places, including

Phoenix, Arizona, Los Angeles, California, Atlanta, Georgia, and Minneapolis, Minnesota. According to the [U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), there have been “at least 200 reported incidents of journalists covering the protests being physically attacked, intimidated or arbitrarily arrested, despite their press credentials being clearly visible.” The police arrested more than [11,000 people](#) across the United States.

Furthermore, it appears that police departments across the United States, backed by federal government agencies (like [CBP](#), which regularly [violates civil and human rights](#)), are escalating the situation with further militarization and excessive use of force against protesters. We note with particular concern the deployment of at least 62,000 National Guard soldiers in two dozen states, the encouragement of the use of violence and mass arrests by President Donald Trump on social media, and his labeling of the protesters as “terrorists.” Several cities around the country have imposed sweeping night curfews that triggered further inflammation of the atmosphere and create yet another justification for additional police violence and arrests.

It is well established that neither the use of violence by a small number of people or damage to property suspend the right to protest of all those gathered and do not provide a license to escalate police responses and use of excessive or deadly force. In all circumstances, the police response must remain within the limits of the law and seek to de-escalate situations rather than inflame them by resorting to life-threatening weapons.

The right to peaceful assembly and demonstration must be protected. This mandate is even more compelling with regard to the rights of minority communities, especially people of African descent, to speak out against racist practices they have endured for centuries. Recent police killings of unarmed Black people as well as police use of excessive force and repression of protests violate United States obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD).

Finally, the massive use of less-lethal weapons is compounded by the fact that the United States is one of the worst-hit countries by the global pandemic. [Health experts warned](#) that the use of tear gas may place individuals at a higher risk of contracting a respiratory illness and can have long-term effects on respiratory function. We are also concerned that mass arrests and detention of protesters will only exacerbate the risk of infection in jails that are already an epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

In light of these grave concerns, the undersigned urge the members of the U.N. Human Rights Council to convene a special session of the HRC in order to respond appropriately to this situation of escalating human right abuses with the aim of mandating an independent inquiry into:

- the recent history of racist policing in cities across the country that continues with seeming impunity from the killing of Michael Brown and the repression of protests in Ferguson, Missouri, to the murder of George Floyd.
- allegations of excessive use of force against peaceful protesters and journalists in the demonstrations in U.S. cities since the murder of George Floyd.

The inquiry should report its findings to the Human Rights Council and should include recommendations on how to ensure that the United States upholds its human rights obligations, including in the context of policing, protests and assemblies. Further, the report should address the responsibility of the United States to end impunity for police violence and other serious human rights violations through appropriate disciplinary actions, prosecutions and fair trials.

The Council should call on the United States to give those conducting this inquiry, as well as other U.N. officials (including special procedures mandate holders), full and unrestricted access to interview witnesses, including members of the police, to inspect places of detention, and to monitor trials related to the protests and their aftermath.

Family members of victims of police violence who have endorsed this letter:

Philonise Floyd and Quincy Mason, brother and son of George Floyd

Tamika Palmer, mother of Breonna Taylor

Valerie Castile, mother of Philando Castile

Lezley McSpadden, mother of Michael Brown



Son Excellence Madame l'Ambassadrice Elisabeth TICHY-FISSELBERGER
Représentante permanente de l'Autriche auprès de l'Office des Nations Unies
et des institutions spécialisées à Genève
Présidente du Conseil des droits de l'homme
Avenue Giuseppe Motta 35-37
1202 Genève

Email: genf-ov@bmeia.gv.at
hrcouncil@ohchr.org

Genève, le 12.06.2020

Demande de la tenue d'un débat urgent sur les violations actuelles des droits de l'homme d'inspiration raciale, le racisme systémique, la brutalité policière et la violence contre les manifestations pacifiques, à l'occasion de la reprise de la 43e session du Conseil des droits de l'homme : 15-19 juin 2020

Madame la Présidente,

Les événements tragiques du 25 mai 2020 à Minneapolis aux États-Unis qui ont entraîné la mort de George Floyd, ont déclenché des protestations dans le monde entier contre l'injustice et la brutalité auxquelles les personnes d'ascendance africaine sont confrontées quotidiennement dans de nombreuses régions du monde. La mort de George Floyd n'est malheureusement pas un incident isolé ; de nombreux cas antérieurs de personnes non armées d'ascendance africaine ayant subi le même sort en raison de violences policières incontrôlées, sont légions. Malheureusement, le sort de ces nombreuses autres victimes n'a pas attiré l'attention, car ce qu'elles ont subi n'ont pas été véhiculé sur les réseaux sociaux à la vue de tous.

Dans leur déclaration du 5 juin 2020, les 47 titulaires de mandat au titre des procédures spéciales du Conseil des droits de l'homme des Nations Unies ont déclaré que : « le soulèvement au niveau national (sic. aux USA) est une protestation contre le racisme systémique, fruit de la violence raciale parrainée par l'État et accorde l'impunité à cette violence. Le soulèvement reflète également la frustration du public qui proteste contre les nombreuses autres manifestations flagrantes du racisme systémique dont il a été impossible d'ignorer ces derniers mois, y compris le taux de mortalité, l'impact socioéconomique ainsi que les restrictions racialement disparates constatées dans la lutte liée à la pandémie COVID-19 ». « Les manifestations dont le monde est témoin sont un rejet de l'inégalité et de la discrimination raciales fondamentales qui caractérisent la vie aux États-Unis pour les Noirs et les autres personnes de couleur. »

Le tollé international soulevé par cette situation souligne l'urgence pour le Conseil des droits de l'homme de discuter de ces questions d'actualité, comme l'ont clairement relevé la semaine dernière, les lettres adressées au Conseil des droits de l'homme par la Société civile, à cet égard.

Au nom de Leurs Excellences, les Représentants permanents et Ambassadeurs du Groupe africain, en ma qualité de Coordonnateur des questions des droits de l'homme, j'ai l'honneur de transmettre par la présente au Conseil des droits de l'homme, une demande de tenir un débat urgent sur les violations actuelles des droits de l'homme d'inspiration raciale, le racisme systémique, la brutalité policière contre les Personnes d'ascendance africaine et la violence contre les manifestations pacifiques, pour appeler à mettre un terme à ces injustices.


Le principal objectif du Dialogue urgent est de s'attaquer aux causes structurelles et immédiates de la discrimination raciale qui prévaut dans le monde entier, avec un impact énorme sur la jouissance des droits de l'homme, en particulier par les Personnes d'ascendance africaine.

Ce débat urgent sera également l'occasion de rappeler aux États, leurs engagements de lutter contre ces violations des droits de l'homme, lorsqu'ils ont adopté la Déclaration et le Programme d'action de Durban il y a près de 20 ans.

Nous espérons que le dialogue tracera la voie à suivre et proposera des stratégies sur la manière dont les différents mécanismes des droits de l'homme et les organes conventionnels concernés, peuvent améliorer leur travail afin d'obtenir des résultats tangibles pour la fin de la discrimination raciale, en coopération avec les pays concernés.

Madame la Présidente, nous vous serions reconnaissants de bien vouloir considérer et faciliter en priorité cette demande.

Respectueusement votre



Son Excellence Monsieur l'Ambassadeur Dieudonné W. Désiré Sougouri

Représentant permanent du Burkina Faso auprès de l'Office des Nations Unies et des autres Organisations Internationales à Genève
Coordonnateur du Groupe Africain pour les questions des droits de l'homme

* <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25927&LangID=E>

PJ : version anglaise

Unofficial translation

Her Excellency Ambassador Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger
Permanent Representative of Austria to the United Nations Office and specialized institutions
in Geneva
President of the Human Rights Council
Avenue Giuseppe Motta 35-37
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Email: genf-ov@bmeia.gv.at
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Geneva, June 12, 2020

Request for an Urgent Debate on the current racially inspired human rights violations, systemic racism, police brutality and the violence against peaceful protest, during the resumed 43rd session of the Human Rights Council: 15-19 June 2020

The tragic events that unfolded on 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis USA and resulted in the death of George Floyd, sparked protests all over the world against the injustice and brutality that People of African Descent face daily in many parts of the world. The death of George Floyd is unfortunately not an isolated incident, with many previous cases of unarmed persons of African descent suffering the same fate due to unchecked police brutality. Sadly the fates of many other victims attracted no attention, as they were not captured on social media for all to see.

In the statement on 5 June 2020, issued by independent experts of the Special Procedures of the United Nations Human Rights Council, the **47 Special Procedure holders** stated the uprising nationally (sic. in USA) is a protest against systemic racism that produces state-sponsored racial violence, and licenses impunity for this violence. The uprising also reflects public frustration and protest against the many other glaring manifestations of systemic racism that have been impossible to ignore in the past months, including the racially disparate death rate and socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the disparate and discriminatory enforcement of pandemic-related restrictions.” “ The protests the world is witnessing, are a rejection of the fundamental racial inequality and discrimination that characterize life in the United States for black people, and other people of color.”

The international outcry stress the urgency for the Human Rights Council to discuss these most topical issues as clearly demonstrated over the past week in the letters to the HRC by Civil Society, in this regard.

On behalf of Their Excellencies, the Permanent Representatives and Ambassadors of the African Group, in my capacity as Coordinator for Human Rights, I have the honour to convey an urgent request for the Human Rights Council to hold an Urgent Debate on the racially inspired human rights violations, police brutality against People of African Descent and the violence against the peaceful protests that call for these injustices to stop.

The main aim of the Urgent Dialogue is to address the structural and proximate causes of racial discrimination that prevails worldwide with tremendous impact on the enjoyment of human rights especially by People of African Descent.

The Urgent Debate will also be an opportunity to remind States of the commitments they made to address these human rights violations when they adopted the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action almost 20 years ago.

It is hoped that the dialogue will chart the way forward and propose strategies on how the different human rights mechanisms and relevant treaty body can improve their work as to bring about tangible results on the end of racial discrimination, in cooperation with concerned countries

Madam President, it would be appreciated if you could as a matter of priority consider and facilitate this request.

Yours respectfully

Ambassador Dieudonné W. Désiré Sougouri

Permanent Representative of Burkina Faso to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva.

Coordinator of the African Group on Human Rights issues.

* <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25927&LangID=E>

Urgent Debate on "the current racially inspired human rights violations, systemic racism, police brutality and the violence against peaceful protest"
Joint Statement submitted by the American Civil Liberties Union
43rd Session of the Human Rights Council
June 17, 2020

Ms. President:

American policing has never been a neutral institution. The first U.S. city police department was a slave patrol, and modern police forces have directed oppression and violence at Black people to enforce Jim Crow, wage the War on Drugs, and crack down on protests.

Policing in the United States originated in the slavery era when patrols were created to recapture runaway slaves, terrorize them in order to deter slave rebellion, and maintain a form of discipline for slave workers. Police often participated in or turned a blind eye to lynching and other acts of violence. While slavery formally ended June 19th, 1865 -- 155 years ago this week -- contemporary police and law enforcement in America in many ways continue to function as modern-day slave patrol: terrorizing Black people, killing with impunity, and criminalizing and controlling the lives of Black and poor communities.

Although having only recently gained the awareness it deserves from those outside the Black community, issues of race-based violence have long been woven into the fabric of American society. Black Americans are 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police than white Americans, despite constituting only 13% of the population. They are also 1.3 times more likely to be unarmed when killed by police.

George Floyd's horrific murder has sparked an unstoppable global movement demanding concrete and bold actions to end racist policing practices and impunity for police violence.

While we recognize the global nature of racism and police violence and stand in full solidarity with victims of police violence everywhere, this Council must ensure that the outcome of this Urgent Debate is focused on efforts to hold the United States accountable. This is an opportunity to demonstrate that no State, no matter how powerful, is above scrutiny, and to demonstrate cross-regional support for the Council's integrity.

The Council should mandate the creation of an independent international accountability mechanism not only to document and investigate extrajudicial killings of unarmed Black people, but also heavily militarized police violence against protesters and journalists. Since May 26th, there have been over 400 instances of journalists being detained, assaulted, or otherwise prevented from performing their duties by police. Peaceful protesters have experienced injuries, and sometimes death, from tear gas, rubber bullets, and other crowd control tactics used by the police.

Partial or half-baked measures of accountability won't remedy structural racism. We therefore ask you to heed the demand of family members of victims of police violence, including George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Philando Castile, and Michael Brown, who together with more than 660 organizations from 66 countries around the world, asked you to hold this urgent session and mandate an effective accountability mechanism.

The protesters in the streets across the United States and around the world are demanding radical change; now is the time for accountability, for reimagining public safety and the role of police in a democratic society. It's time to dismantle structural racism and invest in people and communities of color. We urge the Council to respond rapidly and effectively, and mandate an independent investigation into U.S. racist policing practices and suppression of peaceful protests. We cannot remain complicit in the oppression of Black Americans and must take immediate action to end this legacy of state-sanctioned violence.



Human Rights Council**Forty-third session**

24 February–13 March and 15–23 June 2020

Agenda item 1

Organizational and procedural matters**Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council
on 19 June 2020****43/1. Promotion and protection of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of Africans and of people of African descent against excessive use of force and other human rights violations by law enforcement officers***The Human Rights Council,**Reaffirming* the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all,*Recalling* the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, and that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour or national origin,*Recalling also* the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and bearing in mind the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action,*Recalling further* its previous resolutions on the comprehensive follow-up to the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance and the effective implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, and the International Decade for People of African Descent as proclaimed by the General Assembly in its resolution 68/237 of 23 December 2013,*Recalling* the General Assembly resolutions in this regard, in particular Assembly resolution 74/137 of 18 December 2019, and the imperative need for their full and effective implementation,*Alarmed* at the resurgence of violence, racial hatred, hate speech, hate crimes, neo-Nazism, neo-Fascism and violent nationalist ideologies based on racial or national prejudice, including the resurgence of racial superiority ideologies that incite hatred and violence against Africans and people of African descent,

Recognizing that racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance have a deep negative impact on the enjoyment of human rights, and therefore require a united and comprehensive response from the international community,

Recalling Human Rights Council resolution 7/34 of 28 March 2008, and all subsequent resolutions on the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, including those of the Commission on Human Rights,

Taking note of the historic resolution on racial discrimination in the United States of America adopted at the first ordinary session of the Assembly of African Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity, held in Cairo from 17 to 24 July 1964, and the statement made by the Chairperson of the African Union Commission which condemned the murder of George Floyd in Minnesota, United States of America, on 25 May 2020,

Taking note also of the statement made by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on 8 June 2020 expressing its strong condemnation of the murder of George Floyd and repudiating structural racism, the systemic violence against Afro-Americans, impunity and the disproportionate use of force by law enforcement officers,

Recalling the Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials and the Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials,

Encouraging States to look into their manuals and guidelines used for training law enforcement officers with a view to identifying the proportionality of measures in the handling of suspects and other persons in custody, with respect to the treatment of Africans and people of African descent,

Reaffirming the importance of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action in advancing racial equality, ensuring equal opportunities for all, guaranteeing equality before the law and promoting social, economic and political inclusion without distinctions based on race, age, sex, disability, descent, national or ethnic origin, religion or economic or other status,

Welcoming all statements made by the special procedures regarding the killing of George Floyd, and in particular their joint statement of 5 June 2020, and the statement made by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on 3 June 2020,

1. *Strongly condemns* the continuing racially discriminatory and violent practices perpetrated by law enforcement agencies against Africans and people of African descent, in particular which led to the death of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 in Minnesota, as referred to in the ninth preambular paragraph above, and the deaths of other people of African descent, and also condemns the structural racism in the criminal justice system;

2. *Deplores* the recent incidents of excessive use of force and other human rights violations by law enforcement officers against peaceful demonstrators defending the rights of Africans and of people of African descent;

3. *Requests* the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, with the assistance of relevant special procedure mandate holders, to prepare a report on systemic racism, violations of international human rights law against Africans and people of African descent by law enforcement agencies, especially those incidents that resulted in the death of George Floyd and other Africans and people of African descent, to contribute to accountability and redress for victims;

4. *Also requests* the High Commissioner to examine government responses to anti-racism peaceful protests, including the alleged use of excessive force against protesters, bystanders and journalists;

5. *Calls upon* all States and all relevant stakeholders to cooperate fully with the High Commissioner in the preparation of the report;

6. *Requests* the High Commissioner to provide an oral update on the preparation of her report to the Human Rights Council at its forty-fifth and forty-sixth sessions, and to

present a comprehensive report to the Council at its forty-seventh session, to be followed by an interactive dialogue;

7. *Also requests* the High Commissioner to include updates on police brutality against Africans and people of African descent in all her oral updates to the Human Rights Council;

8. *Invites* all treaty bodies, special procedure mandate holders and international and regional human rights mechanisms, within their respective mandates, to pay due attention to all forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, including against Africans and people of African descent, and to bring them to the attention of the Human Rights Council;

9. *Decides* to remain seized of the matter.

*44th meeting
19 June 2020*

[Adopted without a vote.]

August 3, 2020

H.E. Michelle Bachelet
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
Palais Wilson
52 rue des Pâquis
CH-1201 Geneva, Switzerland

(via email: mbachelet@ohchr.org)

Dear High Commissioner,

The undersigned families of victims of police violence and civil society organizations write with regard to the Human Rights Council resolution (A/HRC/43/L.50) *on the promotion and protection of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of Africans and of people of African descent against excessive use of force and other human rights violations by law enforcement officers*.

As you know, the resolution has mandated your office, with the assistance of relevant Special Mandate Holders, “to prepare a report on systemic racism, violations of international human rights law against Africans and people of African descent by law enforcement agencies, especially those incidents that resulted in the death of George Floyd and other Africans and of people of African descent, to contribute to accountability and redress for victims.” The resolution has also requested that your office “examine government responses to antiracism peaceful process peaceful protests, including the alleged use of excessive force against protesters, bystanders and journalists.” In addition, the resolution also requested that the High Commissioner “include updates on police brutality against Africans and people of African descent in all her oral updates to the Council.”

While we were disappointed that the Council adopted a watered-down resolution due to enormous diplomatic pressure from the United States and other allied countries, we consider the outcome of the *urgent debate* a crucial first step towards full accountability for systemic police violence against Black people in the United States and more generally against people of African descent around the world. We wish to make the following recommendations and suggestions to ensure effective implementation of the resolution and a transparent, inclusive process for producing the report with maximum meaningful participation and engagement from directly impacted communities and other relevant stakeholders.

First, we strongly believe that the High Commissioner’s report should center the lived experiences of people of African descent and be informed primarily by individuals and communities directly impacted by structural racism and police violence. This requires inclusive outreach to communities of color and the creation of meaningful, safe, and accessible opportunities for consultation. It must also involve modalities to provide testimonies, evidence, and other relevant information and materials to encourage unhindered reporting from those fearing retaliation.

Second, for the report to fulfill the mandate of the Council’s resolution and respect the memory of George Floyd and other victims of police violence, it must examine and highlight individual cases of extrajudicial killings of people of African descent and entrenched impunity for police violence rooted in structural racism. The resolution specifically mentions the killing of George Floyd, whose horrific murder by a Minneapolis police officer (and the complicity of other officers) shocked the world and sparked unprecedented protests calling for police accountability and racial justice. The reference to the killing of “other Africans and of people of African descent” suggests that Floyd’s killing should not be the only case examined and highlighted in the report.

Third, we encourage you to thoroughly examine the history of racist policing in the United States and other countries in order to make recommendations for a concrete path forward regarding the Council’s role to ensure effective accountability and follow-up. The report should outline steps and measures that must be taken to dismantle structural racism and bring the country’s criminal legal system in line with international human rights norms. The report should build and expand upon, rather than replicate, previous research and reports published by regional and international human rights bodies, including UN treaty bodies and relevant Special Mandate Holders. Extensive research has already been completed by the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance on racism, the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, and the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Fourth, we are fully aware of the extraordinary financial challenges and limited resources at your disposal, as well as the overwhelming responsibilities of your Office, especially in response to the ongoing global health and economic crises imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we believe the implementation of this Council resolution resulting from an historic *urgent debate* should be of high priority. Sufficient resources must be allocated to ensure that the report comprehensively and thoroughly examines structural racism and police violence. We cannot exaggerate the unfathomable importance of this issue for millions of people and its implications on the full enjoyment of basic human rights and fundamental freedoms for people of African descent, Indigenous Peoples, and racial and ethnic minorities. In the United States alone, there are over a thousand people killed by law enforcement every year, below are just some of the signatures of the many family members, whose loved ones were killed by police that you will never hear of in the mainstream media. They have long been denied justice and accountability and treated as second class citizens; the opportunity to begin rectifying this wrong rests in your hands.

Fifth, the examination of racist police violence and government responses to antiracism protests, including the alleged use of excessive force against protesters, bystanders and journalists, must not be limited to desk research and/or a call for written submissions through notes verbales. Rather, it must be based on regional hearings and consultations, potentially facilitated by OHCHR’s regional and field offices, that will provide adequate and meaningful opportunities for a wide range of voices and experiences to be presented. Holding public hearings will increase the transparency and legitimacy of the process and outcome. It will also create opportunities to educate

the public on racial justice and the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement at this historic juncture. It is possible to conduct more comprehensive outreach and consultations using virtual hearings and meetings, especially when travel and country visits are limited due to COVID-19 or financial constraints.

We stand ready to support you and your dedicated staff as you begin to implement the Council's resolution. Please accept our sincerest gratitude and appreciation for the enormous work you do each day as the world's collective human rights conscience.

Sincerely,

The Families of the Victims of Police Brutality, by year that they lost their loved one:

2020

Tamika Palmer, daughter **Breonna Taylor** killed by Louisville, KY Metro Police Department
Philonise Floyd & Quincy Mason, brother & father **George Floyd** killed by Minneapolis, MN Police

Addie Kitchen, son **Steven DeMarco Taylor** killed by San Leandro, CA Police

Amy Fizer, daughter **Hannah Renee Fizer** killed by Pettis County, MO Police

Jeannie Williams, son **John Henry Ross II** killed by Harrisonburg City Police, Rockingham County VA Sheriffs, and VA State Police

2019

Desiree Lauren, son **Sterling Humbert** killed by Carrollton, TX Police

Irma Woodard-Duncklee, son **Michael Lee Duncklee** killed by Tucson, AZ Police

Lisa Finch, daughter **Adelina Finch** killed by Wichita, KS Police

Tammie Atchison Featherstone, nephew **Jimmy Atchison** killed by Atlanta, GA Police

Toni Biegert, son **Joseph R. Biegert** killed by Green Bay, WI Police

Trena & Quiana Miller, son **TreShun Miller** killed by Arlington, TX Police

2018

Azucena Albrethsen, son **Jacob E. Albrethsen** killed by Orem Police

Barbara Okamoto, grandson **Christopher A. Okamoto** killed by Bakersfield, CA Police

Catherine Young, son **D'Quan Young** killed by Washington DC Police

Iris E. Salazar, daughter **Leslie Salazar** killed by Austin, TX Police

Lisa Vargas, son **Anthony Daniel Vargas** killed by Los Angeles County, CA Sheriff's Deputies

Sabrina Passalaqua Courtroul, son **Tommy Henley** killed by Westminster, CO Police

Tiffany Simpson, son **Logan Simpson** killed by Bixby, OK Police

2017

Aaron Heather Nordin, brother **Jason Fanning** killed by St. Joseph Police

Angelique Negroni-Kearse, husband **Andrew Kearse** killed by Schenectady Police

Annice Evans, son **Angel Ramos** killed by Vallejo, CA Police

Candance Gipp, brother **G. Ryan Gipp Jr.** killed by Standing Rock Police Department

Constance Joann McGuire, **Tavaris Khalil McGuire** killed by Kokomo Police

Cynthia Brown, nephew **Kareen Ali Nadir Jones** killed by Columbus, OH Police
Denise Fanning, son **Jason Fanning** killed by St. Joseph, MO Police
Donna Chisesi, son **Jonathan David Victor** killed by Baldwin County, AL Sheriff's Office
Gina Torres, son **Isaiah Hammett** killed by St. Louis City SWAT/ St. Louis, MO Police
James & Kelly Ghaisar, son **Bijan Ghaisar** killed by Park Police in Northern Virginia
Kathy Scott-Lykes, son **Jarvis Lykes** killed by Georgia State Troopers
Katrina Johnson, cousin **Charleena Lyles** killed by Seattle, WA Police
Kimberly Handy-Jones, son **Cordale Q. Handy**, killed by St. Paul, MN Police
Krystal Wagner, son **Shane Allen Jensen** killed by Iowa Department of Natural Resources
Lisa Finch, son **Andrew Finch** killed by Wichita, KS Police
Marion Jones-Tamba, son **Tyler J. Lee** killed by Dekalb County Police
Natasha Manning, son **Arties Manning III** killed by New Orleans, LA Police
Pochya Mifflin, son **Cedric Jamal Mifflin** killed by Phenix City, AL Police
Rosie Chavez, nephew **Jacob Dominguez** killed by San Jose Police
Shae Powell, son **James Daniel Jill** killed by Arapahoe County Sheriff Department
Tiffany Tabares, son **Dillan Tabares** killed by Huntington Beach, CA Police
Valerie Rivera, son **Eric Rivera** killed by Los Angeles, CA Police Department
Vanessa Moore, son **Hayden Stutz** killed by Canton, OH Police

2016

Adrienne Hood, son **Henry Green** killed by Columbus, OH Police
Alice Corley, son **Lionel Vincent Gibson Jr.** killed by Long Beach, CA Police
Arlene Molinaro, son **Joseph Molinaro** killed by Carbondale, PA Police
Ayanna Johnson, son **Darius Wimberly** killed by Bent Harbor, MI Police
Cruz Weick, son **Sergio Daniel Weick** killed by Vista, CA Sheriff's Department
Dalphine Jabril Robinson, son **Jabril B. Robinson** killed by Clayton County, GA Police
Emily Gonzales, son **Jordan Love** killed by Corpus Christi, TX Police
Felicia Thomas, son **Nicholas Thomas** killed by Smyrna, GA Police
Heather Boland, cousin **Bodhi Phelps** killed by Gresham, OR Police
Irene Kalonji, son **Christopher Kalonji** killed by Clackamas, OR Sheriffs & Officers
Kim Thomas, son **Earl Shaleek Pickney** killed by Harrisburg, PA Police
Kristina Murphy, husband **Christopher Murphy** killed by Woodland, CA Highway Patrol
Lorenza Olivares, son **Elias Portillo** killed by Dallas, TX Police
Monteria Robinson, son **Jamarion Robinson** killed by Atlanta, GA Police
Pattie Gonzalez, husband **Fermin Vincent Valenzuela** killed by Anaheim, CA Police
Sandy Sanchez, son **Anthony Nunez** killed by San Jose, CA Police
Valerie Castile, son **Philando Castile** killed by St. Anthony, MN Police
Vicki Timpa, son **Tony Timpa** killed by Dallas, TX Police

2015

Annemarie Grant, brother **Thomas Purdy** killed by Washoe County Sheriffs & Reno Police
Beverly Smith, son **Alonzo Smith**, killed by Special Police Officers in Washington, D.C.
Diane Winter, nephew **Deven Guildford** killed by Eaton County, MI Sheriff Department
Dominic Archibald, son **Nathaniel Pickett II** killed by San Bernardino County, CA Sheriff
Dorothy Osteen, son **Bertrand Davis** killed by Dallas, TX Police
Greg & Tammy Dyksma, son **Nicholas Dyksma** killed by Harris County, GA Deputy

Holly Galbraith Hester, son **Delaney Hester** beaten by Keller, TX Police
Holly Quigley-Papke, son **Patrick Wetter** killed by Stockton, CA Police
Jindia Blount, brother **Juan May** killed by Arlington, TX Police
Judy Alderman Edens, son **Jason Alderman** killed by Bakersfield Police
Kimberly Davis, son **Kimoni Davis** killed by Hanging Rock, OH Police
LaToya Howell, son **Justus Howell** killed by Zion, IL Police
Lynn Eagle Feather, son **Paul Castaway** killed by Denver, CO Police Department
Pamela Fields, cousin **Derrick Hunt** killed by Long Beach, CA Police
Sarah Fitch, son **Samuel Toshiro Smith** killed by Seattle, WA Police
Sharon Irwin, grandson **Tony Terrell Robinson**, killed by Madison, WI Police
Sheila Banks, godson **Corey Jones** killed by Palm Beach Gardens, FL Police Officer
Stephanie Babb, brother **Captain Brian Avon Babb** killed by Eugene, OR Police
Tania Hudson, son **Deaunte Bell** killed by Columbus, OH Police
Tina Taylor, son **Christian Taylor** killed by Arlington, TX Police

2014

Cheryl Jones, son **Marquise Jones** killed by San Antonio, TX Police
Deanna Joseph, son **Andrew Joseph III** killed by Hillsborough County Sheriff Tampa, FL
Denise Rankin, son **DaRon Gaylor Jr.** killed by Flint, MI Police
Dorothy Holmes, son **Ronald Johnson III** killed by Chicago, IL Police
Gina Thayne, nephew **Dillon Taylor** killed by Salt Lake City Police
Janet Baker, son **Jordan Baker** killed by Houston, TX Police
Kathi Roberts Gaynier, son **Andrew Gaynier** killed by Dallas, TX Police
Laurie Valdez, partner **Antonio Guzman Lopez** killed by San Jose State, CA Police
Lisa Mays-Parramore, son **Kelvin Mays** killed by Garland, TX Police
Mary Wilsey, son **Keith Vidal** killed by Southport, NC Sheriff Department
Michael Brown Sr. & Lezley McSpadden, son **Michael Brown Jr.** killed by Ferguson, MO Police
Pamela Brooks, son **Amir Brooks** killed by Prince George's County Police
Pamela Fields, nephew **Donte Parker** killed by San Bernardino County Sheriff
Shirley & Sean Harrison, son & brother **Jason Harrison** killed by Dallas, TX Police Department
Syreeta Myers, son **VonDerrit Myers Jr.** killed by St. Louis, MO Police
Tressa Sherrod, son **John H. Crawford III** killed by Beavercreek, OH Police
Vanessa White, son **Victor White III** killed by Iberia Parish, LA Sheriff Department
Vickie McNeill Williams, son **Tinoris Williams** killed by Palm Beach County, FL Sheriff Department

2013

Collette Flanagan, son **Clinton Allen** killed by Dallas Police
Jenette Munoz, brother **Salvador Munoz** killed by Dallas, TX Police
Kristine Rose, son **Jessie Rose** killed by Utica, NY Police
Mary Wills, son **Taylor Thompson** killed by Escambia County, FL Sheriff
Milca Perez & Gerardo Pineda Sr., son **Gerardo Pineda Jr.** killed by Dallas, TX Police
Montye A. Benjamin, son **Jayvis L. Benjamin** killed by Avondale Estate Police, Decatur, GA
Murlene Spinks, son **Anthony Skeaton** killed in Placer County Jail
Pamela Fields, son **Donte Jordan** killed by Long Beach, CA Police

Royce Eckley, son **Marcus Anthony Merritt Sr.** killed by Louisiana State Police
Susana Lopez, son **DeAngelo Lopez** killed by Compton, CA Sheriff Department
Tawanda Jones, brother **Tyrone West** killed by Baltimore, MD Police
Toni Taylor, son **Cary Ball Jr.** killed by St. Louis, MO Police
Tyann Lavonne Salgado, son **Derek Brown** killed by Tennessee State Troopers
Val Greenoak, son **Jesse Hamilton** killed by Santa Rosa Police Department
Valarie Carey, sister **Miriam Carey** killed by U.S. Secret Service & Capital Police in Washington D.C.
Virginia Bradford, son **Fred Bradford** killed by Dallas, TX Police

2012

Amalia Villafane-Gregory, son **Sebastian Gregory** shot by Miami, FL Police
Ashley Harper, brother **James Harper** killed by Dallas, TX Police
Cynthia Mitchell, son **Mario Romero** killed by Vallejo, CA Police
Genevieve A. Huizar, son **Manuel Diaz** killed by Anaheim, CA Police
Jeralynn Brown-Blueford, son **Alan Blueford** killed by Oakland, CA Police
Krissey Johnson, father **Inzer Allen Johnson** killed by Rainbow City, AL Police
Lydia and Richard Adams, son **Seth Issac Adams** killed by Palm Beach, FL Sheriff Department
Martinez Sutton, sister **Rekia Boyd** killed by off-duty Chicago, IL Detective
Yolanda McNair, daughter **Adaisha Miller** killed by off-duty Detroit, MI Police

2011

Anita Harris, grandson **Dawntrae Ta'Shawn Williams** killed by Gwinnett City, GA Police
Anita Willis, grandson **Kerry Baxter** killed by Oakland, CA Police
Bridzette Lane, son **Raphael Briscoe** killed by Washington DC Police
Jean Thaxton, son **Michael Lee Nida II** killed by Downey, CA Police

2010

Alicia Alvarez, son **Johnathan Cuevas** killed by Los Angeles, CA Sheriff Lynwood Station
Dionne Smith, son **James Rivera Jr.** killed by Stockton, CA Police

2009-2000

Theresa Smith, son **Caesar Cruz** killed by Anaheim, CA Police, 2009
Wanda Johnson, son **Oscar Grant** killed by BART Police in Oakland, CA, 2009
Darlene Cain, son **Dale Graham** killed by Baltimore, MD Police, 2008
Lola Jones, son **Derrick Jones** killed by Dallas, TX Police, 2008
Alicia Kirkman, son **Angelo Miller** killed by Cleveland, OH Police, 2007
Antoinette Washington, son **Brandon Washington** killed by Dallas, TX Police, 2007
Corie Angle Cline, brother **Joe Whitehouse** killed by Anaheim, CA Police, 2007
Sandra Lane, nephew **Bobby Walker** killed by Dallas, TX Police, 2007
Theresa James, partner **Jay Martin Murphy Sr.** killed by Albuquerque, NM Police, 2007
Verbena Hawkins, son **Trinton Hawkins** killed by Dallas, TX Police, 2007
Greta Willis, son **Kevin L. Cooper** killed by Baltimore City police, 2006
Kat Espinosa, son **Asa Benjamin Sullivan** killed by San Francisco, CA Police, 2006
Patricia Scott, son **Raemawn Scott** killed by Powder Spring, GA Police, 2003
Deborah Forge, son **Keenen L. Forge** killed by Dallas, TX Police, 2002

1999-1990

Marion Gray-Hopkins, son **Gary Hopkins Jr.** killed by Prince George County, MD Police, 1999
Vicki & Sara Mokuria, father **Tesfaie Mokuria** killed by Dallas, TX Police, 1992

Truth-Telling as Decolonial Human Rights Education in the Movement for Black Liberation

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Abstract

Despite the rise of the Western human rights regime in the years following WWII, Black communities suffered from continuous human rights abuses. The work of the Truth Telling Project during the Ferguson movement discovered flaws in Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) models when applied to Black liberation struggles in the United States. TRCs were situated as a human rights tool within international civil society to address the abuses of nation-states, corporations and individuals who committed crimes against humanity; however, the needs of the age in which we live in the United States require truth-telling that can reveal historical exclusions. Furthermore, the fields that teach about peace and human rights need to substantively challenge the narrative of human rights as they impact and exclude the experience of Black liberation struggles. This article contends that truth-telling is a practice rooted firmly in Black liberation struggles and critical race

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theory and that it is a decolonial practice that must inform the fields of peace education, human rights education and research areas that influence future iterations of truth processes. Truth-telling in this sense is a public pedagogy and a radical act toward liberation that must lead to reparations that address the historic harms against Black people and transform extractive relationships in the neoliberal configuration of human rights.

Introduction

Currently, we face an unprecedented moment shaped by a global pandemic, police violence, uprising and insurgencies, and extreme divisions in politics. There has long been silence about how the neoliberal economic system leaves out race from the mainstream discourse (Dawson & Francis, 2016), while reinforcing the economic, social and political inequalities within Western democracies. As a decolonial peace educator and critical race theory scholar-activist, one of the founders of the Truth Telling Project (TTP), and a member of the Ferguson Frontline, this offering speaks to the collective struggle to address structural violence which undergirds state sponsored police violence; while building local and national truth-telling processes as an expression of human dignity.

This article speaks to the public pedagogy of truth-telling in Black social movements that needs to inform our understanding of rights and dignity. While activists and their supporters and some academic circles were tuned into the ongoing structural violence epidemic (before Covid-19) in the United States and across the globe, most Americans did not have to or want to think about the struggles of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities. According to the BIPOC project, the term BIPOC is used to “highlight the unique relationship to whiteness that Indigenous and Black (African Americans) people have, which shapes the experiences of and relationship to white supremacy for all people of color

within a U.S. context.”¹ As a scholar-activist, I situate my current research with the organizing around truth-telling as a decolonial process attuned to the human dignity of communities silenced by U.S. settler colonial and heteropatriarchal social, economic and political worldviews and values. This article first reviews the historical context of race and racialized violence in the United States, then critically analyses human rights frameworks as they have been engaged by Black Americans, and finally discusses the ongoing Black freedom struggle and the role of truth-telling, presenting the work of the Truth-Telling Project (TTP) that emerged out of Ferguson, Missouri, during the uprisings after the police killing of unarmed teenaged Michael Brown in 2014.

Historical and Social Contexts

During the coronavirus pandemic, many in the United States mainstream first discovered the staggering health and economic disparities and disproportionate rates of police violence perpetrated by law enforcement against Black Americans. Given the increased attention to issues of racial injustice, never before has there been such a level of approval and support for racial justice and anti-police violence activism around the United States and the world. Yet, the disparities still abound. ProPublica recently described the rate at which Black men are dying from Covid-19 as “hollowing out” a population already beset with incarceration and other social ills.² In April 2020, the *Washington Post* reported the death

¹ See more at <https://www.thebipocproject.org/>

² ProPublica report on the impact of the corona virus on Black men <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-covid-19-hollowed-out-a-generation-of-young-black-men>

rate of Black people was *six times* higher than White³ people in majority communities.⁴ To date, the mortality of Black people from the coronavirus has not improved. At the start of the pandemic, Black people received 81 percent of the New York Police Department's summons for not social distancing.⁵ In 2020 alone, there were 1,066 people killed by police. Even though Black people are only 13 percent of the U.S. population, 28 percent of those murdered by police were Black.⁶

The reality of racialized and structural violence against Black people by law enforcement and the disproportionate impact of coronavirus can be traced to the history of slave patrols as the historical predecessor of modern police forces. Likewise, medical apartheid is part of the heteropatriarchal power of the U.S. medical industrial complex benefiting from and maintaining remnants from experimentation on enslaved Black people. The current state of medical apartheid can be traced to the period of U.S. history when enslaved Black women, men and children were experimented upon, without personal benefit or consent and to the detriment of their

³ *Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups in our articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.*

⁴ April 2020 Washington Post article <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/07/coronavirus-is-infecting-killing-black-americans-an-alarmingly-high-rate-post-analysis-shows/?arc404=true>

⁵ Newsweek report on NYC social distance summons <https://www.newsweek.com/81-percent-nypds-social-distancing-summons-were-issued-blacks-latinos-its-new-stop-frisk-1502841?>

⁶ For more, see <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org>

mental and physical health, for the sake of “scientific advancement.” There has been recent attention to the tortuous experiments of Dr. J. Sims, the father of modern gynecology (Domonoski, 2018; Wall, 2016) on enslaved Black women. Risë Kevalshar Collins (2020) tells stories passed down to her about slave patrols and hers and other Black women’s experience with substandard medical treatment or as experiments.⁷ These and countless other violations of human rights against Black, Indigenous and other People of Color—whose immense intergenerational trauma and contributions to the United States—are continuously silenced in the retelling of American history, and often also in the academic fields of peace studies, peace education, and human rights. We only know about much of this history because of those who pass down their stories and the stories of their families and friends.

The historical moment when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was established lacked authenticity, given the document’s credibility and representational problem (Al Daraweesh, 2020) since many of the European countries still held colonies. Even the United States, which led much of the establishment of the universal principles and standards of conduct of human rights, was engaged in various rights abuses at the time such as through government-funded experiments on Black people in Tuskegee, Alabama. Little attention has been given to the need for accountability for ongoing and past atrocities committed by the United States and European signatories of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The racist and imperialist power relations continued even after Western liberal democracies adopted the UDHR and with the rise of the “global human rights regime,” making the post-WWII grand narrative mostly window dressing (Maldonado-Torres, 2008).

⁷ Risë Kevalshar Collins discusses American Apartheid and Decolonization https://www.idahopress.com/boiseweekly/opinion/guest_opinions/challenging-american-apartheid-championing-american-decolonization-with-love-and-more/article_a026c339-8373-54de-8787-981be1aed98d.html

The narrative-building project of the United States silences truth, preventing the masses from hearing truth-telling from the margins. Missing from the WWII narrative is how the Nazis studied the United States—the theft of Indigenous land, the Jim Crow codes, and other forms of oppression and violence enacted against non-White people—in order to learn how they might enshrine racial codes and extremist views into the legal system (Little, 2019; Miller, 2019; Puckett, 2011). We continue to live with the colonial practices of sterilization of Latinx and Black immigrants in custody in the United States by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Historical accounts leave out the role that U.S. scientists played in the eugenics movement as a way to advance “racial purity” (Gross, 2019). This history points out that while the United States highlighted the insidious abuses of Germany and its allies against Jews and those deemed unworthy of human rights, the United States is forgetful of its own systemic violations and those against non-White humans throughout the world.

To some extent, Europe was forced to grapple with anti-Semitism because of the Nuremberg Tribunal, but the United States as the newly emerging leader of the West did not address its own human rights abuses. And colonial violence has not been reckoned with; there is silence regarding the German genocide of Namibians and Italy’s use of chemical weapons against Ethiopia despite the League of Nations treaty outlawing their use. These, and many other crimes against humanity, go without serious consideration of reparations for slavery and colonization, despite examples such as the United States having paid reparations to Japanese Americans for their internment in the United States during World War II.

Truth-telling can reveal historical exclusions, and the fields of peace and human rights education need to more actively engage truth-telling particularly vis-à-vis Black experiences and liberation struggles. Mahdis Azarmandi (2016) writes in terms of peace studies that the “decolonial critique and engagement with continuities of colonialism and racism in the global North have been marginal... [R]ace as [an] analytic concept is largely absent in peace studies theorizing” (p. 70). This absence contributes to the systemic blindness in fields like peace studies, peace education, and human rights education in addressing various forms of systemic and enduring

colonial violence. As a faculty member in a peace studies department, I have witnessed the relocation of violence in developing nations and communities of color without acknowledging its origin in the West. Inside and outside of the classroom, I try to shift these dynamics, but the absence of critical race perspectives across various levels of the academy ensures little substantive attention will be given to disrupting the continuing harm of coloniality and racial violence. Mahdis Azarmandi (2018) argues that in this context, scholarship is disconnected by identity and place, from an often disinterested academic location and context, thus framing inquiry into global conflict as outside of the “civilized world,” perpetuating similar violence within the field and externally given its impact on policy and practice.

The Black Freedom Struggle: 1940s to Ferguson

In the period immediately following World War II, while the nation was engaged in peacebuilding in a war-torn Europe, Black people in the United States continued to endure the violence of lynchings primarily in the Jim Crow South, and police violence and brutality throughout the country (Alexander, 2012; Blackmon, 2008). Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor (2016) describes how the war “unleashed upheaval among the colonial possessions of the old world order. As the colonized world went into revolt against European powers, the superpowers made appeals to the newly emerging independent countries. This made discrimination against Blacks not only a domestic issue but also an international one” (p. 32). After World War II, Black migration increased as many escaped the racial terror of the Jim Crow South (Taylor, 2016), and Black veterans also returned home to such violence. The Equal Justice Initiative has highlighted the history of lynching in the United States in describing a series of incidents immediately after World War II:

Black veterans of World War II also faced violence for the most basic assertions of equality and freedom. In August 1944, the white owner of a small restaurant in Shreveport, Louisiana, shot and wounded four Black soldiers he claimed ‘attempted to take over his place.’ He faced no charges. In June 1947, a Black Navy veteran named Joe

Nathan Roberts, studying at Temple University through the G.I. Bill, was visiting family in Sardis, Georgia, when a group of white men became upset because he refused to call them “sir.” Later that night, the men abducted Mr. Roberts from his parents’ home and shot him to death. The next year, on September 9, 1948, a group of white men shot and killed a 28-year-old Black veteran named Isaiah Nixon outside of his home and in front of his wife and six children, just hours after he defied threats and voted in the local primary election in Montgomery County, Georgia. Two white men arrested and charged with his death were later acquitted by all-white juries.⁸

Black soldiers who fought valiantly in the World Wars returned home expecting a bare minimum of decent treatment, yet returned to housing and job shortages and experienced harsher treatment from White people in the United States than they had abroad. Often, Black veterans were accused of attempting to rise above their social station, impersonating soldiers or threatening Whites, which was the justification for brutal retaliation. African Americans wrongly believed that their participation in the war efforts would reduce anti-Black sentiments and violence.⁹ This speaks to the reality that the only times the United States was willing to include Black people (Black men) in the moral community was to wield violence against the *other* outside of its borders.

⁸ The Equal Justice Initiative documents Lynching throughout the US south between 1877 and 1950. <https://eji.org/news/remembering-black-veterans-and-racial-terror-lynchings/>

⁹ Professor Chad Williams examines W.E.B. Du Bois’ changing views about Black participation in the world wars <https://www.aaihs.org/w-e-b-du-bois-world-war-i-and-the-question-of-failure/>; W.E.B. Du Bois’ statement on World War II offers a critique of Western Imperialism as the root cause and reason for the West to end colonialism Dubious’ statement on WWII: <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/pageturn/mums312-b095-i314/#page/1/mode/iup>; Bayard Rustin was a conscientious objector on the basis of his religion and the contradiction of fighting fascism in Europe while facing segregation in the United States; Letter submitted to Rustin’s draft board: <https://www.afsc.org/blogs/acting-in-faith/i-must-resist-bayard-rustin-s-letter-to-draft-board>

Black veterans were not the only ones targeted by racial violence, and that violence took many forms. According to Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor (2016), given the housing shortage, when Black Americans attempted to integrate into White areas, they were set upon by White mobs. Taylor (2016) writes: “In both the North and the South, white police either joined the attacks on African Americans or, as they had done so many times before, passively stood aside as whites stoned houses, set fires, destroyed cars, smashed windows and threaten to kill and Blacks who got in their way” (p. 33). The Queer, Black, anti-war and civil rights activist Bayard Rustin was imprisoned for conscientious objection to World War II. His objections were on moral grounds related to his Quaker spiritual commitments to peace. Rustin argued about the contradictions of fighting against fascism in Europe while struggling against Jim Crow segregation in the United States. The language describing the great “wars” spoke to concepts like peace and human rights, and propositions like ending colonialism and fighting fascism, while Black folks struggled against the relentless violation of our dignity and rights as we battled southern terrorism and violent northern White mobs in the periods before, during, and after WWI and WWII.

The result of truth-seeking through documentation of racialized, ethnic, or political violence can uncover stories that might lead to the telling of truthful histories that inform racial healing and *truth* processes resulting in justice for impacted communities. Margaret Burnham (2020) at Northeastern University Law School, who leads the Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Center, connects the continuous waves of anti-Black violence from the 1930s through the 1970s in their truth seeking efforts to investigate and litigate civil and human rights violations. Professor Burnham’s description of the racial terrorism against Black folks during this period is important as she engages in the practice of truth-telling around systematic human rights abuses.

While the grand narrative of democracy and human rights has permeated U.S. foreign policy, the United States has failed to apply human rights internally or recognize the human dignity of Black (and BIPOC communities). The United States continues to practice targeted economic

exclusion, brutal policing, mass incarceration, and has general failed to apply equal protection to non-White citizens. The radical truth-telling of El Hajj Malik el-Shabazz (Malcolm X) rebuked the American Dream grand narrative by highlighting the ongoing silencing and dehumanizing abuse against BIPOC communities in the United States and their linkages with colonized peoples of the world. Charles Nier III (1997) writes that:

Malcolm X's political viewpoints were dominated by two themes: a developing Pan-African perspective centered upon his efforts to establish a relationship between African-Americans and Africans as a liberating pedagogy and his efforts to utilize this relationship as a means to elevate the black liberation struggle within the United States from the civil rights level to the international human rights level. (p. 153)

The attempt to hold the United States accountable on the world stage for its rights abuses, coupled with Malcolm's deepening pan-Africanist worldview, situated the Black liberation struggle in the United States as global and connected with freedom efforts on the African continent and in diasporic communities throughout the Western hemisphere. At an Organization for Afro American Unity Rally on July 5, 1964, Malcolm X spoke on the need for an international approach given the absence of human rights protections for Black folks: "[y]ou and I have to make it a world problem, make the world aware that there'll be no peace on this earth as long as our human rights are being violated in America. Then the world will have to step in and try and see that our human rights are respected and recognized" (Neir, 1997, p. 157). Over the next few months Malcolm X pushed African heads of state to endorse a call for the U.N. Human Rights Council to investigate the United States in its failure to protect Black people from human rights abuses often sanctioned by the U.S. government.

Because of the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights bill, the statement about U.S. human rights violations was downgraded to a "carefully-worded" statement to address these concerns (Neir, 1997, 158-159). While Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was influenced by international human rights thinking and his rhetoric situated the freedom movement of the 1960s in international human rights language, the policies that resulted from that

activism and organizing did not reflect the human rights framework (Richardson, 2007, 471-473). Despite the limitations of the human rights framework, the Black freedom movement sought to use the international arena to address human rights violations perpetrated by the United States against Black people. The end result was the liberal implementation of Civil Rights era legislation that—much like the period of decolonization only shifted the perception of colonial violence against developing nations—lessened the perception of American racism. The Civil Rights Movement attempted to paint the United States as having ended a brutally racist past, despite many lingering inequalities and injustices.

Derrick Bell (1987), founding scholar of Critical Race Theory, argues that the passage and content of Civil Rights legislation is hollow because it aligned with the interests of White liberal elites' concern with the United States' image abroad and tried to prevent more radical ideologies from gaining momentum. Civil Rights legislation was not concerned with Black liberation in the form of political autonomy and economic empowerment; it sought only to reform the U.S.' reputation. Malcolm X famously described integration under Civil Rights as Novocain - a temporary easing of the pain while continuing the violence. The commitment and participation of Malcolm X and other figures like Maya Angelou and W.E.B. Du Bois in human rights organizing within an internationalist, pan-Africanist framework deepened Black social movements and communities in the U.S.' connection to global Black (and leftist) struggles for liberation and human dignity (Angelou, 1986). The connection to pan-Africanist ideologies and struggles helped to frame the emerging political claims and moral imagination of the Black Power and subsequent Black Lives Matter movements, including feminist, queer, and leftist organizing that shape current activism.

The global liberation movements, rooted in pan-Africanist ideologies, that ended direct colonialism and apartheid influenced the Black liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s and laid the foundation for the activism in the Ferguson Uprising (Murch, 2015; Taylor, 2016), as well as those in this current moment.

The Ferguson Uprising, Black Lives Matter and Truth-Telling

*Colonialism lies to us all in countless ways; in such a context, truth telling is both powerful and necessary.*¹⁰

Much like Selma did in its time, the Ferguson uprising in our time has revealed to the United States some of the most vile parts of itself. The Ferguson uprising, inspired by the freedom and liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, was an unapologetic offering to a continuum of movements by speaking out and standing against the heteropatriarchal, capitalist systems that sanction police violence and profit from the murder, incarceration, global imperialism, and economic apartheid of BIPOC communities. After the murder of Mike Brown on August 9, 2014, peaceful protests over the course of weeks were met with excessive and militarized force by police, clamping down not only on the expressions of free speech by activists, but also on journalists reporting on the protests.¹¹ The protests gained renewed momentum after officer Darren Wilson was acquitted of all charges in the murder of Brown, an unarmed 18-year old. Historian Donna Murch (2015) has written the following about Ferguson:

I have no words to express what is happening in Ferguson. In the name of Michael Brown, a beautiful Black storm against state violence is brewing so dense it has created a gravity of its own, drawing in people from all over the U.S., from centers of wealth and privilege to this city whose most prosperous years were a century ago... It looks explicitly not only to St. Louis City and County police and other municipal law enforcement, but also to the imperial wars

¹⁰ Truth-Telling and Decolonization Report by The Simon Fraser Public Interest Research Group (SFPIRG) is Simon Fraser University's student-funded and student-directed resource center dedicated to social and environmental justice: <https://sfpirg.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/SFPIRG-Truth-Telling-Zine.pdf>

¹¹ For more on the arrest of journalists during the Ferguson protests, see here: <https://qz.com/1897852/what-reparations-mean-for-companies/>

in the Middle East as sites of murder and trauma. The call repeated over and over is Stokely Carmichael's: "Organize, Organize, Organize." And this growing youth movement has all the ancestral sweetness of kinship.¹²

In *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (2016), Angela Davis, speaking about the impact of Ferguson, writes:

Ferguson reminds us that we have to globalize our thinking about these issues... When Mike Brown was killed almost a year ago, Ferguson activists proclaimed that they were standing up not only for this young man whose life was needlessly sacrificed, but also for the countless others. If it had not been for Ferguson, we might not have been compelled to focus our attention on Eric Garner in New York and eleven-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland and Walter Scott in North Charleston, South Carolina and Freddie Gray in Baltimore. If it had not been for Ferguson, we might not have remembered Miriam Carey in Washington, DC, Rekia Boyd in Chicago and Aleia Thomas in Los Angeles. Had it not been for Ferguson protestors, who also pointed out that Black women and people of color and queer communities and Palestinian activists were targets of officially condoned racist violence, we might not have achieved such a broad consciousness of the work that will be required to build a better world. (pp. 27, 97-98)

The Ferguson protest movement exposed the ways that militarized policing turned the city's streets into battle zones, betraying the very people whose taxes and disproportionately levied fees from traffic, ordinance and criminal violations maintained the salaries of police and kept municipalities like Ferguson from crumbling from disinvestment because of White flight (Rios, 2019). The response by local activists to Mike Brown Jr.'s murder rippled

¹² Murch, D. (2015) Ferguson's Inheritance
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/ferguson-police-black-lives-matter/>

across the United States, seeding the ground for the current movement (Rios, 2019) that was built and is now responding to the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and so many others.

The radical truth-telling of the Ferguson uprising is a global and public pedagogy that gave life and form to the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. After teaching a summer introduction to a course on education for peace and social justice at Bucknell University in 2014, I went home to St. Louis to visit my family. August 9th is both my mother's and nephew's birthday. My family and I learned of Mike Brown Jr.'s murder, but numbness prevented me from acting in the moment. It wasn't until sharing with a friend that I recently took students to observe a protest outside of the Israeli embassy over the recent incursion/attack on Gaza that I made the decision to go to the protest. My friend told me, "We have our own Gaza here." I was shaken from the numbness that I felt I needed to adopt in order to move through White academic spaces as one of the few Black male faculty members.

The lived experience and the practice of truth-telling has not just been about the Ferguson protest movement, but also about redressing trauma visited upon those who speak up about the contradictions in the field and in their everyday experience. As a young peace, education, and conflict scholar, I experienced various forms of racism from those charged with practicing and teaching nonviolence, peace education, human rights education, restorative justice (RJ), and related work in international and domestic U.S. settings. I witnessed the way White people are centered at every turn in the scholarship. Deference to foundational concepts of peace education and peace studies are centered around Galtung's conceptions of negative and positive peace; his theorizing of structural violence (Galtung, 1969) kept the discourse mostly theoretical and distanced itself from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s earlier explanations of these same concepts but that were rooted in social movements (Ragland, 2014).¹³ This analysis aids in the

¹³ For example, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s statements precede Galtung's theorizing but resonate deeply with these now-core concepts of the fields of peace studies and peace

maintenance of a division between the scholarship and practice of peace, keeping the content of injustices experienced by impacted communities and racial justice organizing outside of academic realms.

When, by chance, I became a part of the Ferguson uprising, the radical truth-telling I witnessed freed me. As a Black man from the Ferguson/St. Louis community, I had been pressured to minimize myself as a way to survive and flourish. Toward the end of my graduate studies, I came across a racist National Rifle Association (NRA) recruiting advertisement, encouraging students to shoot at Black people, chalked on the university sidewalk. When I brought this issue up to my advisors, I was told to keep quiet about it and finish my work. In order to keep my first post-Ph.D. teaching position, I was told to cut my dreadlocks by a trusted mentor. After doing so, I remember colleagues in my office speaking to me for the first time, as if I had only just started. There is much more to say about my everyday experience as an academic, but in these cases my colleagues were charged with teaching pre-service teachers about social justice and diversity, yet their practices inside and outside of the classroom did not reflect those values. My participation in the Ferguson uprising taught me more about decolonial and principled struggle than any of my studies or attendance at academic conferences because of the way Black people impacted by law enforcement challenged the validity of the American institutions that sanction our murder.

The Ferguson uprising was a catalyst, providing the playbook for activism to articulate what the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter (BLM)

education: (1) "It is not enough to say 'We must not wage war.' It is necessary to love peace and sacrifice for it. We must concentrate not merely on the negative expulsion of war, but the positive affirmation of peace" (Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Anti-War Conference, Los Angeles, California, February 25, 1967); (2) "True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice" (Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 1958). Retrieved from: <https://www.nps.gov/mlkm/learn/quotations.htm>

encapsulated in this political moment. Alicia Garza (2014) elaborates on the term when she states,

Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.¹⁴

BLM is a global moral claim that challenges anti-Blackness throughout the world and posits value and worth as inherent in all Black lives. Garza (2014) continues

Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements... When we say Black Lives Matter, we are talking about the ways in which Black people are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity. It is an acknowledgement [of] Black poverty and [that] genocide is state violence. It is an acknowledgment that one million Black people are locked in cages in this country—one half of all people in prisons or jails—is an act of state violence. It is an acknowledgment that Black women continue to bear the burden of a relentless assault on our children and our families and that assault is an act of state violence.¹⁵

The energy from the Ferguson protests combined with the BLM ideology challenged the lessons many of our parents taught us around

¹⁴ For more, see <https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>

¹⁵ For more, see <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>

respectability. For example, President Barack Obama¹⁶ suggested that part of the issue with Black achievement could be boiled down to ‘pulling up your pants.’ Similar advice includes the ‘talk’ Black parents give to their children to be safe from the police and employing “code switching’ in order to survive a police encounter or get a desired job. The idea that acting respectable provides safety against discrimination and violence is reflexive in that it plays on the neoliberal idea that opportunities and rights are provided for those who accept them and if they are not, people and their impacted communities are at fault (Ragland, 2018, p. 522). Throwing off the constraints of respectability politics went beyond letting my hair grow out or adding strategically placed curse words in the talks I gave about Ferguson. The uprising gave me permission to engage in unapologetic truth-telling about the stark realities as a way of exposing the injustices and intergenerational trauma of Black communities and my lived experience.

Over the course of a few months of participating in the protests following Michael Brown Jr.’s brutal murder by a Ferguson Police officer, and sharing what was happening back to my campus where I taught, I helped to start the Truth Telling Project (TTP) with other activists and members from the community. TTP was initially concerned with the creation of a South African-styled Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). We held a convening in March 2015, inviting our local community and practitioners and scholars doing related research from around the nation. During the convening, the “overwhelming principle that was agreed upon... was that the specifics of any truth-telling process should not be imposed by outside experts and organizers. Rather, the goal is to hear the

¹⁶ T. Coates on Obama and Obama Administration Respectability Politics: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/05/how-the-obama-administration-talks-to-black-america/276015/>

actual voices of the community and to draw the agenda from that.”¹⁷ While truth-telling comes with its critiques, we engaged in truth-telling outside of the official framework of establishing a TRC and transitional justice thinking, taking note of what made sense, and leaving out what was not supportive.

Truth-telling in the Ferguson uprising was an unapologetic and urgent communiqué, declaring and demanding that Black lives be valued in an anti-Black world. Truth-telling is the baring of the soul to demand urgent attention to our human dignity. Truth-telling is a decolonial practice that involves the reclaiming of lost narratives, the airing of grievances, the resisting of and challenge to a colonized narrative that denies the inherent value and dignity of Black lives (Ragland, 2018; Romano & Ragland, 2018). Fuad Al-Daraweesh (2020) writes that “[t]he concept of human dignity encapsulates different views of the worth of humans. It is employed to elevate the level of a human’s worth to a higher level of worth conducive to flourishing and consistent with justice, rights, and peace” (p. 7). Truth-telling has always been a way for BIPOC communities to speak to the violations of their human dignity and rights. In my view, the Ferguson uprising, the organizing of the many truth commissions, activism around the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter, #ExpectUS, #ReparationsNow, #SayHerName, #BlackTransLivesMatter and #WeKeepUsSafe (and so many other hashtags), are all forms of truth-telling that demand multidirectional rights, or rights and obligations. The multidirectional view involves the idea of the pluriverse of rights (Williams & Bermeo, 2020) and moral demands that speak to governments at all levels, as well as for-profit corporations and nonprofit institutions, and White America more broadly. Obligations include the self-determination of impacted communities to dream and make decisions that benefit the entire community. The truth-telling of the Ferguson uprising lifted the veil on the willingness of the U.S. government

¹⁷ Truth Telling Weekend Convening Report, June 2015.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/oB3mAKx-HiHiEeDBXcjVaaopJaiE/view?usp=sharing>

to turn its violence on its own citizens, not as a new phenomenon, but part of an ongoing project of maintaining the order among America's non-White populations. Having that reality exposed by the impacted populations considered most subhuman in the United States was socially and politically unHINGING for White folks and, as a result, a radical act.

Truth-telling is a public pedagogy that holds a light to socially sanctioned and produced ignorance; and in the United States, truth-telling animates this nation's moral imagination and memory. Imani Scott (2015) argues that truth-telling is the beginning of a necessary "moral inventory" and is the first step for any society interested in facing the harm it has caused. To break the silence and dismantle socially sanctioned ignorance, Ferguson activists' various forms of protest educated and revealed the roots of the deeper, more subtle institutional racism and corporate plutocracy. For example, during the Ferguson October, which was a week of protests to mobilize national support toward the indictment of Mike Brown Jr.'s killer, activists staged creative protests at different places, like the symphony, while hanging signs and singing "Justice for Mike Brown is Justice for us all."



One of the attendees of that night's event had a look of utter shock at seeing the performance disrupted. One of the aims of the protests throughout the Ferguson uprising was to disrupt the complacency and self-righteous belief in "White goodness" that many White liberals held and still hold (Sullivan, 2014). This disruption was

especially poignant at places like the symphony orchestra, which represent “high culture.” The protest illustrated that there is no goodness in any parts of a culture that allows state-sanctioned violence. The movement used art to illustrate and disrupt other sacred and seemingly non-political spaces like malls and retail stores throughout the region. This and many other acts of truth-telling taught the world about the violence Black folks have been experiencing since we were brought to these shores over 400 years ago.

Truth-telling is also a victim/survivor-centered process that can be informal or formal, and connected or disconnected to an ongoing transitional or restorative justice process such as a TRC. Truth-telling, while part of a moral inventory, has also served as a way to publicly share and sometimes dramatize stories directly from those who have been most impacted. Truth-telling is especially important given the failure of legal systems to uphold laws meant to protect Black communities. The importance of the truth in the United States matters deeply because of the permanent enshrinement of spaces for subtle and outright discrimination in legal codes, policy and social norms as seen in the ongoing silence around the history of U.S. slavery and colonization. Formal truth-telling processes that give voice to victims and survivors of racialized violence as it did in South Africa offer the possibility for widespread impact and political realignment given the depth of trauma it uncovers.

The young people of Ferguson led the charge of telling the truth of what happened as the nation watched, and others from across the country went to Ferguson, just as they went to Mississippi in 1964 during Freedom Summer. The Story of Michael Brown Jr. exemplifies how we must tell the truth in order for the possibilities of healing to unfold. (DeWolf & Geddes, 2019, p. 81)

The Truth Telling Project

The most famous truth and reconciliation process was initiated to address the gross violations against Black South Africans’ human rights during the apartheid period (1948-1990s). Since that time, communities around the world have used truth and reconciliation commissions to

address mass atrocities and various forms of harm for healing of intergenerational trauma as well as telling stories to provide truthful narratives. In the United States, the Greensboro TRC and the Maine TRC are examples of uncovering the truth and impact of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre and the widespread use of boarding schools to forcibly remove Indigenous youth from their families (from the late 19th to the mid-20th centuries) (Davis, 2018). TRCs and truth commissions are tools within the Western liberal democracy and its human rights regime that reflect the very society they are attempting to “transition” and “restore.” While many TRCs and truth commissions around the world reveal the traumatic experiences hidden by official accounts, they are limited by the reliance on the nation state and public officials for validation. While the overall importance of the South African TRC cannot be overstated, we learned important lessons from some of the shortcomings, such as focusing on selected specific offenders; equating the harm of the African National Congress with the apartheid regime; and the failure to pay reparations to the victims of the apartheid regime; and failing to support those who told their stories publicly, thus, retraumatizing the truth-tellers (Davis, 2018, p. 71). Despite the transformative and healing impact for some,¹⁸ reparations to address the impact of violent and traumatic experiences on victims of these gross human rights abuses are often small or excluded in favor of measures that focus solely on symbolism and healing processes.¹⁹

The Truth Telling Project of Ferguson (TTP) emerged as a community initiative and educational intervention rooted in restorative and

¹⁸ United Nations Development Program 2010, Report on Reparations, Gender and Development, retrieved from <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/Kampala%20workshop%202011-%20Reparations,%20Development%20and%20Gender.pdf>

¹⁹ There were small payments to a small number of victims in South Africa, Governor Paul Le Page was happy to endorse the Maine Boarding School TRC but spoke publicly about not wanting to consider reparations: <https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/films/dawnland/>

transformative justice to challenge narratives that justify harm leveled against Black folk, while building community efficacy and supporting the protest movement through the telling of stories that reflect the experience of those most victimized by direct and structural violence. Storytelling in critical race theory is used to provide deeper and personal connections within a legal framework to illustrate issues of equity and justice (Tate, 1997, pp. 217-218). Critical race theory (CRT) employs stories and counterstories that present the realities and experience of BIPOC communities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997; Writer, 2008). At the same time, CRT is a “mechanism to perform truth-telling—to speak back to colonization and oppression” (Writer, 2008, p. 3). As much as truth-telling is in service of uncovering the lingering colonial violence in law enforcement and the institutions that support it, truth-telling speaks the mundane into the sacred, honoring the lived experience of people who are not valued by mainstream society.

The Ferguson activists and community members involved in the “Truth Telling Weekend,” a convening dedicated to truth-telling as anti-racist praxis, decided that we would focus primarily on truth-telling, not because there wasn’t an interest in reconciliation, but because the concept was perceived as focusing on forgiveness and reconciliation with police and their supporters who believed murdering Black people was not wrong. Community members argued that forgiveness without reckoning with history or taking any actions toward justice was misguided. For example, in the case of Black people killed by police, there were no members of law enforcement willing to characterize their violence as wrong. In addition, the police brutality experienced by activists and the impact of witnessing the onslaught of police violence against Black people throughout the United States were deeply traumatizing. As a result, those community members who attended the weekend were unwilling to participate in a process that gave equal treatment, given the asymmetries of power, to official statements by law enforcement which ultimately invalidated the experience of people victimized by police.

After the Truth Telling Weekend, I began to encounter criticism from some peace, human rights education, and TRC scholars and

practitioners who were unable to see how the project fit into the peace movement because of this focus on truth-telling without forgiveness or reconciliation. At the 2015 International Institute on Peace Education held in Toledo, Ohio, fellow activists Imani Scott, Cori Bush and I gave a panel presentation about the Truth Telling Project. The questioning from the audience was focused on why we did not focus on forgiveness and reconciliation. According to Tom DeWolf and Jodie Geddes (2018) “the process of truth-telling in a safe space is the first step toward breaking free. It is important to note that the burden of forgiveness and reconciliation is not the primary responsibility of the oppressed and marginalized” (p. 82). We responded that while we may individually forgive for our own personal reasons, forgiveness for the Black community in the United States is political. We argued that the religious background and history of Black people in the Civil Rights Movement is misunderstood. The nonviolence and images of bloodied activists refusing to fight back, along with forgiveness in the case of Dylan Roof after he murdered the nine Black church-goers in Charleston, South Carolina, present a misleading view that every act of violence against Black people should be forgiven. Forgiveness, let alone basic decency, is rarely exercised when Black people in the United States encounter the criminal justice system. For us, forgiveness and reconciliation would be possible after the United States listens and learns from truth-telling by beginning the moral and material repair for slavery and the world it created.

After the Institute, we drove to St. Louis for the one-year anniversary of Michael Brown Jr.’s murder. While in St. Louis, I met with a TRC academic who wanted me to make introductions to Ferguson activists. As we met, I shared concerns I had with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human subjects documents. After being welcomed to share my suggestions, I suggested that the activists be made co-authors if they were not paid for their time. The response was that I did not understand IRBs. Reports came back that the academic I met with shared that Ferguson did not understand TRCs and had put together a misguided project. Despite the criticism, we created a process rooted in community leadership that was validated by community members, organizers, and

noted leaders like Cori Bush, Mama Cat aka Cathy Daniels, Kristine Hendrix, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Drs. Angela and Fania Davis, Dr. Bernard Lafayette, Brandon Anderson, Rev. Nelson, and Joyce Johnson, and so many others.

With validation and consultation from the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission,²⁰ TTP created a mandate and declaration of intent²¹ to hear testimony through 2016 that would be shared widely to document U.S. state-sanctioned violence and amplify the experiences of marginalized communities. Rather than creating a formal commission endorsed by the local, state, or national government, we—along with trusted Black and BIPOC leaders—validated ourselves as a decolonial act of self-definition and acknowledgement of the specificity of human dignity in the moral claim “Black Lives Matter.” TTP emerged as a bottom-up project to center our community members who had been made vulnerable because of their encounters with police. We chose not to go the formal route because of the following reasons: (1) most TRCs are nation-state sponsored, with interests that are primarily state-centered; (2) because of the current conditions, distrust of the state was high due to perceived government complicity in the repression at local levels; (3) the impact of the Ferguson uprising saw the creation of many commissions that to date have not resulted in any structural transformation; and (4) transitional justice suggests that there is a formal end of conflict, but police violence is ongoing, and trauma, distrust and resentment continue to resurface among impacted people from marginalized communities in the United States.

²⁰ For more, see <http://www.greensborotrc.org/>

²¹ Truth Telling Project Mandate
& Declaration of Intent
https://drive.google.com/file/d/oB1RkIXhZFao_NkiIengtTmhSRXM/view
https://drive.google.com/file/d/oB1RkIXhZFao_Y29oVldBWkN5SXM/view?usp=drivesdk

In November 2015, after learning from the leaders of the Greensboro Truth Commission and practitioners who worked on the Peruvian and South African TRC, we launched the Ferguson Truth Initiative or Truth Telling Hearings. The initiative held hearings in Ferguson and invited persons from around the country to share their stories in a ceremony and by creating a sacred space. The hearings were structured with truth-tellers who had experienced police brutality or had family members or close friends and/or partners who had been killed by police. The witnesses to the truth were respected local and national community members and restorative and transitional justice practitioners seated on the stage next to them. During each testimony, truth-tellers would share about their lived experience, the interactions with police and the impact of those encounters. While relatives of Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland and Mike Brown Jr. told their stories, we also heard from relatives of Cary Ball Jr. who was murdered by the St. Louis Police Department. Cary's mother Toni Taylor admitted that he was not perfect—he had a record and carried a gun for protection—but that “Cary deserved to live.”²² Highlighting the imperfection of victims was to reinforce the value of all Black lives.

At the end of the first day of hearings, we stood in a circle and chanted Assata Shakur's pledge: “It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love and protect one another. We have nothing to lose but our chains.” Dr. Fania Davis, founder of Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth, stood next to me and said to me, “This is healing” (personal communication, November 2015). We created ceremony by honoring the people and stories shared in truth-telling hearings and deeming them as worthy of our attention; we renewed our calls for justice in the larger system and the need to influence policy.

²² Mark Lance writes about the Truth Telling Initiative. See Toni Taylor's testimony at: <https://medium.com/@thetruthtellingproject/listening-and-understanding-in-racist-america-3c814101a140>

Colonial structures deny the personhood of non-White people and truth-telling challenges that narrative. Arthur Romano and I write elsewhere that:

The processes that marginal communities create to heal and support each other are often overlooked or unrecognizable to those who have not experienced similar trauma and lived in such a community. Grassroots approaches to truth-telling are not outside the problematic dynamics that critics of TRCs raise; however, they offer an alternative approach in need of further exploration and more rigorous critical reflection moving forward. (p. 167)

Within our conceptualization of the truth-telling process, we accepted that “truth-telling” alone is incomplete and only a beginning. Yet, we understood the significance of valuing our own stories because they often shed needed light on a world that does not value truth.

The truth-telling hearings began in November of 2015 in Ferguson, Missouri. Over 30 participants shared their experiences of police violence, what they believed to be its underlying causes, and what change they wanted to see. TTP sponsored local discussion groups and forums with national activists, academics, artists, and advocates to further the notion of truth-telling as the first and most important step in any truth and reconciliation process. TTP organizers developed educational materials and borrowed dialogue frameworks from the Greensboro TRC’s “Night of a Thousand Conversations”²³ guide to support groups in other locales in understanding the tensions and commitments embedded in this emerging approach to truth-telling. These materials were informed by the truth-

²³ TTP Night of A Thousand Conversations Guide and FAQ to support community dialogue after watching testimony of those victimized by police violence a. Conversation Guide https://drive.google.com/file/d/oB1RkIXhZFao_UktIToNmZGIPSTg/view?usp=sharing; b. FAQ for facilitators https://drive.google.com/file/d/oB1RkIXhZFao_LWhjZo5TTUFZTEo/view?usp=sharing

telling hearings and forums. Tom DeWolf and Jodie Geddes (2018), summed up the first hearings and subsequent conversations:

In 2015, The Truth Telling Project hosted a national event entitled “A Night of a Thousand Conversations.” The truth-telling live stream of individuals sharing experiences of police terrorism and harm was viewed all across the country. Viewers were encouraged to have their own conversation afterwards, using a project toolkit. This was a bottom-up approach that started from the roots, with the people. The outcome of such truth-telling efforts is unpredictable. They may or may not result in apologies, forgiveness, or reconciliation. These may be the hoped-for goals for many participants, but as David Ragland, Cori Bush and Melinda Salazar, members of the Truth Telling Project Steering Committee, suggest: “reconciliation and forgiveness is not always possible in the wake of ongoing trauma. Many transitional justice, healing and trauma specialists understand the detrimental effects of forcing people to forgive their assailant.” (p. 82)

In addition to the hearings, community conversations, and a host of connected events sponsored by the Truth Telling project, one primary concern continues to focus on the importance of truth. By giving attention to Black folk who were victimized by police violence, TTP attempts to uplift the narratives of communities whose story is often not believed; often it is assumed that narratives are only credible when validated by White-dominated institutions.²⁴ Given the small staff and budget of TTP, as a way to further disseminate the testimonies in Ferguson, we created an online learning platform, entitled “It’s Time To Listen,”²⁵ to host the testimony and

²⁴For more, see <https://medium.com/@dr538/truth-lies-and-politics-dont-be-limited-by-mainstream-thought-lessness-2c6a2f890b41#.3z9h7mowd>

²⁵ [ItsTimetoListen.com](https://its timeto listen.com)

help users delve more deeply into the structural issues connected to police violence.

The Grassroots Reparations Campaign

On the second-year anniversary of Michael Brown's murder in 2016, TTP partnered with the Michael Brown Jr. Foundation, the St. Louis Artists, and StoryCorps (an oral history archive that facilitated youth workshops in Ferguson) to hold hearings that highlighted the impact of police violence on youth. During the hearings, I sat listening to stories of loss and hope, wondering how truth-telling might disrupt racialized police violence and other forms of structural injustice. One of the drummers who participated in the opening of the hearing later shared that many in his family were killed in the East St. Louis Race Riots of 1917 in which angry White mobs murdered Black people and stole and burnt their homes. Given the structural inequity our youth face and the urgent material needs of BIPOC communities, I began considering the connections between truth-telling and reparations (in line with work underway by the Samuel Dewitt Proctor Conference²⁶ and the Equal Justice Initiative that has memorialized the trauma of lynching).

For Black folk, the trauma exhibited in the stories shared in Ferguson was compounded by the ongoing and systemic experiences of anti-Blackness that include gentrification, unemployment, insecure housing, cultural appropriation, and police violence. The murder of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Sean Read, Rayshard Brooks, and others, continue to retraumatize and contribute to ongoing, deep Black existential anxiety. Following that hearing, Cori Bush, Melinda Salazar and I wrote about the then-upcoming centennial anniversary of the East St. Louis race massacres in the context of ongoing police violence and truth and

²⁶ The Proctor Conference held a truth-telling hearing in Elaine, AR to address the legacy of racial terrorism and demand reparations: <https://sdpconference.info/truth-telling-reparatory-justice/>

reconciliation.²⁷ We argued that because of this continuing history, the focus should be on truth. However, we wanted to connect truth to reparations. I came to believe and write that “reparations is the midpoint between truth and reconciliation.”²⁸

In her book *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation*, Jennifer Harvey (2014) argues that if White people want racial reconciliation, they should pay reparations, which would replace dialogue-based approaches to reconciliation. I was troubled that a large portion of TTP’s audience, at that point, were White liberals who believed reconciliation and forgiveness (even more so than truth) were the best path to peace and racial justice. Traditional TRCs reflect the values of the nation-state system and the individual nations-states they seek to heal. TRC processes seek validity from public officials who may or may not have ties to the conflict and wish to maintain the integrity of the nation-state, often for economic rather than humanitarian reasons. Most of the transitional justice researchers and TRC practitioners I encounter are of European descent, while the conflicts they address are mostly in the nations of formerly colonized people. Because TRCs often focus on the immediate conflict without offering redress for the colonial past which continues to impact the present, we shifted the work of TTP to advocate for truth-telling processes that lead to reparations.

Over the course of the next few years, we launched the grassroots reparations campaign with over 20 other organizations. We saw a direct correlation between injustices visited upon Black people and unearned privileges of White people. Although former slave owners do not populate

²⁷ In Truth and Reconciliation, First thing’s First - The Truth:
<https://www.yesmagazine.org/social-justice/2017/08/16/in-truth-and-reconciliation-first-things-first-the-truth/>

²⁸ Reparations is the Midpoint Between Truth and Reconciliation
<https://medium.com/@dr538/the-midpoint-between-truth-and-reconciliation-is-reparations-cof8226iafif>

our cities, White people continue to benefit from the legacy of slavery and colonization because it built the world we inhabit. According to N'COBRA (the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America), reparations are a process of repairing, healing, and restoring a people injured because of their group identity and in violation of their fundamental human rights by governments, corporations, institutions, and families. Those groups that have been injured have the right to obtain from the government, corporations, institutions, or families responsible for the injuries, what they need to repair and heal themselves.

In addition to being a demand for justice, reparations are a principle of international human rights law. The United Nations recognizes the following five forms of reparations: 1) restitution: restoration of a victim's rights, property, citizenship status; 2) rehabilitation: psychological and physical support; 3) compensation; 4) satisfaction: acknowledgement of guilt, apology, burials, construction of memorials, etc.; and 5) guarantees of non-repetition: transformation of laws and civil and political structures that led to or fueled violence.²⁹ We saw a tremendous amount of possibilities for guarantees of non-repeat³⁰ because the principle asks that we change the underlying conditions leading to the violence. For us, this was a decolonial project, particularly in the United States where people are often separated from the harm that impacts others globally and from which they benefit. This principle is about unravelling ourselves from the complicity of colonized violence, which, for example, is embedded in corporate structures through abusive labor practices, extractive supply chains, investment, and

²⁹ See David Ragland Series on Reparations in Yes! Magazine: <https://www.yesmagazine.org/authors/david-ragland/> & the United Nations Development Program 2010, Report on Reparations, Gender and Development: <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/Kampala%20workshop%202011%20Reparations,%20Development%20and%20Gender.pdf>

³⁰ Guarantees of Non-Repeat Webinar <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpqyRGZ6oX4&t=2s>

direct abuse of incarcerated populations. Amos Wilson (1998) speaks to this understanding of reparations when he writes:

While prior forms of White domination and exploitation of Blacks may have ceased and desisted, the economic injustices and inequalities they imposed continue unabated. The legal prohibition of further injustices does not necessarily mean that the injurious effects of past injustices no longer persist...Justice requires not only the ceasing and desisting of injustice but also requires either punishment or reparation for injuries and damages inflicted for prior wrongdoing. The essence of justice is the redistribution of gains earned through the perpetration of injustice. If restitution is not made and reparations not instituted to compensate for prior injustices, those injustices are in effect rewarded. And the benefits such rewards conferred on the perpetrators of injustice will continue to "draw interest," to be reinvested, and to be passed on to their children, who will use their inherited advantages to continue to exploit the children of the victims of the injustices of their ancestors. Consequently, injustice and inequality will be maintained across the generations as will their deleterious social, economic, and political outcomes. (pp. 459-460)

While we were critical of international human rights language and instruments to speak to decolonial reparations, we followed the lead of organizers who spent decades working toward reparations.

We built on the work of N'COBRA and the National African American Reparations Commission (NAARC), and we learned from the Reparations Now movement that successfully forced the city of Chicago to pay reparations to the victims of Chicago Police Commander John Burge who tortured over 120 Black men between 1972 and 1991.³¹ As a result of the

³¹ The Chicago Torture Justice Center was part of the reparations won to educate future generations <https://www.chicagotorturejustice.org/history>

ongoing work around reparations, we decided to create an approach that would support the existing projects and groups through education and encouraging followers to support that ongoing work. The grassroots reparations approach encourages people and institutions of moral conscience to reflect on their unfair advantages and do their part in repairing generations of structural discrimination and political inequality that have caused harm and trauma. It is necessary for spiritual and faith communities to be involved in the work of reparation required to heal and repair the legacy of slavery, the U.S. colonial past and lingering colonialities (Williams, 2016). We argued that these faith-based communities and institutions benefited from slavery³² and, as a result, they are called both to accept and acknowledge their complicity in the evil and structural injustices that formed the foundations of racism and White supremacy.

Often programs like affirmative action, school desegregation, and the fair housing program, which are viewed as racially-focused, fail to significantly impact Black communities because those efforts are focused on the symptoms of the injustice and not the root causes, and are administered by bureaucrats and politicians entrenched in White supremacy. For example, the Center for Investigative Journalism reports that current redlining practices (that perpetuate unfair housing policies leading to segregation) continue to fuel gentrification.³³ Examining over 3.1 million mortgages, investigators found that bankers routinely sidestepped the Fair Housing Act, as they are more likely to provide loans to Whites than to Black and Brown people. These and other practices reinforce the need for reparations.

³² Georgetown University was saved from financial ruin through the sale of slaves - <https://www.cnn.com/2017/04/18/living/georgetown-slavery-service/index.html>, as well other seminaries and religious institutions like the Presbyterians have acknowledged benefitting from slavery, genocide and colonization of Indigenous lands

³³ Reveal News on Black Americans and mortgages <https://revealnews.org/blog/3-investigations-opened-after-reveal-uncovers-redlining-in-philly/>

The grassroots reparations campaign is primarily focused on shifting to a culture of reparations through education and spiritual practice. Based on the work of Dorothy Benton Lewis (1997), the culminating program of our campaign is Reparation Sundays (occurring twice a year). We organize faith-based communities to join us in a period of reflection culminating in a group to prepare their communities to begin taking on the responsibility of reparations. Reparations are a spiritual practice, not just a transaction. Each date begins with a period of preparation and is planned on historically significant dates. In the summer, we begin with Juneteenth (June 19) and undergo a period of preparation leading into the August Reparations Sunday. The period of preparations involves internal investigation, education, reflection and planning in the community for Reparations Sunday. In winter, the period of preparation begins on the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery (December 2) and concludes on Reparations Sunday, which corresponds with Jubilee Freedom Day (December 21), commemorating one of the largest single days of emancipation of enslaved people in Savannah, Georgia in 1864. This event also led to the promise of forty acres for newly emancipated slaves, which was later rescinded by Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's successor.

We believe reparations are a relational practice of healing spiritual, moral, and material harm. One activist, Patt Gunn, created a commemoration that is now a city-wide celebration. This approach provides White people with ways they might engage in reparations, for their own healing and to shift the broader culture towards viewing accountability for past and ongoing harm as important. If a critical mass feel accountable for past harm, we believe the United States would then begin to see itself as responsible for human rights abuses, interventions, coups, and other forms of exploitation carried out by the military to benefit the United States.

Conclusion: Truth-Telling and Reparations as a Decolonial Project

In this moment, activism under the banner of Black Lives Matter has grown into a global movement. Amidst police violence, White terrorism in Charlottesville and, after the 2020 election, with White terrorists storming

the U.S. Capitol, there have been increased calls for racial justice and for defunding the police. In response to racial violence and injustice, over thirty truth and reconciliation processes have launched in U.S. cities. More than five of these processes are focused on “truth and reparations.”³⁴ The State of California; Evanston, Illinois; and Amherst, Massachusetts; among other communities, have launched reparations processes. One of the most blatantly fascist and racist U.S. presidents has left the White House. The first African American (and South Asian) woman has been elected Vice-President. One of the founding co-directors of the Truth Telling Project, Cori Bush, was sworn into Congress in early 2020 as the first Black woman to go to Congress from Missouri. Representative Bush unseated a fifty-two-year political dynasty to win election. The first openly gay Black man was elected in New York State, and the first Black person will go to the U.S. Senate from Georgia. While identity does not mean real progress, there is an unprecedented level of interest in racial reconciliation and reparations. These changes are the result of hundreds of years of truth-telling from the margins to change discriminatory policies, to address human rights abuses and remind the United States of its racist past linked to ongoing systemic oppression of BIPOC communities.

At the same time, corporations pushing for diversity and releasing statements that Black Lives Matter are simultaneously exploiting low-wage workers, using underpaid prison labor, and benefiting from the exploitation of workers from developing nations. Capitalism remains the driving impulse of the lingering colonialism and ongoing direct colonization in Palestine, genocide in Ambazonia, and repression in the Southern Saharan region of

³⁴ The Mayor of Providence, Rhode Island signed an executive order to launch a Truth and Reparations Process:

<https://amp.providencejournal.com/story/news/2020/07/16/providence-mayor-signs-order-to-pursue-truth-reparations-for-black-indigenous-people/42496067/>

Morocco. During an interview for *Quartz* online magazine,³⁵ I was asked if Chase Manhattan Bank owed reparations given their history of underwriting slavery. I responded that the depth of inequality and intergenerational harm required a holistic approach that could address the level of depraved indifference of White settler coloniality. We initially started truth-telling so that White folks could connect empathetically to people sharing their experiences, in a non-politicized way. It was not that White people did not respond to the testimonies and lesson plans, but we came to see White people and White culture as engrained and embodied. In a chilling reflection that speaks to our current moment, James Baldwin said, “she [referring to Lorraine Hansberry] was very worried about a civilization which could produce those five policeman standing on the Negro woman's neck. ...I'm terrified at the moral apathy. The death of the heart which is happening in my country. ...And this means that they have become, themselves, moral monsters.”³⁶

How does one deal with moral monsters? As recent as May 2020, George Floyd was murdered by a police officer kneeling on his neck despite his repeated pleas for help. An Asian American officer stood by, hand ready at his holster to prevent interference. In his book, *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) wonders how Europeans became White. He writes “...hate gives identity. The nigger, the fag, the bitch illuminate the border, illuminate what we ostensibly are not, illuminate the Dream of being white, of being a Man. We name the hated strangers and are thus confirmed in the tribe” (p. 60). Yet, this hate, according to noted Jungian psychoanalyst Dr. Fannie Brewster (2020), is the projection onto the

³⁵ The Debt U.S. Companies owe Black Americans https://qz.com/1897852/what-reparations-mean-for-companies/?fbclid=IwAR2Mvv8GwyOeEkFoa05-c7pCxc_vl82gGmo6r7mFrLgAA4URBpI3JfoufZw

³⁶ “Conversation with James Baldwin: https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip_15-ov89g5gf5r

shadow.³⁷ Resma Menakem (2017) speaks to this query by looking at the unhealed trauma European immigrants imposed on the people they encountered. Truth-telling is merely a beginning, but needed and necessarily connected to reparations that disrupt the current order.

The entire society should have a stake in truth-telling and reparations. In the aforementioned interview, I proposed multi-sector truth-telling from impacted communities across the United States and truth-seeking within local, state, regional and national governments, for-profit and non-profit organizations, and families that benefited from slavery and the world it created. For White people, it is important to reconnect with ancestors to uncover family histories of trauma and understand the ways they benefited from colonial violence and slavery and continue to benefit from current forms of discrimination. Truth-telling and its outcome—reparations—must be about holding the United States accountable for its ongoing and past illegal military, political and economic interventions that destabilized democratically elected and often, ideologically opposed (communist and socialist) political regimes, in turn supporting authoritarian rule, in some cases, leading to the murder of thousands of non-White peoples by proxy and at times in person. Truth-telling and its outcome—reparations—demands accountability for the January 6, 2021 invasion of White terrorists (and their supporters—elected or otherwise) who overtook the U.S. Capitol seeking to murder and harm elected representatives. Unity and forgiveness should only come after accountability and elimination of the White supremacist crisis in the United States. Only then will the world see the United States as a nation that acts according to its laws and provides equal protection for all of its citizens.

³⁷ Fannie Brewster and David Ragland, spoke about Race in America, integrating the (Jungian) Shadow June 28, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XJuQa1DvDU>.

Truth-telling and truth-seeking as decolonial practice is about the moral and material harm that has been integral to the long struggle for the rights of Black folk, as it informs the content of a human rights pluriverse that is self-determined and demanding of repair. In addition to transitional justice, truth-telling also offers peace and human rights education authentic voices that speak to ways to reconsider the content and focus of the curricula. Truth-telling for communities impacted by lingering settler-colonial violence would similarly need to be at various levels, for the public, and supported without being overtaken by the government and foundations, who may have different agendas. The content, strategies, and practices of truth-telling must be a part of peace education, human rights education, restorative justice, and transitional justice. This is a call for decolonization that is beyond the metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Truth-telling asks us to call our ancestors into the circle, to begin healing the trauma that started with them, so that we might disrupt the internal and external structures and systems that maintain oppression.

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Housing as a Human Right: Black Epistemologies in Deep East Oakland

An Interview with Candice Elder*, East Oakland Collective

By Brian Anthony Davis**
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* **Candice Elder** is a difference maker, thought leader, and changemaker. A native of East Oakland, CA, she is the Founder and Executive Director of the East Oakland Collective (EOC), a member-based community organizing group invested in serving the communities of deep East Oakland with a focus on racial and economic equity. Under Candice's leadership, EOC has garnered widespread momentum and recognition as advocates and champions of underserved populations. Candice brings her wealth of experience in serving on many community-focused boards to her leadership role in EOC and the community. In recognition of her inspirational work, Candice has received numerous awards, such as being selected as one of The Root's Top 100 Most Influential African Americans in 2019 and as a Jefferson Award winner in 2018 for her efforts to feed the unhoused. In addition, Candice has been featured in *Oakland Magazine*, KQED, *San Francisco Chronicle* and *Democracy Now!* for her work with EOC.

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Introduction

The world told me and continues to tell me I am a Black man in a world dominated by White¹ supremacy. A world where White people control and extend their hegemonic force on every area of human activity. A world that suppresses and nullifies my experience as a Black man as peripheral while centering White lives, White bodies, and White lies. Racism is a White grenade that fragments every level in the facet of life for BIPOC² to various degrees to withstand, underpin, reshape, and reify White supremacy. I grew up in the Overbrook Park section of West Philadelphia, a middle-class neighborhood in the hood. As a result of this geography I grew up having Black friends and attending all-Black schools. To that extent, the majority of my teachers were Black, even the principals were Black. I do not recall having a transformative curriculum around Blackness during my elementary, middle school, or high school years. I do remember during my childhood we would start the school year talking about making AYP. AYP is known as "Adequate Yearly Progress," and was a centerpiece in the No Child Left Behind Act. Insofar as learning about Black history, Blackness was caught in the underbelly of assessments and test scores.

I attended The Pennsylvania State University where I majored in African American Studies. The training and racial formation in the African American Studies department at Penn State University was radical, emancipatory, and liberatory. I understood the lies of America. I understood I was not responsible for why my neighborhood looked the way it did, I was not responsible for the condition White people put Black people and other people

¹ Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups in our articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.

² BIPOC stands for Black, Indigenous and People of Color

of color in, and I was not responsible for the effects of colonialism and slavery. My mom grew up telling me to protect my things because guys in the neighborhood would rob me. But White people have been robbing me all my life. White people have been robbing Black people of peace, humanity, freedom, great education, life chances, as well as our relationship with the sun, the earth, water, and more.

Being from the East Coast of the United States, I was caught by surprise when I moved to Oakland, California in 2018. After a four-day trip driving across the country, the first thing I noticed once I got to my new apartment in the Temescal section of Oakland was 20 tents under the bridge off of 42nd and Telegraph Avenue. The next day, my second day living in Oakland, California, I walked around the neighborhood to see other people's reactions to all of the tents under the bridge. Many people walked past the tents as if it was a normal part of life in California. We live in a time and space where people's right to housing and human decency is violated on an everyday basis. What troubles me is the everyday privilege of people who have the ability to ignore people who are houseless and who justify policies to incarcerate people for creating an affordable home in a deeply entrenched capitalistic society. It is through my confusion and disappointment that I was able to find a revolutionary force in Oakland making seismic shifts in the fight for housing and food justice.

Candice Elder, Founder of the [East Oakland Collective](#) (EOC), was very influential in my search for understanding the housing crisis in Oakland, California. I learned that Candice was inspired not only by her upbringing, but also by the revolutionary Black Panther Party. The work of the EOC is a direct and explicit response to the City of Oakland's lack of attention to affordable housing, disparities within the houseless community, and food justice. The work of the EOC moves from being the victims of racism and priced-out housing markets, to understanding systems that create these human rights abuses and disparities at the outset. Candice's boldness, fearlessness, and community leadership has put Oakland's housing crisis in the international spotlight. What is happening in Oakland has been normalized for decades; yet the East Oakland Collective has decided to re-center what has been strategically and intentionally peripheralized. After I first met Candice when she was a guest speaker in my Human Rights

Education program at the University of San Francisco, she agreed to participate in an oral history interview in the summer of 2020. In this article, Candice's words are presented as first-person narrative with key quotes selected as headings of each section.

I Grew up and Lived in Deep East Oakland

The boundaries of East Oakland and deep East Oakland are very debatable. You could ask a million different people in Oakland where East Oakland is and they all might have different definitions. Technically speaking, East Oakland is all the land east of Lake Merritt all the way to the San Leandro border. My family moved around a lot growing up so I've lived in what we call the flatlands of East Oakland, which essentially is the hood. The flatlands of East Oakland are below the 580 highway, below the Oakland hills, and below MacArthur Boulevard. I've also lived in the Oakland Hills. My parents owned each and every single home we lived in, and if they didn't like something, they put them up for sale. I've been able to kind of get the best of both worlds—living on the flat lands and living in the Hills. We had to use someone else's address in order to get into the better Oakland public schools, which were the hills schools. And just growing up in this neighborhood and having friends who live in East Oakland, it's no surprise that I find myself now in East Oakland. I purchased property in District 7; this is where I've been as a homeowner for the last 10 years.

My Experience With the Education System Revealed to Me That I Was Black, and I Might Be Treated Differently Based on the Color of My Skin

I always went to diverse schools and was always on the honor roll. What didn't sit well with me was constantly being honored with a racial signature. When I was acknowledged for my academic performance, it was acknowledged as "Black excellence," as if it was rare for Black students to excel in the academic setting. I felt alienated a bit for the attention just for getting good grades. That led me to examine why aren't Black people equal

when it comes to educational success. When my parents took me out of public schools and I went to a private predominantly-White school, I had never felt so out of place in my life.

There were only four Black people in my entire grade. I went to high school with just four Black people for four years. I would have lost myself if I did not come home to a Black family. At the time, I was going to a Black church in the hood, the same church we went to for 20-25 years. My parents put us in programs for Black youth; we did golf lessons, music lessons. As my Dad read the paper, any free thing for minority kids, he would put us in it whether we wanted to or not.

I Think I Would Have Lost My Blackness

If it was not for my early public-school education, if it was not for growing up in my early years in the flatlands of East Oakland, I don't know what I would have turned out to be today. I think I would have lost my Blackness.

Fortunately, I didn't experience direct racism, but there was still a lot of classism. I went from having my parents move from the flatlands to the hills, and that kind of elevated our status a little... amongst our family and friends. In the community, it was always said, "The hills are for rich people." I feel like my parents got good deals; they worked really hard to get and deserve everything that they bought. They took care of our family, but my parents were very smart. They bought fixer uppers. I think they were able to get really good deals and purchase homes at times when it was a really good price. Now we actually can't. If we would have known what we have known back then, I'm pretty sure my parents would have kept a home or two. Now we're priced out to be able to purchase, at least in this current real estate market.

I grew up in the flatlands of East Oakland in the 1980s and early 90s. East Oakland was on a decline; we had been hit really hard by the crack epidemic. We started to see the lack of resources. We started to see the disinvestment from the community, but I was young at the time, so to me East Oakland was still thriving. Even though it was on the decline, it was still thriving. We still had businesses to go to, we had places to eat, we had

entertainment; we could eat, learn, and play in East Oakland. It was only years later that we really saw businesses leave and close. We saw our elected officials really weren't doing anything for the community.

My parents are the biggest influences for me because as a young child they started the food pantry at our church. I remember being five years old and having to get up at 5 a.m. every Saturday to go to the church and open up the food pantry. Sometimes we slept in the car while they passed out food to those who were less fortunate and sometimes we helped. To this very day, we no longer are official members of the church, but my parents still support that same food pantry. My parents have always been community-oriented; they've always given back; they always had small businesses in the community. Not only did they have a bakery, but they had a daycare in the hood. I had a great childhood and my parents were the biggest influences.

The older I got, the more I learned about Oakland history, the Black Panthers³, and learning about their role in Oakland. The Black Panthers having a school in East Oakland really inspired me. The Black Panther Party having that free breakfast program⁴ and spreading that across the nation, forcing the government to enact a federal program to feed children before school and in the schools.⁵ Learning about that rich history always compelled me to give back. Also working with the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco and being a part of their young leadership, running their board for two years, awakened my leadership skills.

More importantly, I would say a big influence was the old guard, some of our older leaders in Oakland who have paved the way—whether good or bad. I pull from what good examples we have from Oakland leaders

³ For more on the Black Panther Party's education program, please see: <https://www.aaihs.org/resurrecting-the-radical-pedagogy-of-the-black-panther-party/>

⁴ To learn more about the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast Program read here <https://www.aaihs.org/the-black-panther-party/>

⁵ For more on how the BPP's Breakfast Program influenced food policy, see here: <https://www.eater.com/2016/2/16/11002842/free-breakfast-schools-black-panthers>

and learn from some of the bad from our Oakland leaders and elected officials. Let's not reinvent a wheel that's broken, but rather let's form a new wheel and stop working in silos. I grew up knowing about Chuck Johnson (a community journalist), knowing about Chauncey Bailey, a famed Oakland Tribune journalist who was tragically murdered. It's to be believed he was working on a story that would have exposed the corruption in Oakland and in the community. Knowing Elaine Brown (former Black Panther Party Chairwoman) is still in Oakland, and Miss [Angela] Davis (political activist and theorist) still has a presence in Oakland.

I feel like my parents kind of formed my years under 18. I think going to the University of California, Berkeley, helped form my critical thinking skills. I took African American Studies classes with the best professors in California, and I minored in African-American Studies. Having that textual knowledge about the impact of slavery to say “slavery has formed this or has caused this”—being able to actually apply what I was experiencing and what I learned through working with the Museum of the African Diaspora—I was also being pushed by the old guard to form my own organization.

Sami Shilf's Poster
for the
East
Oakland
Collective
(2020)



The East Oakland Collective Works on Racial and Economic Equity

For us, racial and economic equity means civic engagement and leadership; that means the community actually has a voice in any process and any decision that's going to try to decide how they live and how they can thrive in the community. We do a lot of neighborhood and transportation planning work. We disrupt the planning process because usually the way that traditional planning processes work is that decisions affecting entire communities are re-imagined, reformed, and rewritten without any community say. It isn't until the plan is already decided and about to be implemented that, at the very last minute, planners decide to say they're going to present this to the community. But, at that moment, they're already dead set on the plans they're about to implement, and there really isn't any room for any revisions.

In the past few years we've been able to disrupt that process. We said, "You're not going to set foot in deep East Oakland without talking to the community, without talking to community-based organizations who've been here longer than us and we all have a right to have a voice in this process. You should be influenced by what the community wants, not the other way around." We do a lot of community engagement and outreach, a lot of strategic communications and planning, and neighborhood transportation planning. We do a lot of advising and consulting with elected officials and coalition work.

At the East Oakland Collective (EOC), we have an economic empowerment program because we believe that economic self-sufficiency is a way for our communities to thrive, our way for independence from the oppressors, a way to help fight against White supremacy, and for communities to be economically stable. Particularly we believe the way to stabilize our community economically is collective economics—for groups of us to get together and do joint ventures, which is why we have the East Oakland social lending circle program. We are collectively pulling money together and saving and working on our credit as well as jump-starting small businesses and saving to improve quality of life. We're essentially making no-interest small loans to one another. I'm in it along with 30 other people, and we absolutely love it and we hope to continue that program. At

the inception of the EOC, we started off doing advocacy, organizing and policy work with our unhoused brothers and sisters. We were feeding the unhoused as a community service project for our members as we began to expand.

Food is Really Simple, But There is Something Very Humanizing About Feeding Someone, About Offering Someone Food

Breaking bread is an African and Black tradition, so not only do we break bread amongst each other quite a bit, but we also feel like we want to break bread with folks who are suffering from food insecurity and give them fresh food options. Feeding the unhoused as a community service project propelled us into an advocacy organization. We were starting to hear stories from people who live on the street that no one cares about them; no one's coming to see them. We were the only group they saw in a while. So I said, "You know, that's ridiculous, so we're going to do this more often." The next thing you know, 500 people want to do it with us; the next thing you know we're serving 3000 lunches and distributing 1000 hygiene kits. We're doing it every six weeks, so it actually formed into a program. We started doing advocacy just naturally; as you meet people, as you start to care about people, as you hear their stories and their struggles, we realize the importance of being able to speak up for people, especially if we have the resources and the connections to do so.

Seeing that over 70% of the unhoused population in Oakland is Black, there are not a lot of Black advocates at the table. There are not a lot of Black workers in this field who are making the decisions on a daily basis on what happens to our unhoused brothers and sisters, what measures or policies need to be put in place. That keeps me in this work, because sometimes I am sick and tired, and it's stressful internalizing other people's trauma.⁶

⁶ The data reflecting the homeless population in Oakland regarding racial disparities can be found here <https://www.oaklandhomelessresponse.com/the-problem#:~:text=Data%20also%20shows%20a%20disproportionate,to%20help%20people%20in%20need.>

I Stay in This Work Because I'm Black, Because I'm a Black Woman, and There Needs to be a Representation of Black Folks Who Are Living Curbside

The way society works, the way capitalism works, the way the country was formed, it was formed to always have someone in poverty. That's the only way White supremacy thrives is if there's someone caught at the bottom. America was built on stolen land; it was built on taking from other groups of people. That's essentially what's going on with the housing crisis. Black folks have always been marginalized when it comes to housing and economics. In Oakland, when our folks who left the armed forces after World War II and migrated to Oakland, they were in West Oakland. We were either forced there or also just by association because you wanted to be where other Black people are. There is redlining⁷ where Blacks couldn't buy homes in certain areas. So, we didn't really have access to the hills. We were forced to live in West Oakland and in the flatlands, but then there was White flight where White folks either moved to the hills or even left Oakland and went to the suburbs. This opened up Oakland for Black folks and other minorities to purchase homes or to rent.

We started seeing the explosion of homelessness really around 2016-2017 in Oakland. It stems from decades of racist housing policies and housing discrimination. We're seeing the impact of redlining and gentrification, which have led to the displacement of Black folks in Oakland. Oakland was almost a chocolate city when I was growing up; it was about 40% and now we're under 23% Black.⁸ Most of the Black folks that are still here are highly concentrated in deep East Oakland. So we are seeing the impacts of predatory lending, which caused a lot of Black folks to lose their homes during the last economic crash. We can no longer afford to live here; the rental and the housing rates are going up, the cost of

⁷ A map that outlines the historical redlining structure of Oakland can be found here <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=11/37.789/-122.404&city=oakland-ca>

⁸ This data is represented in the most recent US Census Data report. To read more about the demographics of Oakland, California, visit <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/oaklandcitycalifornia/RHI225219#RHI225219>

living is going up, but we are living on minimum wages. We don't have access to jobs and workforce development like we should in order to help create that new pool of hires that can compete with these outside applicants. We have other people moving into our jobs. We don't have that workforce development that it takes to compete for a lot of these tech jobs. We can typically go for the more blue-collar jobs within the tech industry like the cooks and janitorial staff. We're not educating our youth into workforce development enough to bring up a new wave of folks who can go into tech or other industries. We are kind of ignoring trade and other construction-like jobs where there is a lot of potential for our people to actually make really good money. With number 45 in office, we also saw a lot of federal cuts to subsidized housing.

There Are Folks Who Are Unhoused on the Streets With Section 8 Housing Vouchers⁹

There is not enough housing stock in Oakland. People are more concerned about getting that market-rate rent than they are about providing subsidized housing. So why should they rent for only \$900 or \$1,200 when they can get double or triple that now? We're living in this very selfish and self-serving capitalistic society. The more money that's out there, the more people are coming in thinking about themselves and not thinking about what's happening if they don't accept Section 8 anymore or housing vouchers anymore. We need to incentivize property owners and landlords in particular to encourage them to actually accept more subsidized housing so that we can get more people housed. We have a mayor and an administration who care more about who can build the fastest, who can build the highest. So, land is being prioritized for market-rate private commercial development, which is squeezing out the options for affordable housing developers to even come in. We need more affordable housing developers.

We only have a small pool of affordable housing developers because there's not that much money in an affordable house, and we need to

⁹ The Housing Choice Voucher Program, also known as Section 8, is the largest federal affordable housing program funded through the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

incentivize, subsidize and make it more attractive for affordable housing developers to actually build in Oakland. And, of course, there are issues combined with planning codes that add to the crisis. We actually have a lot of land still left in deep East Oakland in particular. We can temporarily house people two to five years in tiny home villages. We need to put the tiny homes on vacant land while we still have vacant land left.¹⁰

We're trying to get ahead of the curve of speculation because East Oakland is hot right now because there's still a lot of property left and also a lot of opportunity zones, so there are some federal incentives and tax credits to building in Oakland. But we don't want outsiders; we don't want market-rate developers. We don't want speculator companies coming in and grabbing up all of our land, and then the community has no say nor does the community have opportunity to be housed themselves. EOC, and a lot of our advocate partners we work for, we believe in shifting what housing looks like.

Housing Is a Human Right

That's not something that everyone really believes in because they don't act like it. It's evident in some of the policies and practices that the government has put into place. We also believe housing is not as cookie cutter as we think; it is not as textbook as we think it is. Not everyone wants to go into shared housing, not everyone wants to go into transitional housing, not everyone is going to want to go into an apartment or even ready to go to the apartment or a shared room tomorrow. But hands down, people overall say they want land, they want independence, and they want space. So let's form intentional communities that are well-designed by the people and on vacant land, and tiny homes is the way to go. We have people actually already building their own tiny homes, unpermitted on the sidewalk, in a park, taking over empty lots. Not only do we need to open up empty buildings and remodel them so we can house people, we also need to consider empty lands and the potential that we have to build on most of

¹⁰ For more coverage of the Tiny Home Village efforts, please see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqMEEzMCmbk&feature=emb_logo

those empty lands. People already have the skills to do, so let's give them the model. Let's make these tiny homes up to code. Let's put in fresh clean water, restrooms, hook ups to the sewer, so it's better for the entire community. It will better stabilize the people who are unhoused or housing insecure. It is also a better look and more of a community feel for even the housed neighbors.

Housing is a human right because no matter what condition you are in—I don't care about drugs, mental health, or your economic status—you deserve to have a roof over your head. It is one of the basic needs as a human, and everyone has a right to that dignity. People right now are living undignified. They don't have access to use the restrooms and don't have access to fresh water. They have no ability to cook and provide food for themselves and their families; these are just basic human rights. But we're seeing the same cuts in state benefits, cuts in food stamps, cuts in housing subsidies. The government is basically saying, "We don't care about you, and we're no longer going to support you." But it is the government's job to make sure that every single citizen has the basic resources that they need to thrive.

At the EOC, we offer them the wraparound services to get them independent and to eventually transition them off of these benefits to be able to provide for themselves and their families. We're seeing a new wave of homelessness; we're not dealing with the 1980s chronic homelessness under Reagan where the Reagan Administration actually cut a lot of mental health benefits and closed the hospitals/institutions forcing everybody onto the street. Particularly in areas like San Francisco, we are still seeing the effects of chronic homelessness, where the person has been homeless for 20 plus years and is in deep mental crisis on the street, and you have to walk over them and walk around them.

We Are Actually Seeing a New Wave of Homelessness Where the Average Person Now Is One Paycheck Away From Being Housing Insecure or Unhoused Themselves

We do a lot of education around this issue because if people knew who was really unhoused and how some of them have jobs and go to work

just like you and I, how some of them have paychecks, how some of them have benefits, but it's just they can't afford rent of \$900 a month. People are walking out of tents looking just like you and I—hair done, nails done, and everything. But their wages are not living wages, so people are not making enough money to survive with the current rate of rent and housing prices. Folks may have suffered a lot of trauma in their lives that may have really put them in the environment to spiral into homelessness, and then folks have dealt with just a lot of slumlords and evictions. There are a lot of issues around renter protection and how do we protect people from being in situations like this. If you have an eviction on your record, it is next to impossible for you to get another place, or if you have bad credit, it is next to impossible for you to rent again. If you don't have a stable working history, some people have gig jobs or people collect cans. They're not absent from income, but either they don't have enough income, or they don't have the proper documentation to prove in this very strict system that they can actually afford to pay for a place.

The United Nations Report Named Oakland and the Bay Area as Human Rights Violators for the Conditions That People Are Living in Right Now

The East Oakland Collective, [The Village, Love and Justice in the Streets](#), and a few other organizations led the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, Leilani Farha, on a tour of encampments in Oakland. Then there were other groups who led her on a tour in San Francisco and Berkeley. She spent a day with us, and we went to encampments in West Oakland and East Oakland, and she was able to talk to some of our unhoused leaders. She was able to see the inner workings of an encampment for a day. That gave her the background research to write her report to the UN on what she calls “informal settlements in the Western Hemisphere.” It’s a beautiful and damning report at the same time.¹¹

Leilani Farha said that for America to be a first world country with

¹¹ The full UN Report can be accessed here: <http://www.undocs.org/A/73/310/rev.1>

the amount of money that we have, no one should be living the way that they are. She said it's worse than "Third World" countries in cities like Oakland facing homelessness, and we have shantytowns. What was really powerful about the report was she wrote that the government should be providing resources and basic human needs—which are sanitation, access to restrooms, access to fresh drinking water, trash pickup, and rodent control. The government should be providing this in the absence of adequate housing.

Permanent and adequate housing is everyone's first priority. But in the absence of that, if the government cannot provide, then they need to stabilize people where they're at, how they are, and provide them more basic human rights. They should not be removing people or what we call "encampment sweeps," which are really encampment closures. The government should not be doing that. There's nowhere for people to go, so when you remove a group of people from one spot, you're just pushing them to another spot. You're pushing them in front of the next school, in front of the next yard, under the next bridge, in the next neighborhood, in front of the next business, it's not solving anything. It's not helping people find housing; you're just pushing and further spreading their displacement and traumatizing people.

The City of Oakland Flat Out Told Us to Our Faces That They Felt Like the Report Was Just Fluff

I felt like initially Oakland ignored it, but what I've seen since the report came out is definitely a more global awareness of what's happening in California regarding the homelessness crisis, and education is half the battle. The more people are aware of what's going on, the more people can hold the government accountable; the more people can put funding into it, the more people on a basic level care and can provide a lunch and provide a hygiene kit. The more people will get together and organize and advocate on behalf of humane practices and policies. We have seen some

changes with the city; we saw the emergence of the Tuff Shed program.¹² We don't believe in putting people in backyard sheds even though there are definitely remodeled versions of backyard sheds, it's still a backyard shed, and I think that just subconsciously signifies to the people, “this is what we think of you.” We're not going to put you into a tiny home which actually looks like and feels like a home, but we're going to put you into a backyard shed that makes you very temporary, signifying that you can't be here forever, but we're going to sweep you under the rug like we did something temporarily. It works for some people, but it doesn't work for others.

But if people are living there only for six to nine months and going back out onto the street, I don't see it as a solution at all. I think it's a band-aid solution, so you can get rid of that particular encampment that maybe the housed neighbors complained about at such a high amount. The city takes one step forward and sometimes two steps back, and it's a daily battle. Right now, the City of Oakland is looking at an encampment management policy—how we can have some rules and guidelines across the city about where people can live, where people can't live, what does living look like, how much space can people take up on a public sidewalk or on a vacant property. We want to see some rules and guidelines and uniformity out there as long as it's humane and as long as it comes from the people who are living the experience, as well. I'm a conscious housed person, and I'm a conscious homeowner that takes everyone into consideration whether they own property or not. Whether they are unhoused or not. The city is trying, and they have been trying since the report, but, like, how hard? I don't think hard enough or fast enough.

Our Unhoused Population in Oakland is One of the Most Heavily Policed Communities

There's no coincidence that in Oakland our unhoused population is predominantly Black. There's no coincidence to that at all; I think it speaks

¹² To learn more about the City of Oakland's Tuff Shed program read here <https://www.oaklandhomelessresponse.com/our-response-1>

to the same level of racism that we have been experiencing for centuries. There are a lot of encampments where there's a heavy police presence; police come with guns, they come in and out, they're always picking people up. Particularly, the encampment that used to be on East Alameda Avenue next to Home Depot in Oakland was one of the most policed encampments in Oakland. Home Depot hired full-time officers to be in that parking lot next to the encampment. They set up cameras pointed at the encampment. The police are known to sit outside the encampment and just pull people over as they're leaving the encampment, catching them on a moving violation. But then they find this person has a warrant or something like that and gets caught.

What gives the police the right to just always go in and out of these encampments—to walk through these encampments and just terrorize people? The police have to show up with public works; police are spending money to show up with public works to pick up trash because public works thinks it's a safety issue for them. Unnecessary police dollars are being spent on having police accompany public works, creating a high presence of police at encampment enclosures. The police are towing cars that people live in. They're towing people's storage vehicles; some people fix cars and resell them so they're robbing people of potential income. A lot of money is spent for the police to honestly terrorize encampments, not necessarily help with the management or help with community, but more so to terrorize unhoused folks.

Our Work at EOC Has Been Deeply Impacted by the Covid-19 Pandemic Because We've Seen More Food Insecurity Across Our Communities

We've expanded our services to not only just feed unhoused folks, but also to provide fresh meals, groceries, hygiene kits, sanitation kits, and household supplies to the seniors and low-income families. We went from serving 400 meals a week just to the unhoused and then doing our "Feed the Hood" program every six weeks for the unhoused, to now working Monday through Friday to make sure unhoused folks, particularly in East Oakland, are fed even across Oakland. Also to make sure our low-income and struggling families are fed and able to thrive as well during the

pandemic. We've had to source PPE [personal protective equipment] from many different places and make sure that our unhoused folks and our seniors are equipped every day. There have been some outbreaks and hotspot encampments in Oakland, but how can you properly wash your hands? How can you properly protect yourself against the virus, if you don't have access to a restroom, if you don't have access to a sink? This led the EOC to partner with The Village and Love and Justice in the Streets to do a hotel program. We've been able to temporarily house 45 individuals and families for over 70 weeks in two hotels.

We Are Very Much Inspired by the Black Panther Party 10-Point Model Which Addressed Housing, Food, and Education in the Mindset That We Have to Do for Ourselves

We don't wait on anyone else; we particularly don't wait on the government, because if we do so, we are going to die first. The community takes care of its own, and then we can partner with the government if it's in the best interests of the community and is feasible; but we don't wait on that. I'm in a lot of conversations about what's going to happen after Covid-19 ends, but there's no ending in sight at the moment. People are struggling not only with food but also economically; as more time goes on, a lot of industries aren't coming back at the moment. We know folks who are in daycare, nannies, salons, personalized care businesses that are struggling, entrepreneurs that are struggling. How do we meet the needs of those small businesses, of those families, where either one or both bread winners' hours were cut or lost their jobs? These people are having to return to the gig economy, having to drive for Lyft, Uber, Doordash, do stuff to supplement or even make new income.

So how do we stabilize folks, and what happens if your unemployment is cut? The Trump administration does not believe in any benefits and subsidies for people. We are in fear of the rate of homelessness rising because of Covid-19, in fear of people losing their apartments, losing their housing, and being housing insecure. We need more economic stimuluses; we need more and different job opportunities. The EOC has been fortunate enough to be able to employ a few impacted people from those highly impacted demographics: formerly incarcerated, unhoused,

low-income, and Black folks. It's really up to us.

How do we redirect funding, how do we redirect this new normal that we find ourselves in because of Covid-19? How do we redirect that to be able to offer resources in the community? The EOC is glad to be in that space to see what the light is at the end of the tunnel after Covid-19; to be working with partners like the [Black Cultural Zone](#), [Brotherhood of Elders Network](#), the African-American Covid-19 response frontline healers, who are boots on the ground addressing economics, housing, community development now and also well into the future. These are age-old problems that our community has already been struggling with. Covid-19 just exacerbated it and put it on a global platform.

Closing Reflections by Brian Anthony Davis

I leave this conversation feeling a mixture of emotions. It always has been—and continues to be—people on the grassroots level responding to issues of denial and delayed human rights as outlined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. What is currently taking place in Oakland, California, displays the ways in which racial capitalism and the right to housing act as coterminous phenomena that exacerbate the everyday lives of people who are homeless, and in this case mostly Black and Brown people. It comes as no great surprise that the world continues to reinforce that the right to housing is not a pressing concern. Here in Oakland, the city has given and continues to give permits to businesses to build outdoor sheds for outdoor dining and other luxuries. What does it mean in the name of human rights, the name of housing for the City of Oakland specifically, and cities around the world at large, to expedite the process for businesses to create tough sheds for outdoor dining, while prolonging the process for securing adequate and affordable housing for people who are homeless? The neoliberal propensity of our society suggests that people who are homeless are in this position because of their individual choices and meritocracy, rather than acknowledging people who are homeless as subjects of and victims to state violence, along with institutional racism. These people are dehumanized in the eyes of society. I am thankful to Candice and the EOC for responding to the challenges of our particular time in the name of love, in the name of justice, and in the name of human rights, while still holding our government accountable.

Critical Post-Traumatic Growth among Black Femme High School Students within the School to Prison Pipeline: A Focus on Healing

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Abstract

Both educational research and practices pay little attention to the experiences of girls related to trauma within the School-to-Prison Pipeline. Educators typically take a deficit approach toward youth experiencing trauma and often reinforce trauma through discriminatory and exclusionary disciplinary practices. Using a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methodology centered in the authentic experiences of Black girls, with an intentional focus on their agency and growth, I conducted a research study that educated, coached, and supported a research team

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collectively known as Queens Speak. This research explored the emerging, explanatory conceptual framework of Critical Post-Traumatic Growth. This framework combines Critical Race Theory and Post-Traumatic Growth, highlighting eight tenets that can be used as a lens to both explore and increase the growth among Black girls. These tenets are: context, identity, struggle, resistance, navigation, community, voice and hope. Drawing from this framework, this article examines educational justice through the eyes of Black high school femmes: cis, trans and gender fluid girls who developed a research team to explore and share their lived experiences. It focuses specifically on the growth exhibited by Queens Speak during and after the YPAR project.

Introduction

It seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked (Sontag, 2003).

I am a trauma researcher who can no longer write about trauma. I sit down at the computer in an attempt to take the trauma narratives shared with me by young Black womxn¹ and weave them in a coherent manner to convince human rights educators that their lives matter too, and my fingers are frozen. I stand before my colleagues in a faculty meeting and attempt to share the truths that Black college students have divulged, displaying the fear and anxiety they feel about returning to virtual classrooms in the midst of the multiple crises of 2020 and I stutter. I read carefully crafted statements in an online training, hoping participants are given a glimpse into the humanity of our students' experiences and I stumble over my words.

I am not alone in this. During a time where videos and descriptions of Black death are easily accessible and often shared, many activists and researchers remind us of the impact of watching and constantly discussing this racialized trauma on our mental health. Furthermore, we carry

¹ The term "womxn" is rooted in intersectional feminist literature. It is used in this paper to be inclusive of people who are trans and gender non-binary, and do not identify as men.

concerns that repeatedly viewing violence against Black people further dehumanizes and doesn't increase allyship, and rather is increasingly being labeled as, "trauma porn."

I am a trauma researcher, who can no longer write about trauma. And then, maybe that's the point. Maybe, in this era, in this season, what is needed is not another article about Black pain. Not another narrative of historical and systemic oppression. Not another glimpse into the wounds we as Black womxn and girls carry within educational spaces, specifically within the School-to-Prison Pipeline. Maybe what I could add to the discourse are counter-narratives to the deficit based view of trauma, a glimpse into the resistance displayed by Queens Speak, a Black femme high school research team I co-founded in 2017. Maybe our Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) findings could shine a light on the growth and healing of Black girls.

Queens Speak created an opportunity for young women to use their own agency and voice in not only the creation of new knowledge and insight into their lives, but also in the development of recommendations for how girls should be treated in schools. I will highlight the work we embarked on together during our yearlong research project. Using the conceptual framework of Critical Post-Traumatic Growth that I developed, I commit to focusing on the growth.

This article examines educational justice through the eyes of Black femmes: cis, trans and gender non-conforming girls who developed a research team to explore and share their lived experiences. It focuses specifically on the growth exhibited by Queens Speak during and after the YPAR project; the creation of YPAR as a healing space; the role of scholars and community members in expanding our deficit view trauma; and the need to curate spaces where healing and growth can occur.

Positionality

I have carried trauma in this body since I was five years old. I hauled around racialized traumatic stress for longer than that. I ran away from preschool at 3 years old because I was the only Black child in the class and was uncomfortable with the stares and whispers. I walked several blocks to my Nan's house and hid in her garden waiting for someone to show up and reassure me I belonged. I was an intelligent, disengaged student most of my life. In British schools, I was often singled out for dress code violations and attitude problems. A White² male administrator once licked his finger and attempted to wipe the make-up off my face, except I didn't have eyeliner or mascara on, just dark brown eyes and naturally black lashes. When I immigrated to the US at age 16, I found my people on the margins. We built community outside of traditional school spaces, and when I got pregnant in my junior year, it was easy for me to stop attending (as I was hardly going to school anyway). In spite of, and maybe motivated by these exclusionary educational experiences, I found resistance through college success. I found revenge in proving to others I could get degrees, in spite of their explicit, and implicit, messages that told me I didn't belong.

My positionality as Black, female, trauma survivor, immigrant, teen mum, and someone who was pushed out of high school and spent young adulthood navigating poverty and the prison industrial complex, shapes my identity—still. These life experiences prepared and called me to engage in YPAR with Black femme high school students and explore alongside them our collective trauma and growth. Now, a tenure-track professor, I find myself navigating the academy and dealing with much of the same

² Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups in our articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.

institutional trauma and racialized stress as the girls described. In the midst of this, I grow. I heal. I resist.

Background & Context

Black Girls Matter, Say Her Name, Arrest the Cops that killed Breonna Taylor have all been battle cries for Black womxn and girls over the last half decade. Contemporary social justice movements, whether pushing back against the School-to-Prison Pipeline, or confronting police brutality have tended to center the experiences of boys and men (Crenshaw, 2015). Research and public policy debates often fail to paint a nuanced picture that addresses the degree to which girls are vulnerable to many of the same factors faced by their male counterparts. The suspension and expulsion rates for Black girls far outpace the rates for other girls—and in some places, they outpace the rates of most boys (Crenshaw, 2015, p.14). In many districts, suspension rates have hovered around 12% for Black girls as compared to 2% for White girls, meaning that Black girls are suspended six times as often as White girls. Because feminist epistemologies tend to be concerned with the education of White girls and women and race-based epistemologies tend to be consumed with the educational barriers negatively effecting Black boys, the educational needs of Black girls have fallen through the cracks (Evans-Winters, 2007).

Contemporary scholarship asserts Black girls' experience with exclusionary discipline produces similar outcomes to Black boys (Morris, 2012, 2016). Educational policies often “regulate students’ nonviolent movements, labeling expressions and forms of communication as defiance and disobedience” (Wun, 2016, p. 182). When committed by Black girls, these behaviors are criminalized by the school authorities (Wun, p. 183). We also know Black girls are more likely to be suspended or expelled for issues that center on disrespect or willful defiance (Morris, 2012). This aggressive punishment of norm violations is used to help maintain the existing social order rather than changing society—or education—to benefit the most disadvantaged Black women or girls (Richie, 2012, p.103).

Use of the term *School-to-Prison Pipeline* (STPP) in this article expands the traditional STPP framework that only uplifts the impact of disparate disciplinary action that criminalizes youth of color in schools. We cannot focus purely on discipline practices as contributors to the prison pipeline; we must also address issues related to the educational system's need to uphold dangerous stereotypes that control and dominate Black minds and bodies [these stereotypes are discussed in length in my forthcoming article (Ault, 2021)]. According to Sojoyner (2016), we must strive to understand the complex relationship of the enclosure processes—which “embod(y) the removal/withdrawal/denial of services and programs that are key to the stability and long-term well-being of communities” (p. xiii)—that have brought us to the current moment. Based on the history of exclusion and enclosure of Black communities, we are forced to examine the complexity of the current relationship between schools and prisons in the United States (Sojoyner, 2016).

We must also challenge the strategies employed by schools, often fueled by community organizations within the non-profit industrial complex, that attempt to co-opt the radical transformative spaces inside and outside of schools. This co-optation “neutralize(s) efforts to dismantle racial, gendered, class and sexed hierarchies” (p. 193). I therefore use the term *School-to-Prison Pipeline* to describe the carceral environment of policing and dehumanizing that happens in classrooms, and on school campuses, that leaves Black students, including femmes, in literal and figurative bondage.

Human Rights Education

The work of *Queens Speak* situates the current *School-to-Prison Pipeline* in a context of centuries of human rights abuses against Black people, including: the transatlantic slave trade; the Black Codes; Jim Crow; the rape, brutalization, exploitation of Black women; and the exclusion and

adultification of Black girls.³ Situating the School-to-Prison Pipeline in an historical context is necessary to comprehend the complexity of Black youth experiences within school settings. This allows us to not only understand the historical systems of oppression that have been perpetuated through US education, but also understand the power, strength and resistance that exists among young people amidst the trauma of their oppression. The education system in the United States continues to have a long history of violating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), including Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights; and Article 26: Everyone has the right to education.

Based on the ongoing racism and educational inequities facing Black students, it is evident that the US has not created sufficient strategies to abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) nor the International Convention to Eliminate Racial Discrimination (CERD). We thus turn to Human Rights Education (HRE) as a framework to elevate Critical Post-Traumatic Growth inside and outside of the school space. HRE has the opportunity to make ethical and material differences in the lives of youth, propel students to engage in democratic citizenship, and combat socioeconomic and structural educational disparities by creating conditions that not only promote school attendance but also (re)socialize students academically (Hantzopoulos, 2016, p. 47). We must, however, proceed with caution, for without dialogue and consideration of students' specific social contexts, human rights—which are designed to be liberating—can be “part of a hegemonic discourse, used instead to control” (Hantzopoulos, 2016, p. 37). These ongoing instances of structural racism lead to well-documented instances of traumatic stress among Black students in the US.

³ Burton (2007) notes that “adultification comprises contextual, social, and developmental processes in which youth are prematurely, and often inappropriately, exposed to adult knowledge and assume extensive adult roles and responsibilities within their family network.”

Racialized Traumatic Stress

The conditions experienced by Black youth in urban communities impact their psychosocial, physical, emotional, and spiritual health (Ginwright, 2016). Black youth have to navigate an environment of persistent and racialized traumatic stress. The traumatic experiences of Black girls are compounded by the trauma they experience on a daily basis. We must therefore force schools to move beyond color blind conversations of grit, growth mindset and resilience, towards a deep discovery about complex trauma, critical growth and resistance.

The context calls for us to develop spaces that directly address the healing of those who have experienced trauma. This commitment to justice must extend beyond the immediate trauma and include the acknowledgement and healing of racialized infractions (McGee & Stovall, 2015; Ault 2017). In addition, the process of teaching students about “Socially Engineered Trauma” and racialized traumatic stress is a critical foundation of culturally relevant mental health (Shaia, Avruch, Green & Godsey, 2019). Socially Engineered Traumas are defined as traumatic events rooted in social forces of oppression that can result in students experiencing reduced shame and self-blame as they increase their knowledge of how their larger social context impacts their individual functioning (Shaia, Avruch, Green & Godsey, 2019). In addition, Ault (2017) uses the term racialized traumatic stress to collectively describe all of the trauma resulting from racism in all its forms.

Abolitionist Callings

We currently exist in a space in time where abolition and defunding the police—especially in schools—has become a foreseeable and viable option. These conversations have resulted in movements around the country demanding for the removal of law enforcement, in the form of School Resource Officers, from schools and calling for efforts to replace them with social workers and counselors. These holistic responses are also manifesting themselves outside of school spaces as communities work to

provide their own mental health response teams independent of law enforcement agencies. For example MH First community response hotlines in [Oakland](#) and [Sacramento](#) provide a community driven alternative for individuals experiencing mental health crises.

Queens Speak cautions us to be careful about making blanket recommendations to increase mental health and social emotional support for students of color. Reminding us, “if there is any support in school, it is always White psychologists and counselors. We need people that went through what we went through and can relate to us; people that look like us” (Queens Speak participant). These abolitionist healing models, therefore, offer us direction as we consider grassroots and culturally affirming healing options inside school spaces. Bettina Love (2019) calls us to tear down and rebuild schools using intersectional tactics of past and present abolitionists. In addition, the [Abolitionist Teaching Network](#) founded by Love, whose mission is to develop and support educators to fight injustice within their schools and communities, serves as a collective space for organizing, educating and collaboration.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Post-Traumatic Growth

Critical Post-Traumatic Growth is formed within the intersections of Critical Race Theory and Post-Traumatic Growth. Working with Queens Speak, I was searching for a conceptual framework that would push back against the solely deficit-based frame many were using to examine trauma. We wanted to uplift the growth and agency of Black girls who had experienced trauma. Post-Traumatic Growth is defined as “the experience of positive change resulting from the struggle with major life crises” (Calhoun, Cann & Tedeschi, 2010, p.1; Rendon, 2015). Joseph (2001) confirmed that traumatic events could also serve as a catalyst for positive change within individuals. Joseph’s assertion that “rather than ruining one’s life, a traumatic event can actually improve it” has implications for young people, especially young women of color that are both insightful and

problematic (2001, p. x). While it is imperative to ensure that we do not minimize the devastating short- and long-term effects of trauma, it is also important to explore a counter-narrative consisting of both positive and negative consequences that young women may encounter after experiencing trauma.

One of the obstacles in the expansion of Post-Traumatic Growth as a framework has been the tendency for researchers to ignore the cultural and racial context of stress and coping (Weiss & Berger, 2010). Critical Race Theory (CRT) therefore offers us a lens through which to explore Post-Traumatic Growth further. CRT draws from and extends a broad literature base of critical theory in law, sociology, history, education, ethnic studies and women's studies (Bell, 1976, 1980; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2005; Stovall, 2006). CRT holds useful tenets in examining school experiences, such as: the centrality of racism and White supremacy in US society; a commitment to social justice; and the importance of first person narratives from people of color. Within the context of this article, of particular interest is the notion of White supremacy, which is described as:

A political, economic and cultural system in which Whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of White superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of White dominance and non-White subordination are daily re-enacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (Mills, 2003, p.179)

This foundational understanding of White supremacy is critical when recognizing the potential systemic damage of educational policy and the impact of colorblind policies, such as zero tolerance, that may have no *de jure* mention of race but are interpreted within school systems to disparately affect students of color (Stovall, 2006), specifically Black girls. CRT theorists are committed to examining the ways power and privilege structure and shape education, and push this understanding into action. As we strive to teach social justice, or teach the importance of uplifting counter-stories, the counter-narratives of Queens Speak are important in

contradicting the dominant deficit-based narratives, particularly in regards to trauma.

Critical Post-Traumatic Growth (CPTG) draws upon concepts and methodologies from Critical Race Theory and Post-Traumatic Growth, and serves as a critical lens through which to interrogate the trauma, healing and growth of Black female students. In my original study (Ault, 2017), I used critical ethnography in order to examine the lived experiences of Queens Speak in light of the literature and explore CPTG further. Eight tenets emerged that were both uplifted in the research and displayed by the girls as they navigated educational spaces. These tenets of Critical Post-Traumatic Growth are context, suffering, identity, community, voice, resistance, navigation and hope. Rather than explore all of these tenets in this article, I will provide an overview of Queens Speak's knowledge contributions, focusing specifically on healing and growth.

Our current context—namely, the racial uprisings of 2020, Covid-19, distance learning, and the effects of climate change illustrated by the devastating wildfires of California—has afforded us the opportunity to recognize Critical Post-Traumatic Growth all around us. Black youth and community members are simultaneously experiencing interpersonal and community violence along with all of the other traumas of the era. Concurrently, many Black women and girls are describing deeper relational connections and a return to [African spirituality and healing modalities](#). Groups are advocating for spending time outside in nature in order to positively impact mental health. For example, [GirlTrek](#) activates thousands of Black women to be change makers. A recent GirlTrek campaign provided free 21-day meditations where participants could learn about the historical and contemporary contributions of Black women while getting outside to walk. Additionally there is a renewed interest in [therapy](#). Even my own organization, the [Race and Gender Equity Project](#), has opened a healing space providing ancestral and youth-centered healing options for youth both in-person and virtually. Finally, local youth-led social justice efforts have positioned young people at the forefront for making mental health recommendations, including work by [Youth Forward](#) to expand peer-to-peer mental wellness supports on school campuses.

Methodology

Youth Participatory Action Research

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is a critical research methodology that focuses on centralizing youth voice and placing young people in the position as experts in their own education and experiences (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Morrell, 2006; Bautista et. al, 2013). YPAR encompasses three principles: “the collective investigation of a problem; the reliance on Indigenous knowledge to better understand that problem; and the desire to take individual and/or collective action to deal with the stated problem” (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 157). YPAR is more than a research methodology; rather it is at once, a methodology, pedagogy, and a theory of action for creating social justice and social change (Akom, Cammarota & Ginwright, 2008). In the Queens Speak project, YPAR was both the methodological tool used to examine the phenomena of youth trauma, and the healing process used to positively impact growth. By combining CPTG with YPAR, a pedagogical space of resiliency and resistance can be developed, which challenges the dominant mindset, increases academic engagement and achievement, promotes healing, and builds new understandings of the strength and assets of youth of color and the communities from which they come from (Akom, Cammarota & Ginwright, 2008). YPAR provided a space where youth had an individual and collective sense of agency as they uplifted and addressed systemic racism (Welton & Bertrand, 2019).

First person narratives are an integral part of CRT pedagogy. Storytelling can function as a form of self-defense and personal agency despite historical silences and targeted violence by governmental authorities or public institutions like schools (Phillips, 2015). Ultimately, Queens Speak strived to create a space in which personal testimony became political praxis (Phillips, 2015). YPAR approaches engage in critical and collective inquiry as well as reflection and action focused on "reading" and speaking back to the reality of the world, their world (Freire, 1993, p. 2.) Community organizations also use YPAR to support youth in engaging in

liberatory and radical inquiry (Villa, 2018). YPAR in itself is resistive pedagogy. By focusing on Black girls as agents rather than objects within systems of power within society, we position them as creators of knowledge and acknowledge their everyday formal and informal acts of resistance (Brown, 2009; Jacobs, 2016). In this study YPAR became formal resistance that led to transformation, which can be defined as systemic and institutional change to promote social justice (Freire, 1993) as well as individual radical healing.

Our Process

Through my relationship with the local school district and area high schools, I gained access and permission to conduct the Queens Speak project at a local high school site, using the Blacks Making a Difference (BMAD) Leadership program as a starting point to engage youth. BMAD was an elective within the high school's expanded learning (7th period) space. BMAD provided a space where young people developed leadership and advocacy skills. I had been an adult supporter/mentor with BMAD for several years. Using a snowball sampling technique, I selected co-researchers in the roles of research team participants based initially on teacher or facilitator recommendation, students' engagement in their leadership class, students' desire to participate in the research project, and their interest in being involved in school and community change.

I initially identified ten Black students to participate on the research team, consisting of cis-gendered, trans and gender non-conforming/gender fluid students. At the time of the project, all research team members self-identified as Black females and ranged in age from 15-18. As the project ensued, other girls wanted to join the research team. The core team agreed to have enrollment be open. The total number of enrolled girls was fifteen, although participation and attendance varied throughout the eight months of research. The research team named their research group *Queens Speak*. They described choosing "queen" as a way to push back on the negative stereotypes surrounding Black women. During the naming process, two of the students talked openly about the fluidity of their gender and whether

“queen” adequately described them. They discussed and contemplated having a gender-neutral term; however, the group ultimately decided that they primarily identified as strong Black womxn whose ancestors may have included African kings and queens. They determined that the name felt appropriate and inclusive.

As researchers develop participatory action research projects in collaboration with young people, research teams can learn from the Black Lives Matter movement to push past the gender binaries that have historically shaped our justice movements. Queens Speak became a place for non-men to express their unique experiences within the School-to-Prison Pipeline. The research team collected data from other Black female students participating in BMAD programs at their high school and neighboring schools. They called these focus groups *Women’s Empowerment Chats*.

Queens Speak collaboratively developed their own research questions, which were as follows:

- 1) How do we as Black girls describe ourselves?
- 2) What struggles do Black girls have?
- 3) In what ways do our struggles make us stronger?
- 4) What do Black girls need to be successful in school?
- 5) What recommendations do we have for schools to better serve and teach us?

As I met with potential participants, read youth poetry and explored their journals in preparation for this project, it became apparent that the Queens Speak students had experienced extensive individual, community and systemic trauma. To maximize safety, the youth themselves would not be called to unpack or address each other’s traumatic histories. We addressed and discussed any instances of trauma that were organically brought up; however, we framed conversations to focus on *struggle* rather than trauma. This decision was made to avoid enhancing secondary trauma, as well as to preclude students from feeling pressured to share their trauma narratives with their peers. If trauma was directly disclosed in groups or interviews, follow-up happened with the students outside of the group sessions. This follow up was conducted by both myself and the BMAD

facilitators. In order to further understand the trauma and growth experienced by the young people, I developed secondary research questions that informed my meta-analysis of the CPTG revealed through the Queens Speak sessions. These questions were: 1) What types of trauma have Black girls, within the School-to-Prison Pipeline, experienced? and 2) How do the emerging tenets of CPTG illustrate the experiences of Black girls within the School-to-Prison Pipeline?

Project Design

The methodology for the project, adapted from Duncan Andrade & Morrell (2008), entailed five different phases as illustrated in Figure 1 below:

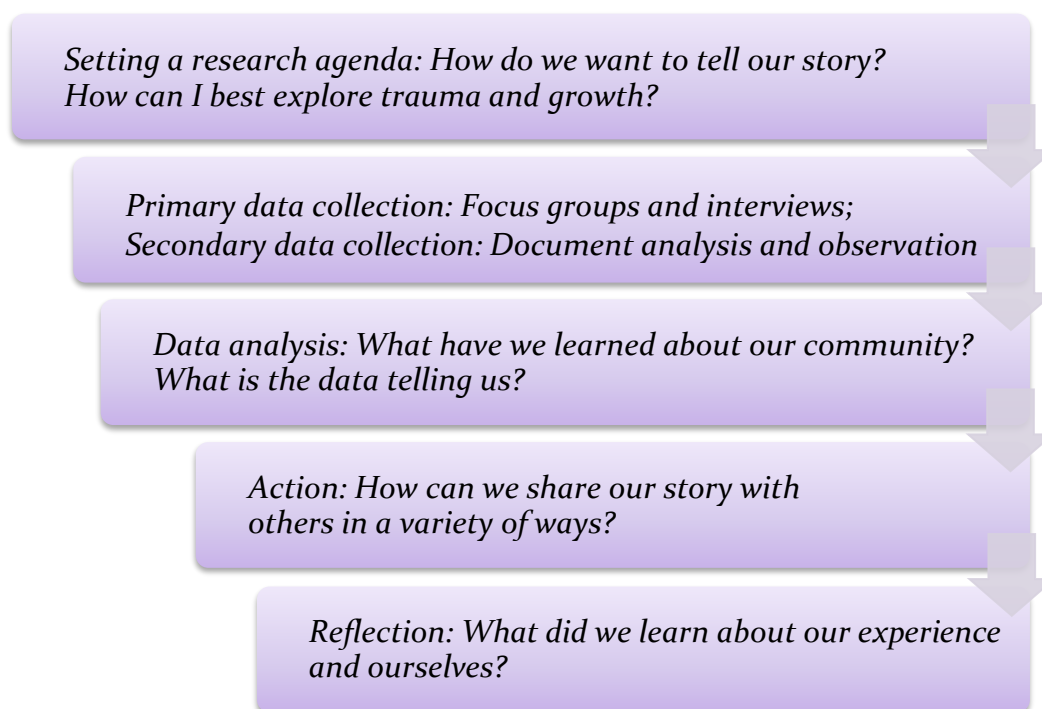


Figure 1. Phases of the Project

In order to triangulate their data, Queens Speak chose to conduct interviews, focus groups, and journal entries as their primary data collection methods. During Phase 1, they interviewed each other in order to both

practice their interviewing skills and develop a context for the focus groups. In addition, I conducted a critical ethnography in order to explore the culture of Black girls in relationship to CPTG. This ethnographic process included observation, interviews and document analysis. Ultimately, all of the interactions and experiences during the course of the year became usable data as we unpacked and examined the new phenomenon of Critical Post-Traumatic Growth. Some of the data collection and data sharing methods included: songs, videos, poster art, appearance, and food.

To explore the secondary research questions, I conducted regular observations of the girls in their leadership programs, including Queens Speak. I used my journal to document interactions between the participants, paying close attention to the conversations they had with each other. Observation is the best technique to use when an activity, event, or situation can be observed first-hand, especially when a fresh perspective is desired (Merriam, 2009).

According to Merriam (2009) documents of any kind can help a researcher “uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem” (p. 163). In this project I used participants’ documents both prior to and during the YPAR project. Poetry and journal entries provided background information as well as further insight into the girls’ lived experiences (Bowen, 2009). The preliminary document analysis revealed the extent of trauma that participants had experienced and shaped how we rolled out questions related to trauma and struggle. Both Queens Speak members and I also kept reflection journals for the duration of the project. These reflection journals were analyzed and coded collectively.

During and after the data collection phase, the youth researchers and I worked together to organize our data, read and summarize our findings, describe, classify and group our data into themes, and interpret our data (Creswell, 2013). I transcribed the focus group and interview sessions and we reviewed and discussed their content as a group. I gave preliminary suggestions regarding the themes I was noticing, and we used flip charts and markers to write them down, subsequently pasting them on the walls of the rooms in which we gathered. We collectively reviewed data to see whether or not it fit into the categories we were developing. We also

checked regularly with other participants to see whether or not we had missed anything and whether we had captured the essence of our discussions. Ultimately, we harnessed our data into a coherent and unified story that represented our findings with the hope we could motivate our subsequent audience into action (Mirra et.al, 2016). This action culminated in a community-wide Empowerment Chat where the young people shared their findings with their peers, their parents and systems leaders in creative and artistic ways. They wanted the event to be rooted in youth culture and “not a lecture” so they created posters to share their data, held a gallery walk in which they discussed the findings in small groups, read poetry, and facilitated a community conversation about their recommendations for change. They also had food, a DJ and a photo booth to ensure their peers were engaged and uplifted.

Study Findings and Discussion: Reflection, Growth & Action

In the original study (Ault, 2017), I offered composite profiles for six of the research team members. I chose not to share every student’s profile and used pseudonyms in their profiles to protect their privacy. In addition, the team collectively decided all of the quotes shared would be attributed collectively to *Queens Speak* rather than individual members. This highlights the collective nature of the entire process and their desire to be seen as an anonymous group of girls, pushing back on the hypervisibility they often felt when they spoke up. To maintain additional privacy, I have also ascribed a pseudonym to the high school that I will call “Brookside.”

Identity

Within their BMAD leadership class, Queens Speak had been learning how to develop critical consciousness focused on systematic injustices and actions required to overcome social and economic oppression (Cammarota, 2011). Without an intentional focus on understanding and dismantling systems of oppression, Queens Speak students would not have developed what Paulo Freire calls *conscientização* (Freire, 2010), or a

transformative educational process that begins with the creation of pedagogical spaces where members of marginalized communities are enabled to gain an understanding, or consciousness, of how their own experiences have been shaped by larger social institutions (Freire, 1993; Akom, Cammarota & Ginwright, 2008).

All of the Queens Speak members were able to develop a collective understanding of their history and identity through this critical lens that was connected to their growth. Similarly, Shin, Daly, and Vera (2007) assert that when students develop a positive ethnic identity, it acts as a protective factor against being affected by the systemic violence that students are often exposed to in urban areas. Moreover, positive peer norms and higher ethnic identity correlate with higher school engagement, while negative peer norms and lower ethnic identity correlate with lower school engagement (Shin, Daly, & Vera, 2007).

This collective history was described by Queens Speak in this way:

It's important to know where you came from to know where you are going. It's also important to know how other people made it to where you wanna go. These schools and teachers don't always help you. But there's a way through. We have to help each other find it.

Additionally, as Queens Speak developed a more critical understanding of systemic racism, they described having an increased self-efficacy: Once you understand the system isn't set up for you, you realize you are going to have to figure out ways around things. You will also stop setting yourself up for failure by getting into it with teachers and stuff. You ain't gon win. But you can set up things that work for you.

It is important to support Black girls in the development of their identity that is situated within both a socio-historical context, as well as their current reality. Black girls must therefore be given space to get to know and develop their own authentic identity. In addition, in the midst of a growing enthusiasm to counteract negative stereotypes, researchers must not create new stereotypes—overly positive images that fail to accurately reflect the complexity of the lives of Black girls (Hull, Scott & Smith, 1982). Scholarship must also be mindful of the nuances of race, class and gender

and push for an intersectional lens as the driving force of educational transformation. As one Queens Speak member stated:

My struggles growing up for me and still is today, is accepting the way I was made and not even looks—I believe I’m very beautiful—but my attitude, the way I speak, etc. I am very outspoken and I stand for what I believe in. I have a very projected voice and I’m not afraid to tell you how I feel. Growing up that seemed to be a problem for those around me. I was always misunderstood for having an attitude or being mean, etc. I was told I’m not gonna make it far in life because of my attitude. I envied the “quiet or calm kids.” I wished so bad to be like them.

It is important to recognize the humanity and complexity of Black girls, even as we examine their collective experience. In our attempt to make meaning of what we are discovering, we must be careful not to create monolithic caricatures that simplify and further stereotype Black youth.

Power and agency

Queens Speak members demonstrated a belief in their own power and ability to be successful. It appeared as though the more they believed in their own capability, the easier it became for them to navigate systems of oppression. In turn, the more they realized that the system was built on inequities, the less they internalized their failures. For example, one of the students had been expelled the year before we began Queens Speak. She enrolled in a local charter school rather than attend an alternative school program and returned to Brookside for 7th period on the days we met.

It was important to Queens Speak that the research space included a place for the sharing of personal stories. For example, one student shared the following as a focus group introduction. This set the stage for all the other girls to engage in transparent and vulnerable conversations:

Y’all know I was kicked out of school. Y’all may not know my story tho’. I’m a junior. I used to go here but yeah. Right now I’m adopted, my mom she just got out prison, a couple of months ago or whatever. She has three kids, we all currently live in different

households. I never had a dad. But I was just trying to find out where I fit in, and not really feeling comfortable. I was always lashing out. Always in trouble. Always in the office. I finally got kicked out of here for something stupid. Like, not even fighting. But I realize the system is set up for me to fail. I'm going to succeed. With or without support. Like, I appreciate how we have set up a support system for each other. Nothing can stop me now. I am going to be everything I set out to be.

Shortly thereafter, another student shared how they dealt with some of the difficult and traumatic experiences they had undergone.

I empower myself. I don't need others to tell me things in order for me to do it. Sometimes hearing it is good or knowing it's there is good, but I don't wanna feel as if I need it. I want to have the ability to tell myself I'm going to do something and do it with no hesitation or second thoughts. No one is going to give you anything and everyone that says they're there for you probably won't be there forever. Actually, I know they aren't going to be here forever. Everyone is temporary.

This belief in one's own power and ability to heal, when coupled with an understanding of history and social justice, is an important part of rewriting a trauma narrative. It is important for young women to realize they have the power to heal and transform themselves and to understand their own worth and contribution to the world that no one else can make but them (Winn & Franklin, 2014).

Scholar Activism & Community Building

Queens Speak members were also involved in community activism and advocacy. For many, this focus on others is an important part of Post-Traumatic Growth. Community activism or social justice involvement can also help people look for the positive within difficult circumstances (Rendon, 2014). For example, Queens Speak cohosted bi-monthly BMAD

family breakfasts, where, in the spirit of the Black Panther Party,⁴ the young people cooked breakfast for their community at either a school site or a community location. They invited children and parents to join them as they broke bread, socialized and engaged in other community building, youth-led rituals.

One Queens Speak member shared:

Even doing the [BMAD family] breakfasts helps us out inside. We can be having a bad day or a bad week or whatever, but then we get together for breakfast and cook for families and little people. The kids are running around and having fun, and we feel better almost instantly.

Sometimes [after the breakfast] we gave out the leftovers to people who were homeless. It makes you realize even when things are bad, you have a roof over your head, you can make it to school, you can find something to eat. You don't have to rummage in dumpsters.

Peer-to-peer supports

Peer support is based on the idea that people who have experienced and overcome a particular type of adversity can serve as a source of support, encouragement and hope to others experiencing similar situations and may also be uniquely positioned to promote service engagement (Walker, et. al, 2018). The Queens Speak members were all focused on supporting each other and leaving a legacy for the younger generation. They were involved in peer-to-peer tutoring and adopted strict norms about the types of behavior they would engage in around younger children. It appeared as though this legacy-building helped them stay focused on continuing to mature and grow even amidst their trauma.

⁴ In 1969, The Black Panther Party held their first free breakfast for children at St. Augustine's Episcopal Church in Oakland. One of over 60 survival programs pioneered by the BPP, the free breakfast for children program met a need in the Black community. The US government started offering free breakfast in schools in 1975. Learn more here: <https://search.freedomarchives.org/search.php?s=free+breakfast>

All of the following quotes blossomed out of a conversation in which Queens Speak asked each other how they imagined their role in creating change for their young family and members of the community. They led each other in a journaling exercise from which came these words of wisdom:

It's time for us to be leaders and change the Black community from negative to positive. Adults today can't do much for us. It's our job because we're the next generation. It's up to us to change what's going on because we're up next.

This is what you should know because most people won't tell you: Make an impact in your community for what you think is right, self-educate yourself and become better than what is around you. Last but not least, not only help yourself but others. Help make a difference in other people's lives.

We need to choose the right decisions. Take all the chances you can to benefit you and your family. I chose to keep my mind on a positive note to be a good example for my brothers and sisters. To help them out once I become successful and make sure they get on a positive track as well.

The babies—they look up to us. We have to do better so they don't have to go through the things we go through.

Queens Speak also described the impact of standing up for each other, recognizing that it wasn't enough for them to impact the younger generation, they also needed to support each other through their ups and downs.

I love noticing that it's not just me having the day-to-day problems that I face because I'm always told I'm "tripping", but there's no way that approximately 13 girls are "tripping" about all the same problems. We have to speak up. Maybe if we all talk at once, they'll listen.

Expanding opportunities for Black girls to engage in peer mentoring potentially reduces their invisibility, which was highlighted as a source of trauma for Queens Speak (Buck, et. al., 2017; Ault, 2017). As one Queens Speak member stated:

Being a Black girl, I feel that we need to work on building each other up. Often, we despise and say mean and hurtful things to one another which constantly breaks down the confidence and self-esteem of the next Black girl. We need to start doing the opposite of that and build each other up, give each other compliments, tell one another that they are beautiful, intelligent, and can amount to so much more than what society has said that they can. Encouraging each other I think will build a stronger Black community within the girls and women, and even the men, and we will be more powerful together and others will begin to respect us once we start to respect each other.

Creative Expression & The Arts

The use of art in the healing process is effective because it helps focus people on new activities that absorb them in the process of creating something (Rendon, 2015). Tapping into creative ways of thinking through the arts can also help inspire people to find more creative ways to address their problems (Rendon, 2015). In addition, schools have historically been a site that can foster Black consciousness and cultural expression (Sojoyner, 2016).

Queens Speak members were all inspired by the arts in some way. They expressed themselves creatively and used the arts as a form of self-expression, healing and voice:

I love to sing and dance and sometimes write poetry. I really just love entertaining people. I like to make people feel good and laugh a lot and try hard to be as positive as possible.

It gives me a chance to express myself in a way that is unimaginable. I admire the way they go up there and pour out their heart and soul in their words and tone of voice I love every aspect of poetry. It's the most beautiful thing.

[I express myself] through writing or I'll verbally express it, but usually writing works. Even writing in my journal helps me process.

At first, I thought it was annoying, now I use it as a way to capture my day and make sense of everything that happened.

A Black femme community member joined us for one of our sessions. This community leader, whom we shall call “Dominique”, shared her experiences with community organizing and art. She made African jewelry. She shared how learning about and creating art connected her to her ancestors and how that, in and of itself, can be resistance. Dominique told the young people:

It wasn't until I was in a difficult situation that I realized I was a Black *woman*. Prior to that I fought for Black issues, but then when I realized I was also woman, I realized as Black women, we have particular needs. It is important that we speak for ourselves and articulate our needs to our community. It is important that other members of our community are able to organize in support of us, get behind us.

While conducting the Queens Speak project, the members were invited by a nonprofit ([Future Youth Records](#)), to record songs specifically related to the empowerment of girls. This was a perfect example of how they were able to combine research, art and healing. [\[Listen to the song here\]](#). Watching the young people come together to create was inspiring. They stated, “It’s like all the things we talked about in the research group came together in a song. So it’s not just our voice. It’s a lot of voices.” The chorus reads:

*I am the change. I'm done trying to please you.
We killing the game, baby just be you
No more playing it safe, I'm going my own way
The way I walk, the way I talk
I am a queen, this is me.*

Verbalizing many of the issues we had been discussing, including negative stereotyping and overall struggles, juxtaposed with agency, power and unbridled resistance in the song. The song describes some of the themes highlighted by the girls in their trauma narratives including community violence and interpersonal trauma. They also push back on a

single narrative of negativity and uplift the importance of community in both supporting them, and encouraging them to become change. They flow:

... I missed the way that I used to be/oblivious to all this cruelty/families crying over eulogies/girls not understanding true beauty/but this reality made me/My success is moving hastily/I was made to be, ahead of the game/give back to my community, be the change you see/even at my lowest mama always seemed to show her support in me/BMAD family, helping to uplift and show me positivity/It was new to me, and it's crazy/that what made me was the struggle/but it saved me, the grind paid me/it's a woman's world and it's crazy.

Healing and Reimagining

Part of the healing process involves reimagining a future, a new narrative, a vision. Without new visions, we don't know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless and cynical, but we also forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us (Kelly, 2002). "This refusal to give up on an anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, anti-caste feminist imaginary is the refusal to give up hope for change" (Singh, 2018, p.103). "When movements have been unable to clear the clouds, it has been the poets ... who have succeeded in imagining the color of the sky, in rendering the kinds of dreams and futures social movements are capable of producing" (Kelly, 2002, p. 9). This intersection of poetry, healing and social justice resonated with many of the girls as we attempted to create a space in which their imagination would be inspired. Queens Speak write:

I like to write poetry and perform it. It's such a rush. Also, it gives me a chance to express myself in a way that is unimaginable. I admire the way they go up there and pour out their heart and soul in their words and tone of voice. I love every aspect of poetry it's the most beautiful thing. I am so excited to do this because not only do I get to express my feelings and voice my observations, but I get to talk

about real things, not be afraid to get personal but also to be able to cope with the everyday struggle of being me.

Queens Speak imagined schools that were: “[Places where] we would be free, our soul would be free, we wouldn’t have all this baggage, unless it came from home, then we would have somewhere to go to.” They also uplifted school as being “a way of escape—the baggage from school piles onto what I’m already going through it makes it worse.” As we reimagine schooling and work to dismantle oppressive school systems, we must strive, alongside youth, to build spaces where they feel valued and free.

Community

The Research Team also came up with some recommendations for the local Black community, stressing that at the same time as we are advocating for change within the public school system, they should be pressing and pushing our community to better support them as young Black women. They recognized change was occurring at the intersection of schools and community, and it was not enough for teachers or support staff to merely represent their identity groups. They felt strongly that their healing was linked to social justice and called us to use an intersectional lens that did not focus solely on race, but also gender, age and ability.

They also called out the historical nature of racism and challenged us as adults to be more critical in our analysis, and less critical in our judgement. A Queens Speak member states, we need to “stop helping add to the stereotypes—all the stuff we go through. It’s like the community forgot there was racism and want us to “fix” everything about ourselves without recognizing where it comes from.”

According to Buck et al. (2017), students consistently highlighted the importance of mentors who were less formal or authoritarian in approach. The participants stressed that they needed non-judgmental and supportive adults who were willing to vulnerably share their own stories. A participant states, “don’t judge us; you can help us. Listen to our stories... and share your stories with Black girls. You may have gone through something that can help us. Many of us are trying to get where you are.”

In addition to support, the young people valued the concept of family. Looking to each other as well as the adults, they honored and appreciated the community they belonged to and supported each other as valued members of their family. They share “I really wouldn’t be here without my BMAD family. Jody and Mama Stacey and all of us for real... we in this together.”

Social & Emotional Support

The students described the need for additional social and emotional support in school. They also shared that they wished there were more supports designed specifically for Black students. They felt as though these supports should be aligned with and support them academically, as well, and not merely pull them out of class to get help. For example, one Queens Speak member stated, “we have programs like anger management in our school; they be helping, but then we are missing class and falling behind. How I’m supposed to feel about that? *Angry* [laughs].”

Another participant uplifted the need for support outside of teachers. She states:

We need more counselors, psychologists to talk to. You can’t put our problems on a timetable... you have to get to know us. Plus we students have to open up. Oftentimes we aren’t comfortable sharing what’s going on with us ...

Queens Speak also noted there were few places they could go to engage with their peers in positive ways. In addition, they noted the importance of getting outside, such as spending time in their high school garden or in local parks. They collectively asked the school system’s leaders to “Create a safe haven for young people in our own communities; More community centers, spaces where we can congregate and have fun. Like more teen groups.” They also uplifted environmental justice issues, for example, “more street lights and green space (parks) in our community. White communities have this, especially as a result of gentrification. This is important, it makes us feel valued and safe.”

Conclusion

As community engaged scholars exploring human rights education, we are called to recognize the trauma experienced by Black girls and recognize the agency, healing and growth demonstrated by young people. Queens Speak allowed us all to explore the juxtaposition of trauma, healing and growth in our own lives. Youth Participatory Action Research can be a liberatory pedagogy used to place youth as creators of knowledge and a space that in and of itself can be medicine. What initially began as a way to collect data became a healing mechanism, a way to process our experiences and rewrite our narratives. Given space to build community, explore their identity, reimagine school spaces, and support each other, youth can move from being recipients of service, to providers of peer-to-peer mental health wellness.

As transformative educators, we must ensure we have space for cis and trans girls and gender non-conforming, gender fluid students to assess, create and develop the change they want to see. We must create a dynamic movement where the focus is on inclusivity and solidarity as young people push to dismantle White supremacy, racialized capitalism and cis heteropatriarchy within the educational system.

These words from members of the research team, encapsulate the project, and the opportunity. They state “we are what we need ... Through tears, frustration and heartache you remember that you've grown from a struggle and being able to express your struggles to someone can impact the next person's life.”

Finally, I close with a quote from a research team member who reminds us of the power of Critical Post-Traumatic Growth. She states:

A struggle could inspire you. People often look at struggles as a bad thing because of what they went through but never look at it in a positive perspective. If it wasn't for that challenge you went through you wouldn't grow.

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Notes From The Field

It Is Well With My Soul: A Letter to My Nephew

By Linda Garrett*

The Black Panther Party (BPP or the Party)¹ was created to address the needs of oppressed people in marginalized communities. The organization was ahead of its time and was subjected to intense government repression. Media narratives about the Party would lead people to believe that they were violent thugs who sought to overthrow the government. The negative narrative is so prevalent, that a whole new generation of youth in marginalized communities will miss out on the truth about the work of the Party unless we begin to share the real story.

The following narrative takes the form of a letter to my nephew, Jay. While the idea of the letter comes from *My Dungeon Shook: A Letter to My Nephew*, written by James Baldwin (1963), this letter is different in that it is a vehicle to share the “Recipe for a Revolution” created by the Black Panther Party to a new generation. A generation who may not have heard of the Party, or who see the pictures of Party members and think the stories about them being miscreants who were out to destroy instead of build are true. It tells the story of two regular guys who wanted to make a difference in their community and created a movement that was embraced by marginalized

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¹ For more on the Black Panther Party, see here: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/black-panther-party-challenging-police-and-promoting-social-change>

communities worldwide. The hope is that the narrative will inspire appreciation for the past sacrifices made by Party members, encourage further research, and galvanize a new generation.

*The very time I thought I was lost,
My dungeon shook and my chains fell off.*
(Baldwin, 1998, pp. 291-295)

Dear Jay –

As I begin to write this, I wonder where to start. There are so many things I want to tell you. I remember just how excited my sister was when she found out you were on the way. We all were excited. It had been a while since we had a baby in the family. You were so full of life and excitement; your smile lit up every room you entered. You were born with this natural ability to draw people to you. You are definitely an Alpha male. I have watched you charm people with just your smile and infectious laugh.

It has not been lost to me that you being a handsome, 6-foot-tall, African-American man with this ability to garner attention in every venue you enter may not be a good thing. There are those who see you and don't see the young man who loves his Granny and PaPa or see the Mama's boy who likes his Mama to fix his plate at family dinners. They see someone who should be feared because of the color of his skin or someone who must be up to something. After all, how did you afford that car? Certainly your Dad didn't buy it for you (but he did). Who are all those guys you are walking with? They must be a gang of some kind—certainly not your friends from the basketball team or the football team from your college. In this era, when there are those who would have the world believe we are post-racial, racism abounds. It is almost worse than in the Jim Crow era, because then at least people were out in the open with their bigotry, and you could easily identify those who were working against you.

A group of young men of color is always seen as a gang; they are always up to some kind of mischief. They can't just be on their way to an event together to have a good time. No, they must be about to rob somebody or shoot somebody; much like they believe everybody who speaks Spanish must be here illegally. It is a great weight for you to carry. You do not get to be you; you have a constant battle against the opinions and actions of others. Young African-American youth are constantly being asked to prove that they are not – in a gang, a thief, a rapist, a killer. They

are always guilty and have to prove they are innocent. When they are being harassed by the police, if people pass by, they always think, “They must have done something, or the police would not be bothering them. Officer Jim in my neighborhood is a really nice guy.”

In 2020, communities of color are occupied. So, even though you are taught in school that you are free, and that like every other American, you can achieve anything you want provided you are willing to work for it, and that America is a level playing field for everyone; it’s all lies. You are constantly judged by the color of your skin more than the content of your character. When I worked at an office that was near the county welfare office, I overheard many conversations about all my children, my ‘baby-daddies,’ my welfare checks and my EBT card.² I never once heard anyone say, “I bet she has three college degrees,” or even consider the fact that I do not have children or baby daddies or a welfare check or an EBT card. I was just going to work. Not that needing public assistance is bad; the notion that all African Americans are on it is what is problematic.

America is complex but has the capacity to be great if only the truth was paramount. Too often, a comfortable lie is more palatable to people than an uncomfortable truth. I continue to believe that the keys to changing the world are in the hands of young people. They have this innate ability to believe in and grasp the possible without being weighed down by what others say is impossible. Often, the push back you receive from others is unexpected, especially the force they are willing to exert just to stop you from making any changes to the status quo. Your ability to excel is weighed down by those external people who seek to limit your progress. That is not what I want for you. Sometimes those forces appear to be invisible, but really it is a systemic thing that is constantly working in the background to ensure that things don’t really change too much. The poor need to stay poor. The rich need to stay rich. Those in power need to retain that power. The price for change has to be so high that people are afraid or at least extremely cautious about even suggesting making a change.

There are those roadblocks that come into your path. Those things that will hinder you and limit your progress. Those things that are designed to make you afraid. Be fearless. I know that seems like a simple refrain,

² An EBT card refers to an “Electronic Benefits Transfer” card given to those on public assistance in the United States.

when really, we know that it is a challenge. But even if you are scared, even if you don't know the outcomes—pass or fail—do it anyway.

I am reminded of Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. Do you know who they are? They are the founders of the Black Panther Party. They met in college. Bobby Seale was fresh out the military, and Huey Newton, who was a few years younger than Bobby, possessed an unmatched intellect. It was the mid 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement was raging in the US South, but the Bay Area was a little different. Bobby and Huey were living in Oakland. They wanted to work on issues of racism, police brutality, and other things that were plaguing communities of color. They grew frustrated with the groups who only wanted to talk about the issues, but never actually do anything. They had made a point of talking with people in their community, getting a consensus of what the major issues were, and making sure they knew what the real needs were.

I know you are wondering why I am telling you this, but Bobby and Huey are worth you knowing. The media's narrative about the Black Panther Party paints them as thugs and hoodlums with guns, who wanted to overthrow the government and kill all White³ people. This is not true. I feel like if I don't share this story with you, you won't know the truth. You will see the pictures of brothers with guns and think that that is all there was to the Party. I want you to dig deeper. They loved and served the people and deserve to have their legacy preserved. Also, if I tell you and you tell your friends and so on, the legacy continues.

2 Kings 7:3-4 The Message

³⁻⁴It happened that four lepers were sitting just outside the city gate. They said to one another, "What are we doing sitting here at death's door? If we

³ Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups for articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.

enter the famine-struck city, we'll die; if we stay, here we'll die. So, let's take our chances in the camp of Aram and throw ourselves on their mercy. If they receive us, we'll live, if they kill us we'll die. We've got nothing to lose."

Much like now, Huey and Bobby found themselves at a crossroads. They could let things continue as they were, or they could take action. If they did nothing, things would stay the same or get worse. If they did something, then there was a chance that things could get better for the oppressed people they wanted to serve. *They didn't have anything to lose.* You know I had to tie it back to the scripture.

The BPP started with the Ten Point Platform. It was composed of all the stuff that Seale and Newton learned from talking to the people in the community and also all the studying they had done on their own. Man, the Ten Point Platform was simple, direct, and amazing. Newton and Seale managed to find a way to list all the community's concerns in a very succinct way. After they finished with the ten points, they chose the Black Panther as their symbol, not because the panther was Black, but because they saw themselves as the Self-Defense Party and the nature of a panther is not to attack but to defend itself if it feels threatened.⁴

I believe that like Huey, you possess a natural leadership ability; you can reach the people and organize and make your community better. You may think that you are too young, but that is not true. Huey was in his early 20s when he founded the BPP. The first person to join the BPP was only 16 years old.⁵

As you look around, you can see that the police still occupy communities of color. People from outside our communities who have different relationships with the police pretend not to understand the plight of oppressed people in our communities. But they have driven through those occupied neighborhoods; they see, they understand, but they want to tell a different story. It is part of the oppressor's plan. I think part of our job is to wake them up, because this plan doesn't only oppress people of color, but it oppresses them as well. They think they are not oppressed, but they

⁴ The Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), also known as the Black Panther Party, was started by Stokely Carmichael and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. The LCFO was also known as the Black Panther Party and had the panther as a symbol. Newton and Seale did contact Carmichael to get permission to use the symbol.

⁵ Bobby Hutton was the first person to join the Party. He was only 16 years old. He had worked with Bobby Seale in a job training program.

are just oppressed in a different way. Have you ever listened to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "March on Ballot Boxes"⁶ speech? In it he outlines how poor White people in these United States have been hoodwinked into thinking that Whiteness in and of itself is worth something. So, even though they may also be oppressed, taken advantage of and impoverished, they believe they are better because at least they are not Black. This blindness to their true situation makes them campaign against their own self-interest.

Please take every chance to tell your own stories. Name your own situations. Don't allow yourself to live down to the labels of others, but to live up to the visions you have for your own life. Don't let media depictions limit you. You can accomplish whatever you choose, just choose. Don't limit yourself by the opinions of others who think that as a man of color, your only option is playing basketball or football or rapping, and never encourage you to step out on your own and build your own empire. There are those that think you have to always work for somebody else, but that is not true; you can do something on your own. Don't even let my over-protective spirit hold you back from spreading your wings to fly and excel.

I may always treat you like a baby, but I know you are a man. I worry about how you will be treated when you are out in the world. Will they know you are the sweet baby who held your great-grandmother's hand and spoke softly in her presence? Will they know you are the loving grandson that stood by your grandfather and hugged his shoulder as he stood by the casket grieving the loss of his older brother? Would they know that you are my sister's only child who snuggles up to her and gets his feet or shoulders rubbed after football practice? Would they recognize in that smile your ability to light up a room? Or would they see a media-created predator who is there to steal, rape and kill? My overprotective side would love to lock you in a lovely penthouse apartment where you could see the sun, smell fresh air, but not go outside and be threatened by the boogey men in the streets. You wouldn't be happy, but you would be safe. I know that isn't realistic. I know you have to go out in the world. I know the world needs

⁶ In the March on Ballot Boxes speech, Dr. King shares a story from the book *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* about the Populist Movement, which sought to bring poor White and Black people together in the South. And how the movement was stopped when it was made illegal for Blacks and Whites to work together as equals. In effect, the Southern aristocracy blocked the growing movement and manufactured a false hatred between the races, just to maintain power and control the people.

you. I wish that the things out there waiting to harm you didn't exist, but they do. I guess it is my charge to equip you to face those things.

You know, you really remind me of Huey Newton; y'all are similar. Like him, you are tall, handsome, people are drawn to you; you have the ability to be comfortable in any situation, absolutely fearless. You possess this ability to be loyal and protective of your friends. One of the things that I observed about you as an athlete, you have this fierce competitive side; not that you alone made all the shots in basketball or all the touchdowns in football. You could rally your teammates to push through and get the win; so even though you had superstar moves, you did not have a superstar attitude. I can totally picture you as a grassroots organizer. I can see you knocking on doors, charming the grannies or chatting with the fellas while walking through the neighborhood; getting them to all rally around an issue, finding out their thoughts and opinions, getting work done to make the community better.

Making the lives of oppressed people better was the goal of the Black Panther Party. The founders, Bobby and Huey, wanted to build an organization that empowered the people in communities to be able to help themselves. The motto of the Black Panther Party was "All Power to the People," regardless of color.⁷ Too often, the BPP has been portrayed as a group only interested in issues that were of interest to the Black community, but really, they saw the work as broader than that; they wanted to help all people who were being oppressed, regardless of color. But that happens when you don't have control of your own narrative or how your story is told.⁸

This coming together of oppressed people was not a positive thing in the eyes of the power structure. Because what will happen if all the oppressed people realize they have power and start to work together? What if they realize that they have more in common than they recognize? They truly have the power to change how things are done; if they all registered and voted in every election, local, state and federal, reminded the politicians who they really work for—change can really take place. You

⁷ At a lecture by Bobby Seale at the University of San Francisco on February 24, 2011, he made this point. They were interested in serving all people regardless of color.

⁸ Party members were required to take part in political education classes with a long-required reading list. They also had to participate in training and fulfill other requirements before they could carry guns.

know, you can take the lessons learned by the work of the Party and implement it today and it would slide right in; it's still very relevant.

I often think about how many times people perceived you as guilty or criminal, just because you are Black. They did not see you as the only child of my sister, whose presence in this world made her eyes twinkle. They did not see you as a great grandson, nephew, or cousin. They didn't see you as a young man who would help an old lady take her groceries to her car or carry them up the stairs for her. They looked at you and saw you as a threat, someone to fear; they locked their doors and clutched their wallets. They did not see a person who has never had to worry about what he would eat or where he would sleep. Much like members of the BPP were profiled as criminals who were plotting to overthrow the U.S. government, even though there was no proof of such activity.

The BPP really were a band of men and women that varied by age and came from different economic and educational backgrounds who wanted to work together to make things better for those who were struggling under a system that did not value them. They wanted to be a part of a movement that was making things better for people who were most often silenced and ignored. They were keenly aware of what the laws of the day were, and of what rights they had, and the power of building a political network. I think it was the thought of this political network that made them so scary to those in power. And while the BPP was careful to follow the law, those in power had no trouble breaking the law just to ensure that the status quo was not changed. They were labeled by J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI, as the "greatest threat to the internal security of the United States."⁹ They were a threat, not because they had guns, but because they had books. They were seeking to let the average everyday person know that they had rights and what those rights were; they made education a central part of their mission.

The Ten Point Program and Platform was something created by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. As a document, on the surface it would appear simple; but if you really read it, in it is a document that simply and

⁹ The work of the FBI and their COINTELPRO operation is well documented in the COINTELPRO papers that were released to the public and analyzed in the book, *War on The Panthers* (1980) by Huey Newton.

succinctly addresses the issues of most concern to members of communities of color. The 10 Point Platform was:

1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.
2. We want full employment for our people.
3. We want an end to the robbery by the Capitalists of our Black Community.
4. We want decent housing, fit for the shelter of human beings.
5. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches the true history and our role in the present-day society.
6. We want all Black men to be exempt from military service.
7. We want an immediate end to Police Brutality and Murder of Black people.
8. We want freedom for all Black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails.
9. We want all Black people when brought to trial to be tried by a jury of their peer group or people from Black communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States.
10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace. And as a major political objective, a United Nations supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the Black colony in which only Black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate, for the purpose of determining the will of Black people as to their national destiny.

I know the first question you have: “What is a plebiscite?” A plebiscite is the direct vote of the qualified voters of an electorate on an important public question. In this case, the call was for all Black people to be able to come together and decide on their national destiny.

I don’t want you to think that the BPP was a perfect organization. They had their challenges. They were young, and the work they were trying to complete was challenging—add to that, the U.S. government was working constantly to disrupt and destroy the work and infiltrate the organization. There are not many who can explain what the weight of the U.S. government coming down on you feels like, but the members of the BPP can. This constant harassment served as a barrier to the Party being able to develop a way to fully “on board” its ranks and ensure that all the activities of the chapters were in line with the vision of the Party.

Recipe for a Revolution

One of the greatest things the founders of the BPP left for generations after to follow is a “Recipe for a Revolution.” First, expand your idea of what a revolution is. It is not always a forcible overthrow of the government or social order; it doesn’t always require violence. But a revolution can be “activity or movement designed to effect fundamental changes in the socioeconomic situation.”

It’s important that you know this isn’t an exact recipe; this is like if Granny was making biscuits. She does not measure the flour and the shortening exactly; her experience in baking allows her to eyeball the amounts. Like that, this recipe gives you the necessary steps, but how long is spent on each step may vary.

The Recipe: preparation, connection, love the people, validation, serve the people, validation, and evolve. I know what you are thinking: “Why is validation listed twice?” It is there twice because it is important to validate whether or not the work is on track and is really serving the people.

The first step is Preparation because if you want to lead, you must first prepare yourself. Take the time to educate yourself about the issues facing your community, learn about the systems that are currently in place and how they work. Before you advocate for dismantling something, be sure you know how it really works.

The next step is Connection. The Party founders took time before the BPP was started to talk to the people in their community. To find out what the people thought the needs were and what they thought they needed. They got to know the people. They built relationships. The people felt they knew them and that they knew what they were about. Seems simple, but often organizations skip this part and come into communities and want to tell them what they ‘really’ need.

The next step is probably the most important - Love the People. Of course, I will direct you to the Bible’s definition of love – Love (Agape) is patient and kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love never ends (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). Love the people means *all* of the people. How can you serve them if you do not love them? The sacrifices made by BPP members were many; it was

made possible because they loved the people and wanted to make changes that would make their lives better. You have to love the people you serve.¹⁰

The next step was Validation. After Newton and Seale finished creating the Ten Point Program and Platform of the Black Panther Party, they typed it up and made copies. Then, they took the platform to the people to ensure that it was on track with what the people saw as their needs. They shared it; they talked about it, and the community let them know that they were on track. The validation piece is important because you have to make sure that what you think the people want is indeed what they want. The Ten Point Platform of the Black Panther Party articulated perfectly what the people felt they needed. Sure, there are lots of different things the people needed, but each of those needs could fall under the umbrella of one of the platform points.

The next step is to Serve the People. Their idea to serve was a way to equip the community with the necessary tools to obtain the power to change their lives. Oppression and occupation of communities of color was routine; the people in those communities were under constant attack and control. One of the goals of the BPP was to educate the people to prepare them for revolution and equip them with the skills to obtain power. Their love of the people led to their service of the people. This love of the people is not a romantic love, but a desire to serve the people in such a way as to make their lives better.

The next step is Validation. The second round of validation is needed to ensure that the work that is being done is actually serving the people as intended. It is an opportunity to ensure that the work is doing what it is intended to do. Don't skip this step! It will ensure that the work stays on track.

The last step is To Evolve. Be ready for change. The Party had a process of constant evaluation that was their way of ensuring that their mission continued to represent the people they were serving. Don't be afraid to veer from the original plan if the needs of the people are dictating the change. Change is a part of the process. Change keeps you relevant to the people.

¹⁰ The Community Survival programs are documented on this website of the BPP Research Project, part of the Martin Luther King Jr. Papers based at Stanford University. Its goal is to provide a source of information for those interested in researching the BPP. <https://web.stanford.edu/group/blackpanthers/programs.shtml>

While I do not believe that the 1966 version of the Party would work today in its entirety, I do believe their “recipe” could be used to build a new movement to address the current needs of oppressed communities in this country. The Party did not outline this “recipe” prior to starting their work; however, this is what they did and what makes their work still relevant today. You know I would be remiss if I failed to recommend books to read: *Seize the Time* by Bobby Seale and *Revolutionary Suicide* by Huey Newton. Read both, start your preparation, read the recipe.¹¹

The Black Panther Party was an all-volunteer organization. People did not join the Party to get rich, but to serve the people. Sure, there were those who sought the Party out because the sight of Black men with guns, standing up to those in power, was attractive. But the majority joined because they wanted to make their communities better. They wanted to be a part of a solution to those issues that faced oppressed communities. They felt a responsibility to the children that would come after them to make sure they did not have to face the same issues as generations before.

Can you imagine if the Party had been allowed to carry out their plans without interference? If they were around to be positive role models in the community? If they were able to build the programs they planned to serve the people and those programs had been allowed to thrive? If the people had truly been empowered by their work, instead being fed misinformation by the FBI and the police.¹² The FBI declared war on the Panthers; they did all they could think of to discredit and destroy the work the Party was doing.

I wish I could tell you that things have changed. That the world you would grow up in is very different from the one that propelled Huey and Bobby to even start the Black Panther Party. But I cannot tell you that because I will not lie to you. There is this predominant lie that permeates the American narrative—one that says if you work hard, pull yourself up by your bootstraps, take responsibility for your own actions, that everything

¹¹ Another good resource on the BPP is *Living for the City: Migration, Education and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* by Donna Murch (2010), University of North Carolina Press.

¹² The FBI would routinely feed misinformation to community members about what the Party was doing, including telling parents that the free breakfast program was going to poison their children, etc. For more information, see: <http://radicalteacher.library.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/radicalteacher/article/view/80>

will be OK, that you will be successful. This is not true. The Party wanted to take responsibility for their own communities and show the people their true power in this society. They were met with labels of invaders and criminals. They were met at every turn with forces that wanted to crush their movement.

The Party worked in their own communities, served the people in their own communities, passed out groceries, served breakfast to children, helped seniors to their appointments, helped families visit relatives in prison, opened medical clinics, gave away clothes and shoes, registered people to vote, had educational programs, and this was just the tip of the iceberg.¹³ How could this good work be seen as sinister by those outside of the communities the Party served? It is because they were Black. Racism has a longer history in the United States than the American flag. I would do you a disservice to tell you anything any different.

Everyday there will be somebody that will judge you by the color of your skin. It is a great responsibility that you will have to endure, that was also endured by your parents, your grandparents and their parents before them. I don't tell you this to discourage you but to let you know that in spite of this, the family was able to thrive. In spite of this, your great-great grandfather was able to become a school teacher after having being born a slave. This history makes you strong, you have to know that even with the odds against them, you come from a family that is filled with people who were able to overcome. Everywhere you turn, you will see people who attended college, you will see doctors, lawyers, nurses, and military personnel. You also know that one of the wealthiest people in the family did not attend college but instead had his own janitorial business. You can see people who can model for you how there is more than one way to be happy and successful, even if you were to choose not to finish college. Hard work is coded in your DNA.

Racism is the main reason that when the Panthers were targeted, the general public was not outraged.¹⁴ It is not the only reason they were targeted; a key reason why they were viewed as dangerous is because they

¹³ See *The Black Panther Party Service to the People Programs* by David Hilliard (2008).

¹⁴ See *War on the Panthers* by Huey Newton. The FBI under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover identified the Party as a threat and did all it could to shut down its operations. The FBI was particularly brutal on groups composed mainly of Black people, as noted in FBI documents.

questioned how power was distributed and demanded power for oppressed people. And when the government stomped all over the rights of Party members, those who should have been speaking up on their behalf, were silent because they too felt that Black men with guns were too dangerous.¹⁵ Local law enforcement, with the blessing and aid of the FBI, did all it could to eradicate the Black Panther Party.¹⁶ By the middle of the 1970s, they were able to neutralize large numbers of activist-focused Black men and women and remove them from communities. This chasm was soon filled with the growth of neighborhood gangs. With the powerful role models that the men and women of the Black Panther Party and other Black community groups virtually eradicated, and the influx of drugs into communities of color, gangs began to grow and become more violent. The positive voices in communities of color were being drowned out by the destruction of drugs and the violence of gangs.

I know you; you are wondering why I am writing this long letter to tell you about the Black Panther Party. After all, they started in the 60s but you were born in the 90s. Well, there is an old saying that if you don't know your history, you are destined to repeat it or even better, the African proverb: "Until lions have their historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter." It is time the lion had a voice in the discussion. I want you to know about a group of young men and women, who were your age and who set out against insurmountable odds to work to make life better for those in oppressed communities. Young people who worked hard and risked their lives and thought it was their duty to serve. Who despite evidence to the contrary believed that things could get better and that they could make a difference. I wanted to tell you about people who not only talked about it but work toward it. I wanted you to know that they had allies of every race and from every walk of life who worked with them and supported their vision.

As I sit here, writing this letter to you, I imagine what communities of color would be like had the Panther vision been allowed to flourish. If they had been able to get community control of the police, if they were able to improve educational opportunities in oppressed communities, if they

¹⁶ See *War on the Panthers* by Huey Newton. The FBI under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover identified the Party as a threat and did all it could to shut down its operations. The FBI was particularly brutal on groups composed mainly of Black people, as noted in FBI documents.

were able to stop the exploitation of poor people by systems that failed to protect them, if they were to change the visions of themselves as inferior that people in oppression often held. How different would things be? How would things have been different by the time you were born?

I imagine that things would have been better. I imagine that the schools would have been better, the job prospects would have been better, I imagine that the Party would have made it known in oppressed communities that there are more ways to prosper besides basketball, football, or being a rap star. I imagine that if they were able to continue, their work would have had a positive effect on 'him.' I imagine 'him' at a BPP tutoring camp as an elementary school child or being mentored by a Panther as a high school youth. Either way, 'he' would have been changed. 'He' would have known that there are other ways to prosper besides robbery, besides the dream of a rap career. See, 'he' would have known that 'he' was indeed responsible for his neighbor. 'He' would have had visions of 'his' own life that did not include taking the life of another. See, on that fateful September afternoon, 'he' would have been busy uplifting the community, so 'he' would not have been available to take you away from us.

“It Is Well with My Soul”

Losing someone you love is hard. I will not sugar coat it. I remember a lot of things about September 14. I was sick at work. I had to leave my desk and go outside and get some air. I subscribed to Amazon Prime and watched Kevin Hart's "Seriously Funny." And... I got the worst phone call of my life.

In the days after that phone call, I did not sleep much. I had to leave my house and go home to my parents. My family spent lots of hours together. We talked but nobody said it. I prayed constantly. I knew that I would not survive without serious help. And to those who don't know, the Holy Ghost is a source of serious help.

One night, I had a dream about you, Jay. You were wearing a white robe; you had your signature haircut, that familiar twinkle in your eye, and you were singing, "It Is Well with My Soul." As I watched you, you were saying: "*It is well, it is well, with my soul.*" You sang the chorus a few times. I woke up when you finished singing, and all I could think was "Jay don't know that song," but the Bible teaches us that the Lord will teach us a new song.

I watched a lot of Hallmark channel and TV Land in the aftermath. And so many mornings, I awoke to the “Golden Girls” (the TV would be on all night). So, one morning after I had the dream, an episode of the “Golden Girls” was on, and somebody was quoting the “It is Well with My Soul” lyrics. I noticed but did not think much of it. Then, after that it was an episode of “Parenthood,” and the music track they played was “It Is Well with My Soul.” After that, I stopped believing it was a coincidence.

So, on the evening of the “Quiet Hour” service, I am sitting in the chapel of the mortuary feeling especially lost. Still in shock and disbelief. I am sitting in the row behind my brother. There are quite a few people there. The basketball team from your college is there. All these strong guys, trying their best to hold it together, while they sat, quietly.

The chapel had instrumental music playing, an assortment of hymns. I sat there, not really knowing how I was going to survive. My mind was racing. Just then, “It Is Well with My Soul” began to play. When it clicked in my mind, all of a sudden, I began to cry uncontrollably. You know, in the old Negro Spirituals, there is one that mentions “weeping and a wailing.” I was wailing. I remember reaching for my brother, who never moved. My eyes were slammed shut, and people were patting me on the back saying, “Just let it out.” It seemed like I cried for hours. I was just catching my breath and I could hear you, Jay, in my ear laughing at me, and you said, “Man, Lin, you scared off the whole basketball team!” and you kept laughing. I peeled my eyes open, and sure enough, the rows where the basketball team had been sitting were now empty. I almost burst out laughing. Can you imagine if I had started to laugh? Oh boy.

In that moment, I knew the Lord had been trying to let me know something. Jay, you are alright. It is well with your soul. In that moment, which is the lowest I have ever felt in my life, to be able to even think about laughing. It lets me know that the “Holy Ghost” is really a comforter—just like the Bible says.

I know that I don’t have to worry about you anymore. I know that you are well. I know that it is left to me to work to make the world I imagine a reality.

Love you,
Auntie Linda

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Notes From the Field

(Un)Hidden Grief and Loss Inform the Movement for Black Lives

Dr. Aaminah Norris* & Babalwa Kwanele, LMFT**

Abstract

We are Black women and lifelong friends committed to the movement for Black lives because it impacts us, our families, and our communities. After

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** **Babalwa Kwanele** is a licensed mental health therapist (LMFT), with over 20 years of professional experience working with culturally diverse youth, children, and families in community mental health and school-based settings. Her work and research have a special focus on prevention and intervention, with the goal of improving academic outcomes and the social determinants of health. Ms. Kwanele holds a Master's of Science degree in counseling with a concentration in Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) and education. She has extensively studied the neurobiology of trauma and the effects of racism and poverty on communities, families, individuals, and complex systems since 1990. She is a well-seasoned professional trainer and consultant. babalwakwanele@gmail.com

the death of George Floyd, we began a purposeful and concerted effort to address the trauma of state-sanctioned murders, the Covid-19 pandemics, and the California wildfires on us and our community in our work. Our effort, grounded in sisterhood, is a quest for collective healing. During our search, we uncovered the complexity of grief over systemic racism and anti-Black hate. This essay is our effort to acknowledge, name, and frame complex grief and its impact on Black people, including ourselves. We detail an intertwined web of grief that has 11 components. We also share the initial upstream solutions we have uncovered in our efforts to collectively heal.

Babalwa Kwanele is a South African name that means someone who is blessed, has had enough and is ready to change things. My full name Aminah Muhammad Nomusa Norris is a mixture of Arabic, South African, and English. It means a praiseworthy and gracious woman you can believe in who hails to the north. Our sisterhood that began approximately 35 years ago connects us, our faith, families, and communities. It has led us to acknowledge the complexities of grief over racism and anti-Black hate and the importance of collective healing. As residents of the San Francisco Bay Area, we were sheltering in place when George Floyd was assassinated on May 25, 2020. Floyd, an African American man from Minneapolis, Minnesota, was suffocated to death as he repeatedly stated, "I can't breathe." During an interview on ABC News, Floyd's sister said, "We were told that a police officer had his knee kneeled into my brother's neck while he was handcuffed to the ground" (KABC, 2020). Floyd's utterance that he could not breathe harkens back to other Black victims of police violence including Eric Garner, who made the same statement before he died due to a police chokehold in 2014 (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015).

A week after George Floyd's assassination, Sister Aminah's four-year old grandson, Zachariah, asked his mother, her eldest daughter, Leilani, "we don't like the police right, Mommy?" Leilani tried to explain to her son that the police are there to protect them. He interrupted her as his voice quivered, "what will happen to me if the cops shoot me?" Moments after I (Aminah) learned of Zachariah's fears, my brother called to inform me that he and our cousins were tear gassed as they engaged in a peaceful protest in Oakland, California. At 7:15am on May 31, 2020, I sent a text message to Sister

Babalwa. It read, “Sis, it’s time. You and I need to write a joint statement. We need to address anti-Blackness.”

This essay is our statement. It includes excerpts from the conversation that we had on that last day of May 2020.¹ Our conversation launched Aaminah’s work with (Un)Hidden Voices, an educational consultancy with the mission of building empathy for and disrupting the invisibility of Black children, students, and families. When Sister Babalwa asked me (Aaminah) if I had a chance to grieve George Floyd’s death, I explained that in an article by Dayan (2015), he describes the terror that Black people experience over others’ nonchalance at our inability to breathe. The terror we suffer as a result of the nonchalance is exacerbated by Covid-19, a respiratory disease that limits its victims’ capacity to breathe. According to APM Research Labs, “The latest Covid-19 mortality rate for Black Americans is 2.3 times as high as the rate for Whites and Asians.” For us, the acknowledgment of our grief is a step toward collective healing because it results in clarity. We have come to recognize the manifestations of Black people’s grief over nonchalance, dehumanization, and anti-Black racism. Below is a poem that Aaminah wrote in an effort to explain the complexity of our grief.

If. Then. Grief.

*If we do things that other people take for granted
Then we could die
If we are in our own damn apartment with our doors closed
Then we can be shot and killed
If we watch television
Then we got to see our brother laid down like an animal
If you as a human being have resolved this
Then you cannot identify the evil
If you have learned that it is okay that Black folks can’t breathe
Then your humanity is gone
If you cannot tell the difference between Black and blue*

¹ A podcast episode of a conversation between Aaminah and Babalwa about “Becoming AntiRacist” can be accessed here: <https://anchor.fm/aaminah-norris/episodes/Episode-4-Becoming-AntiRacist-eglte8>

*Then you do not care about our breath
If Our grief is Angry
Then you call us defiant and kneel on our necks
If Our Grief is
Enraged
Then you tell us to regulate ourselves
If Our Grief shouts, "this is outrageous!"
Then you silently watch us at meetings
If you are a sponge soaking up all of our energy
Then you calmly say, "thank you for sharing."
If Our grief is
Numbness
Then you congratulate us, "You are such a strong Black woman. So
resilient."
If you disregard our votes
Then you see them as an endorsement of systemic racism
If Our grief is
Desperate
Then you ask us, "can you please center others?"
If you are asked to wear a mask
Then you complain, "Why are you always talking about Black people?"
If you carry guns instead
Then Our grief is Unapologetic*

Our contribution to this special issue on human rights education and Black liberation is a definition of the complex grief we as Black Americans experience as a result of anti-Black hate and racism including the impact of multigenerational trauma on our grief. We then suggest a means of collective healing through upstream solutions. In our efforts to support others' healing, we have come to recognize and acknowledge our own grief and the grief of our communities.

Complex Grief as an Interconnected Web

We now see grief for what it is; grief is complicated and complex. Sister Babalwa drew on the work of Degruy (2005), Lipscomb and Ashley (2018), and the World Health Organization (2014) to

create a framework for complex grief as an interconnected web with 11 subsets that impact one another and manifest without regard to chronology. The subsets and their explanations are below:

1. Systemic racism: A system that is designed with the sole purpose of maintaining power, control, and dominance over a race of people and their progress. This form of discrimination has erected laws that allows the White² dominant class unearned privileges and powers. Such benefits and advancements are exploited and hoarded from those that are oppressed. One clear example of systemic racism is in the tenure and promotion process in higher education because policies and procedures advantage White faculty and disadvantage Black faculty. Eighty percent of full professors are White. Only 2% of full professors are Black faculty (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020). In 2019, I (Aaminah) earned an early tenure and promotion to associate professor. I grieve the process because I saw the systematicity of racism meted out by my colleagues. I was forced to name and frame the anti-Blackness within the institution for my colleagues by quoting statistics and proving my worth to earn the tenure and promotion that I received. It was brutal.

2. Overt racism, oppression, fear of violence and death: Racism and oppression intertwined with the threat of loss of life due to state-sanctioned violence is a part of the daily experience in Black life. This daily burden causes a profound sense of sadness and loss that lays dormant in our minds as an ever-present reality. This is crystalized for us by the assassination of Breonna Taylor who was murdered while she slept. In an interview on

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MSNBC, Brittany Packnett Cunningham's (2020) analysis of the verdict clarifies the pain we experience by the fact that 99% of the time when our lives are taken by state-sanctioned terror, the police are found not guilty.

3. Family stress, loss, and disruption of coping strategies: Racism, trauma, discrimination, poverty, and restricted access to health and mental health care has had an impact on the quality of interfamilial relationships because the family system is extremely taxed and overwhelmed. These compounded factors, combined with a lack of support due to inequities, create family stress and challenges the family's ability to effectively cope with grief and loss. We have seen the racially disproportionate loss of life and health from Covid-19. According to the Centers for Disease Control (2020), 34% of all Covid-19 deaths were among Black people, a group that is only 12% of the total United States' population. Within this death count, there were many losses from the same family, further exacerbating the pain of loss.

4. Intergenerational stress and multigenerational transmission of historical trauma: Trauma is a physical and psychological distress response to an overwhelming and unbearable experience that is potentially life-threatening either personally witnessed and/or learned about. Such stress and adverse experiences are handed down from parent to child (Intergenerational) and from generation to generation (multigenerational) orally, experientially, and genetically. These distress responses can have a negative physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, neurological, and/or cognitive impact on the individual, resulting in reduced daily life functioning and abilities to cope with grief and loss. Further complicating grief, is the historical trauma of the United States' chattel slavery, which has created what Dr. Joy DeGruy calls Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome, which contributes to toxic stress. The intergenerational transmission of adversity and toxic stress is well documented in California Surgeon General Nadine Burke Harris' (2020) report.

5. Disregard and disruption of faith-based systems: The disregard of faith-based natural support systems from mental health treatment and education may have a negative impact on expected treatment and learning outcomes. Disruptions to the opportunity to worship or practice faith rituals denies access to an essential practice of Black cultural collective healing. One way that faith-based systems are disregarded is that they have been described as “non-essential” during the global pandemic. For many of us, our faith affords us with the capacity to persevere despite the impact of our grief and loss on our lives.

6. Dehumanization and marginalization of culture: Cultural appropriation that extracts humanity from Black culture; rebrands and exploits our culture and our bodies for corporate profit. Ominira Mars (2020) examines an open letter written by Jessica Krug, a White African American Studies professor who pretended to be a Black woman. Mars writes that Krug’s appropriation of Blackness is haunting because it provides a concrete example of how White people move through Black spaces taking on aesthetics that are pleasing and palatable to the White gaze.

7. Microaggressions and macroaggression: Living while Black connotes the endurance of stereotypes, racial profiles, insults cloaked in compliments, racism, and verbal and non-verbal messages that communicate rejection from mainstream society. Too often we shift the focus from the aggrieved person while the individual who inflicts harm is allowed to deflect responsibilities with claims that the aggressions were unintended. Either this or the person inflicting micro-aggressive or macro-aggressive behaviors denies that they caused any harm. Thus, we are forced to relive the trauma; detail the harm. This is grief inducing and retraumatizing.

8. The social determinants of health and mental health: World Health Organization (2014), describes a social determinant of good mental health as critical to the health and well-being of an individual. Risk factors such as

inequalities in economic, social, and physical environments have a profound impact on mental wellness. “Mental health disorders are a leading cause of disability in the United States. Lack of access to mental health care further reduces quality of life for millions of people [...]. African Americans continue to be hospitalized for mental health disorders at much higher rates than other racial/ethnic groups.” (City of Berkeley, 2020, pp. 80 & 83).

9. Black economic disempowerment: Black people in America have continually been placed back at the starting line of economic growth and development; this problem continues to be a reality. The suffering of Black economic disempowerment is substantial. Disempowerment happens as a result of “institutional practices like redlining, the undervaluation of homes in majority-Black neighborhoods and predatory lending continue to exacerbate racial wealth disparities. The failure to fully address these inequities further sustains the wealth gap from generation to generation” (Joint Economic Committee Democrats, 2020).

10. Absence of opportunities to heal and grieve: DeGruy (2005) explains the absence of opportunities to heal from the pains of enslavement. Such pains, coupled with ongoing life stressors, makes grief an almost unrecognizable element in daily life, thereby limiting the opportunity to focus on healing. When Bablawa and I first began addressing anti-Blackness, it was through the lens of complex trauma. We did not realize the complexity and enormity of our grief because it was hidden from us. Therefore, we could not begin the healing process.

11. Environmental disasters natural and man-made: Black people, among other people of color, have been America’s canary in the coal mine. The disparate rates of health and mental health problems and economic collapse resulting in disasters points to systemic environmental injustice. Covid-19 is a manifestation of the ways that health disparities have caused disproportionate death in Black families and communities. Our deaths have been exacerbated by the ineptitude on the federal level. Our Blackness is a pre-existing condition.

Towards Upstream Solutions

Once on a hike near a river in Yosemite National Park, Babalwa photographed a sign that read, “victims swept downstream seldom survive.” She shared with me and others in our community that we need for our solutions to be upstream so that we can survive the events that seek to snatch our breath and end our lives. We began to search for upstream solutions to address the complex trauma we experience from the Covid-19 pandemic, fires in California (Hutchinson, 2020), anti-Black violence, and systemic racism. It was through ongoing discussion, reflection, writing, and revisiting the site of our grief that it became unhidden for us. We came to a collective realization that we were indeed grieving.

We uncovered that the trauma was indeed encapsulated in a web of complex grief. The first upstream solution we developed was the process of naming and framing the grief we experience. Aminah describes this as “healing out loud” and Babalwa names the uncanny ability to cope by “forecasting danger” that may result in a grief-producing situation. To name and frame our own grief allows others to heal with us because they come to recognize their own grief. For example, after Babalwa and I discussed our grief over George Floyd’s death on the (Un)Hidden Voices podcast, listeners shared with me that it was cathartic for them. As we share our grief, others grieve with us. Thus, we commit to acknowledging our grief as we continue to work in the movement for Black lives. Naming grief is a contribution to the movement because it is a humanizing practice. It affords us with the opportunity to acknowledge the pain we experience by the loss of life and anti-Blackness. It is only by acknowledgement of our grief that we can process and heal. Lastly, we invite you to join forces in our effort to make it upstream and heal out loud because the time for collective healing is now. We have begun our swim upstream and our plan is to continue to seek sustainable solutions.

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Notes From The Field

House/Full of Blackwomen: The Insistence Movement

Brandie Bowen^{*}, Ellen Sebastian Chang^{**}, and Yvette Aldama^{***}

What one does realize is that when you try to stand up and look the world in the face as if you had a right to be here, you have attacked the entire power structure of the western world. (James Baldwin, 1969)

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We write this underneath a fiery sky in the Bay Area where Black people are looking the world in the face with an unyielding certainty that we have a human right to be here. Nevertheless, our certainty goes beyond the simple right to *be* and exist and stretches into the right to live deeply joyful, abundant, and unshackled lives. While the fight for Black lives stretches across the globe, we focus specifically on local attacks meant to suppress the existence of Black women in Oakland, California and how we rise up through powerful insistence. The subjugation of Black women in this localized context is a direct reflection of a widespread effort to uproot Black communities from their guaranteed human rights. As Eleanor Roosevelt, the first Chairperson in the Commission on Human Rights, once said “Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home” (Roosevelt, 1958 as cited in Horton, 2007).

While we are experiencing the widespread mathematics of apocalyptic change, we focus in on our small place—the city of Oakland in the State of California. Presently in California, there are 600,000 cases of Covid-19, nearly 12,000 deaths, and in the last 72 hours a historic amount of nearly 11,000 lightning strikes have caused about 367 fires. People are also standing on the front lines of protests and other projects for systemic change calling for the city to disinvest from a police force that murdered Oscar Grant, Raheim Brown, and many others in Oakland. Furthermore, Black women and girls are disproportionately affected as they manage living in the midst of a global pandemic while also facing rapid gentrification, high rates of institutional and physical violence against Black queer women and gender non-conforming people, and absurd criminalization of everyday Black life. This is the world that Black women are boldly looking in the face, and, undoubtedly, the world is looking back.

The world James Baldwin (1969) refers to above was not the Earth,

Land, or community that nurtures us. Baldwin was talking about a White¹, colonial gaze that zooms into our “small places, close to home” in order to survey our joy and resilience and then attack our right to imaginative, self-determined life. [House/Full of Blackwomen](#) (“House/Full”), conceived by Amara Tabor Smith and co-director Ellen Sebastian Chang, is a site-specific ritual performance project that strikes back by building a bridge that links the promises of universal human rights to direct realities of Black people. They produce transformative art that addresses issues of displacement, well-being, and sex trafficking of Black women and girls in Oakland. Set in various public sites throughout Oakland over a five-year period, this community-engaged project is performed as a series of “Episodes” that are driven by the core question, “How can we, as Black women and girls find space to breathe, and be well within a stable home?”

We Insist

Resistance is always about being in response or reaction to something. We are in the resistance movement, but what if we become the insistence movement? We insist on our humanity. We insist upon housing, we insist upon respect. Because when you look up the word ‘insist’ in the dictionary, its root meaning is perseverance. It’s more of a demand. And it’s an actualization as such.

House/Full is all about the insistence movement. We insist on the dignity of our life. And you can’t take that away from us. If my circumstances which are interconnected to this racist capitalist

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system forced me on the streets, I understand that my value as a human being is not diminished by my circumstances. I still exist as a full human being who insists on my human rights. (Ellen Sebastian Chang, 2020).

House/Full of Blackwomen is a revolutionary group that asserts their right to a stable, vibrant life and cites the guarantees of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as a means to changing the material conditions of Oakland's Black community. They focus specifically on UDHR articles that affirm their right to "a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of one's self and of one's family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security" (Article 25). They also cite their right to rest and leisure (Article 24) and the protection guaranteed to them that "no one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms" (Article 4). House/Full of Blackwomen transforms the promises of these articles into [active art](#) that educates and heals the community while dismantling oppressive power structures.

This powerful group of Black women assert that their role as lead artists is to understand their community's needs in order to alchemize and distill them into public performance, as well as ritualize them into private actions of healthy change. House/Full of Blackwomen offers financial stipends, meals, and healing circles: This is "shadow work," quiet work, work that happens over time and space and in respectful service to the (un)recognized creative service and brilliance of countless unnamed Black women and girls who inhabit and fuel our global imaginations. One powerful episode, titled "[Black Womxn Dreaming](#)," portrays Black women ritualistically resting and dreaming in interactive, magical installations.

Capitalism has historically overworked Black women to the point in which they suffer disproportionately from sleep related illnesses and are denied health and rest at its full capacity. Angela Davis' "Reflections On The Black Women's Role in the Community of Slaves" describes the violence of laboring excruciatingly long hour days under the thumb of brutal overseers and slave patrols. She also points out that Black women had to perform a double duty because they played a central role in the community of

enslaved people as well. After hard days in the field or the master's house, a Black woman was expected to continue working in her slave quarters by performing domestic labor (Davis, 1972, p. 85). Her body was treated as a machine made to labor and birth more labor power for the economic interests of the slave owner. Davis (1972) also notes that because Black women were pushed into being “the center of domestic life...and thus as an important source of survival, the Black woman could play a pivotal role in nurturing the thrust towards freedom” (p. 11). Black women have been so essential in their communities within these caretaking roles and beyond them. Their rebellion, artistry, and leadership have historically been a measurement of the Black community's endurance and fortitude within movements toward fully realized emancipation. Furthermore, we must also be careful not to confine Black women into anti-Black and patriarchal tropes that force them into monolithic servant and lone saviour roles. This would only reproduce the imbalance of labor, power, and suffering House/Full is fighting against.

House/Full of Blackwomen is grounded in ancestral knowledge as they break these toxic, capitalist cycles that have bled into the everyday lives of 21st century Black women and tried to rob them of their right to rest and leisure. This beautiful episode is one of many that subverts hegemonic goals to isolate Black women from their joy and health and provides them space to embody the liberation they are manifesting for themselves and their lineages.



Photo entitled “Reparations Vaudeville”, provided by House/full of Blackwomen

This work operates spiritually, physically, and politically as it employs what Audre Lorde (1978) would call the “use of the erotic,” (p. 53) whereas the erotic is an internal and collective sense of reclaimed joy and empowered creative energy that generates freedom. It is not based on neoliberal ideologies that goodness and satisfaction are grounded in profit and labor. Revolutionary art like House/full’s rituals and installations have the power to shift this dynamic and halt the exploitation of Black women. Recognizing Lorde’s power of the erotic within our lives can offer us:

the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama. For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society. (Lorde, 1978, p. 59)

We plant seeds of change in the Oakland community, looking the world in its face like we have the right to live a holistic life. We insist. Consequently, as Lorde and Baldwin predicted, House/Full’s bold insistence on life threatens a Western power structure that is contingent on the repression of Black women, especially.

Lavender Honey Ice Cream: The Flavor of Insistence

In 2018, Yvette a member of House/Full (who can be seen in [this episode](#)) was fingerprinted and booked for “selling” small batch homemade ice cream. She served this organic ice cream as a treat during the twelfth Episode as an offering to “sweeten” the path for their audience. The House/Full program was used as evidence for her “wrongdoing.” Undercover officers came to her home under the pretense of buying ice cream. The report detailing elements of her life (the skin color of her husband, the Orisha altar in her home, etc.) all listed for the unlawful making of ice cream, leading to court hearings and yearlong probation.

These White supremacist laws serve as reminders that joy and sweetness facilitated by a Black woman is sign of humanity being fully realized—and that is a danger to the status-quo. The state takes intentional measures to quell the revolutions of Black women and then hides its hands,

calling Black women guilty, crazy, and subhuman. There are deep-seated contradictions between what the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees and what is real to Black women. K.W. Yang (2015) illuminates this contradiction as he reminds us that “the rights to work, leisure, adequate living conditions, and education...were not unmet rights but rights actively destroyed by the state” (p. 229).

Here, Yvette recounts her experience:

Briefly and for a minute, my spirit left my body, and the crocodile tears that fell, stained the Summons I had carried in and had laid on the table, I felt that. I say... “Ice Cream?” she sits in silence as I try to gather myself, and repeats it again, “Yes. Ice Cream.” She then explains to me that two undercover officers had come into my home to purchase ice cream and then proceeds to read me all thirteen of the charges and assures me she will fight this while she is still trying to fix this moment by not slowing me down. I am numb. Someone came into my home to harm me and I welcomed them in and I didn’t know? At this time, my mind is racing and scanning the faces of every person who walked through my door wondering who it was? I had only reached out to people that I knew and that were friends of friends. She then tells me that a complaint had come from someone who attended a performance that I had participated in where ice cream was served as part of the performance; the agents had followed my Facebook page and made contact.

I desperately try to explain to her all the reasons why I made small batches of ice cream, it was **because it brought me joy, because it saved me, because it helped me with the grief and recent loss of my father and because I was good at it** and just like that, I realized, the more I knew the reasons why, the more I became angry. I rarely broke even ...but what I did get was joy. She let me just cry. She didn’t rush it; she understood that I, a Black woman with no criminal record, was just dragged into the criminal justice system, and had I been a White or an Asian woman, this would have never gotten this far and would have likely been handled administratively.

The fact that Alameda County sent undercover agents to my home is a betrayal of trust and resources to every resident of Oakland and the State

of California. What could and should have been handled administratively, was instead handled by spending thousands and thousands of dollars and resources, spread across local and state agencies, laboratories, and departments to prosecute me for ice cream. It was ice cream, not crack; why the force? Why did they NOT directly send me a cease and desist letter? They knew how to contact me.

My home, where I laid my head down had become a crime scene, and I didn't even know it.

On May 30, 2018, I was required to turn myself into Santa Rita Jail for fingerprinting and booking. The Booking Officer had no record of me in the system, nor how to book me, despite the paperwork that I presented. He, himself a guy with lines on his face that looks like he has seen it all, was slightly disgusted after he spent 20 minutes trying to understand how to “charge” me. I was told to wait two hours in the lobby for “booking hours”. When the two hours passed, I was led into the jail by two young sheriffs who stayed in character for fingerprints and mugshots and released two hours later. I walked out dazed; I was met by my friend Amber who came to meet me as support, who looked me lovingly in the eyes and just let me just be broken. I remember walking out thinking...***Wait. I was just assaulted by the criminal justice system, who do I call?***

Matthew Bettramo, an overzealous District Attorney, who stands no more than 5'4 in shoes, was the prosecuting DA. He had built a case and threw the whole force of the law at me involving Alameda County's Environmental Health, The California Department of Food and Agriculture, The State of California Milk Advisory Board, and a few testing labs.

On June 24, 2018, exhausted, in fear and broken, I had agreed to a “Deferred Prosecution” ... essentially probation, in exchange for “one year of not getting in trouble.” Two months later, on August 18, 2018, the Senate passed Assembly Bill 626 – and one month later on September 18, 2018, Assembly Bill 626 the Homemade Food Operations Act (AB 626) was signed into law by then-Governor Jerry Brown. The legislation allows independent cooks to start small cooking operations from their home kitchens. And why was this not considered in my defense?

Ellen and Amber supported me through this process and in court.

They had researched resources, held my tears and shame, and got angry too. I sat amongst people who were before the judge for a lot of reasons, probation violations, drunk driving charges, domestic violence charges. We watched a Black woman who was a new mother breastfeeding, standing before the judge, and a room full of White men as she petitioned the judge “I am a breastfeeding mother.” She was handcuffed and sent to jail for a minor offense.

“I just want to be restored” -Yvette

Yvette’s experience is common amongst Black women because we are policed for seeking joy and healing while creating change in our community. House/Full of Blackwomen provides meals, healing spaces, and support in Oakland similar to the work of the Black Panthers, a political organization that fought against the oppression of Black people and offered direct service to communities across the nation including The Free Breakfast Program and the People’s Medical Clinic (Marobia, 2016). Fred Hampton, Chairman of the Chicago chapter, was also persecuted for “ice cream” charges. He was falsely accused of robbing an ice cream truck for \$71 and was sentenced to serve two to five years in the Menard Penitentiary (Palmer, 2009). Certainly, these deliberate attacks have nothing to do with ice cream and everything to do with an oppressive State’s historic and futuristic strategy to police the humanity of Black people as a means to sustain their false social position as inferior subjects for profit and subjugation.

The Insistence Movement is important to House/Full because insistence regenerates a tangible connection between humanity and what it holds as sacred: health, nature, having a stable home, making ice cream, community, ancestry, art, and much more. When we truly bear witness to the dance that happens between power and humanity, we realize that our insistence lifts the veil and pivots power in our favor enabling us to set the terms and the foundation for radical change. Over time, the corrupt system that Baldwin (1969) refers to loses power as it tumbles over itself responding, and therefore yielding, to the direction of unshackled Black









improvisation until it can no longer exist comfortably within the layers of change we shape.

House/Full of Blackwomen rises up in its full expression of dignity and humanity insisting and conjuring a bridge that leads Black women to their inherent right to beautiful, restored, joyful life. Their work is a portal to the world as it should be—a world where the colonial White gaze is not the gatekeeper to basic necessities like housing and safety. Instead, this world honors human rights as a living guide to our collective liberation.

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Appendix

Performance Pieces	
 <p>Referenced on p. 2</p>	<p>Watch at:</p>  <p>SCAN ME</p>
 <p>Referenced on p. 4</p>	<p>Watch at:</p>  <p>SCAN ME</p>
 <p>Referenced on p. 4</p>	<p>Watch at:</p>  <p>SCAN ME</p>
 <p>Referenced on p. 6</p>	<p>Watch at:</p>  <p>SCAN ME</p>

Film Credit: Alexa Burrell

Poem: original work, Vanessa L. German “I got arrested for selling ice cream”

Notes From the Field

A School of Education Curricular Response to Anti-Blackness

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Abstract

In this article, the authors share the inspiration for and development of a new concentration in a doctoral program at the University of San Francisco. The concentration, Racial Justice and Education, is grounded in four pillars of knowledge, love, solidarity and justice. The concentration allows doctoral

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students to study critical race theory and critical Whiteness¹ studies. In addition, students take two ethnic studies courses that focus on the educational experiences of different racial and ethnic groups, as well as relational histories and shared solidarities across groups. During multiple pandemics that disparately harm Black communities (including state-sanctioned violence against Black communities and health and environmental pandemics), the launch of this new concentration is timely.

Keywords: anti-Black racism, doctoral programs, higher education, race theory, racial justice

We are deeply grateful for this invitation to write, in this moment, about the efforts at the University of San Francisco (USF) School of Education to develop a doctoral concentration in Racial Justice and Education. Though the development of this concentration preceded the present political moment, the concentration is rooted in a recognition that anti-Black racism is enduring and, in fact, one of the foundational structures of White supremacy. The Racial Justice and Education concentration acknowledges that the violation of the human rights of Black people is historical, ongoing, entrenched, and everyday. It is, as critical race theorists note, endemic in the US. The Racial Justice and Education concentration at USF is an expression of the School of Education's broader commitment to public scholarship and praxis to combat anti-Black racism and the violation of human rights. Yes, in this moment, the subjection of Black people to state violence is made more

¹ *Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups for articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.*

visible (and, all the more appalling when a White supremacist president actively encourages vigilante killings of Black people). And, this moment is a continuation of a longer and ongoing disregard for the wellness and lives of Black people and Black communities.

In this article, we provide both an overview of the Racial Justice and Education (RJE) concentration as well as our process of creating it. In line with both the principles of Human Rights Education and Black Lives Matter, we write this article with an acknowledgement that both the outcome and the process matter. That is, what we choose to do in our work and how we go about that work both matter to the world that we hope to create. It was equally important to us to create a concentration that names race and racism as worthy foci of study as it was to create it in a way that “embod[ied] and practice[d] justice, liberation, and peace in our engagements with one another” (Cullors, 2020, n.p.).

We first provide context to the development of this concentration. RJE emerged in a department that had previously established a program in Human Rights Education (HRE), as well as a sequence of Ethnic Studies courses and foundational courses in Critical Race Theory and Critical Whiteness Studies. Thus, the department was ideally situated to create a concentration in Racial Justice and Education. Next, we share the process for the development of the RJE concentration. This process involved the use of several protocols to ensure equitable voice among department members, the soliciting of feedback from students, and researching programs in other schools of education to ensure that we were not duplicating efforts. It is our belief that our work should not compete for students, but rather work in concert with colleagues’ efforts across universities. We also share the details of the RJE concentration with hopes of inviting a dialogue with other schools of education who have similarly decided to provide opportunities for students to engage in dialogues about race, racism, and racial justice. What can we learn from each other, what can we offer to each other, and how can we support each other in this work? And, finally, we discuss our vision for ways to grow the program in exciting new directions.

Context

The seeds of the Racial Justice and Education concentration were planted many decades ago by the (predominantly) Women of Color faculty who founded the department which houses the RJE concentration—the International and Multicultural Education (IME) department. First established in 1975, IME was centered on Freirean thought and praxis. Several of the founding faculty were either colleagues or students of Paulo Freire who wanted to create a program grounded in critical pedagogy at USF. The goal of the program was to create access to empowering graduate studies for those historically marginalized and excluded from institutions of higher education. For over 45 years, the work of the IME department has been rooted in this tradition, focused on the important work of understanding and dismantling social/racial inequity and injustice in both local and global contexts. Our goal has always been, and continues to be, to prepare graduate students who are equipped with both a language of critique and a language of possibility and imagination—those who see the roles of public scholar, advocate, and practitioner working to advance educational and racial justice as critical.

The department, at its founding and in its present iteration, has remained committed to creating counter-hegemonic academic spaces rooted in critical pedagogy. Yet, IME has also changed over the years in important ways from its initial Freirean focus of “reading the word and the world” to a more explicit focus on language and culture, human rights, and racial justice within an internationalist tradition. For example, in 2008, IME introduced a Human Rights Education concentration to our existing graduate programs. This was followed by a stand-alone Master’s degree program in 2013, the first of its kind in the United States. Both the Human Rights Education doctoral concentration and the Master’s program offer students a rigorous understanding of the “promise” of rights guarantees, while focusing on the often large gaps between these rights and material everyday realities. This addition to IME follows a long history of Freirean praxis that centers the transformative power of Human Rights Education, with an explicit focus on individual and collective agency. It allowed us to

name an important part of the larger work of our department, namely a focus on human rights and collective agency in local, national, and international contexts. Such changes reflect our desire to remain responsive and relevant to the specific socio-political context of each moment.

One practical and theoretical commitment of IME has been to work to disrupt binaries that position local concerns in one arena and international concerns in another, or rather that situate social and racial justice as localized concerns and human rights as “international,” above and outside of the United States. In adding the Human Rights Education framework to IME, we found an opportunity to explore and unpack the ways that HRE and racial justice educational models are positioned in relationship to each other, reminding us that these fields are not separate but rather inform each other. The two are enriched when we see them as overlapping models of educational praxis we so desperately need. HRE then became a powerful tool in furthering our work of “advancing justice through education” while linking local struggles with global social justice and anti-racism movements.

By adding the HRE doctoral concentration and Master’s degree to IME, the department was able to grow in important ways, including the hiring of new faculty and recruitment of students from various parts of the country and the world. Yet, it also made clear that there was another fundamental part of our collective work that was yet to be named. In the following sections, we share the process by which we developed a concentration on Racial Justice and Education (RJE). This new concentration not only makes explicit links to HRE but also allows us to continue to explore both how schooling has been a site for continued racialization and racism and also how critical forms of education can challenge racial injustice in educational institutions and beyond. Formally naming this new concentration allows us to draw upon IME’s long history of racial justice work as well as center the important task of racial justice and education in our current political moment. The work of racial justice—particularly in this time of national uprisings for Black lives and the inequalities exposed by Covid-19—is also the study of power, intersectional solidarities, and imagining and building towards new futures. It is our hope

that the RJE concentration will offer students valuable tools to help them more deeply integrate racial justice into their own teaching, research, work, and lives.

Development of the Racial Justice and Education Concentration

We began this process by closely examining our existing departmental course offerings along with the scholarly interests and work of our faculty and students. It felt important to acknowledge the ways that our scholarly community already centered race theory and its applications in coursework, research, and activism while also identifying the shortcomings in our department. We examined our courses, curricula, faculty areas of expertise and interest, as well as student interests. We found that, in part, we already had many of the necessary ingredients for this concentration, but had not done the work of naming and framing how disparate parts of our curriculum held together as a concentration. We had not articulated goals for a trajectory through a series of courses and experiences that focused on racial justice.

One important aspect of this process was to survey our current students, many of whom had expressed a desire for a concentration related to race and education, in order to gather their thoughts and feedback on what was lacking in their study of race. The survey showed that students expressed overall excitement for a concentration in race and education. Many clearly stated that the concentration should center anti-Blackness and distinguish between anti-Blackness and racism (the two are intertwined, but different phenomena). Surveys also indicated that coursework should include a study of the couplings of anti-Blackness, settler colonialism, and White supremacy as lenses of analyses, but de-center White privilege and the study of White people. Students did not want Whiteness to be inadvertently further highlighted in the study of power and race.

We also did a survey of other local and national schools of education, conducting a textual analysis of descriptions of their programs in race and education. We wanted to both understand how schools of education were thinking about race and racism in this moment and to consider what we

might add to this unstated dialogue among programs. It was important to us that we added to this dialogue without duplicating the contents of the conversation. This work should be a collective effort toward racial justice, not a competition for students in what neoliberal articulations have termed a ‘market.’

With this data collected, we turned to developing the Racial Justice and Education concentration through a series of subcommittee meetings. This subcommittee first identified desired program-level goals that were the expression of our best vision for racial justice in education. We framed these goals, or outcomes, by utilizing the four main pillars of knowledge, love, justice, and solidarity. One learning outcome of this concentration is grounded in the concept of knowledge, where students both gain new knowledge and also engage in knowledge production based on their own lived realities and experiences. In RJE, students will gain a fluency and familiarity with diverse race theories that define race and racism and that explain race-based injustice in the US and globally. We want students to graduate with a theoretical and practical understanding of the social construction of race and racial groups, anti-Blackness, White supremacy, power and racial oppression. With this fluency and familiarity, it is our hope that students will then be able to develop their own racial theoretical frameworks that provide a lens through which they see, understand, and analyze educational institutions.

Another learning outcome is for students to develop the ability to lovingly engage others in dialogue about race, racism, and racial justice. Using a pedagogy aligned with intergroup dialogue (Nagda & Maxwell, 2011) and social justice education (Adams, et. al, 2016), we practice, for example, multipartiality to generate a “productive and healthy environment for dialogue”—one that “challenges the master narrative, supports the target narrative, and invites the agent group’s experiences to be a participatory element...” (Maxwell et al., 2011, p. 50). We also use norms chosen to encourage expansive (Aguilar, 2018), active, and resonant listening among students.

The third learning outcome is for students to hold not only a theoretical understanding of anti-Blackness, settler colonialism, and White

supremacy as rooted structures and their implications for everyday life, but also for them to have a practical understanding of these structures and to take reflective action against racial oppression to create racially just spaces for youth. This goal reminds us that while theory saves lives (hooks, 1994), reflective anti-racist action as praxis is critically important to changing the material injustices that act as co-morbidities in communities of color.

Our fourth and final learning outcome is for students to be able to analyze, compare, and contrast the educational experiences of different communities of color through a lens of shared solidarity and relational histories. Students gain an understanding of the ways that racial oppression plays a role in the experiences of students in schools and the inequitable distribution of resources and opportunity. In addition, while students gain a theoretical and historical understanding of the ways that race and racism are rooted into the fibers of our society, and inform policy, law and everyday lives, we also explore the many ways that communities come together to build power. To that end, we explore the many brilliant examples of movement building that reach across borders and nation states, and that struggle towards our collective liberation.

An Overview of the Racial Justice and Education Concentration

Launched in Fall 2020 and drawing on the department's rich legacy of building new possible futures, the Racial Justice and Education concentration is framed by these learning outcomes which we articulate to students as the pillars of the concentration: knowledge, love, solidarity, and justice. As noted above, students in the concentration examine issues of power, resistance, refusal, and solidarity with respect to racism and its intersections with other structures of oppression. The concentration includes two foundation courses that center race theory and the history of racism in education. Combined, these courses establish a deep knowledge base of racial theories, problematize race and racism in education, and look toward justice and change.

In the first foundation course, students develop their racial theoretical frameworks drawing from the work of scholars such as Omi and

Winant (2015), Tatum (2017), and critical race theorists in legal and educational studies. They also study epistemological and methodological considerations in the study of race in the field of education. The subsequent foundation course offers a critical engagement and critique of White supremacy, anti-Blackness and settler colonialism. In the study of Whiteness, we contrast notions of White privilege with White supremacy and discuss origins of Whiteness as a structural reality and concept with material impacts. We consider anti-Black racism and settler colonialism while also revealing the ways that, taken together, ultimately dehumanizes us and renders all of us un-whole. Finally, this course also pays specific attention to anti-racist movement building and directs our imaginations toward collective liberation.

Once students complete the foundational year of study, they then have the option to choose two of four Ethnic Studies courses. Each Ethnic Studies course focuses not only on the racialized and educational experiences of one identified racial group but also pays specific attention to shared solidarities and relational histories between and among groups, as well as intersectional coalition building. Below is a listing of the courses in the concentration:

Foundation Course A: Critical Race Theory and Praxis
(semester-long)

Foundation Course B: Whiteness, Power and Privilege
(semester-long)²

Ethnic Studies Electives: These courses focus on the racial and educational experiences of youth from one identified racial or ethnic group. All courses include an overview of the field of Ethnic Studies they experience differential racialization against other groups, relational histories and solidarities across groups and theories, epistemologies and methodologies specific to that scholarly community. Students select two from the following:

² We are in the midst of ongoing discussions about changing the titles of these courses to better reflect the content.

- **Ethnic Studies with a Focus on: Latinx Education**
- **Ethnic Studies with a Focus on: Asian American Education**
- **Ethnic Studies with a Focus on: African American Education**
- **Ethnic Studies with a Focus on: Indigenous Education**

Looking Forward

As we continue to dream and build this concentration, we now look toward how to prepare our students to take anti-racist action in educational spaces. Two students in the concentration, for example, dreamed up an online school called *Making Us Matter* this past spring semester (see also Hamilton & Jenkins in this special issue). During discussions in the Whiteness, Privilege and Power course, they realized that in this space of remote instruction due to Covid-19 and in this moment of public awareness about anti-Black racism, a remote school that focused on a celebration of Black lives and the structures that oppress Black people is particularly important. They launched a remote school with Black faculty and a curriculum that is cutting-edge, asking critical questions of students about race, racism, and anti-racism.

We plan to prepare our students to contribute to community learning about race, racism and racial justice, as well. Our department offers continuing education courses to K-12 educators and parents who want to learn how to talk about race and take inspired anti-racist action in their schools. These continuing education courses generate funding for our concentration. With these funds, we offer small grants to students in the RJE concentration to pursue collaborative anti-racist actions in partnerships with schools and community organizations. Our hope for the upcoming year is to create additional coursework to train our students to teach these continuing education courses, thus building our students' racial literacy pedagogical skills.

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Notes From The Field

Making Us Matter & the Work Of Spirit Revival

By Eghosa Obaizamomwan-Hamilton* and T. Gertrude Jenkins**

This Is The Problem

Last year I (Eghosa) received an email from my principal: *“I wanted to chat with you about ideas for Black History Month in February and how I may work with members of our staff and students to create a meaningful message.”* These are the types of emails that produce the Black teacher’s proverbial side-eye. Black History is but a micro-moment of celebration across this country but on school campuses it inevitably becomes a moment that ironically illuminates anti-Blackness. It is one of

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** **T. Gertrude Jenkins** is a 14-year educator, specializing in grades 9-12 Language Arts. Over the course of her career, she’s taught in Orlando, FL; Atlanta, GA; and Redwood City, CA. Jenkins is currently pursuing a doctorate at the University of San Francisco as part of the International & Multicultural Education program in the School of Education. Her research focuses on anti-Blackness in K-12 school systems both in the U.S and abroad. As a co-founder of Making Us Matter, an education activism non-profit, Jenkins works to provide an education space that is safe from White normativity and deficit-centered pedagogy. Her work is motivated by her desire to provide alternative options for schooling that are free of the many systemic messages of anti-Blackness that are constantly transmitted in our current school systems. tjenkins@dons.usfca.edu

the only times (aside from slavery lessons in history classes) where Black bodies are highlighted. It is also one of the only times Black teachers are consulted (aside from occasions of overt racism) to weigh in on school-wide issues. In her attempt to make Black History Month “meaningful,” this principal inadvertently highlighted how deeply rooted anti-Blackness is at our school site and in schooling across the United States. The inherent desire to appear as though Blackness is valued (but only during the month of February) is dispiriting.

It is in these moments that I am reminded that my 13 years of experience in the field of education is often dwindled down to how I can contribute to issues of race, equity, and inclusion. To only be called upon when Black students aren’t passing standardized testing or when some kid uses graffiti to bring back de facto segregation by distinguishing a water fountain for White¹ students and another for Black students,² is to discount and devalue all that I contribute. It is the same way Black students feel after being “represented” for one unit or lesson before being put back on the sidelines for the “classics”. Our value should be meaningful every day. *Period*. Our history, culture, and existence should be emphasized and embedded into every aspect of school. We are too impactful to just simply be a blip in the curriculum and then return to the status quo.

The current educational spiral consists of performative or failed attempts to acknowledge the existence of Black students and teachers. I have witnessed attempts to do culturally responsive teaching, restorative justice, anti-defamation, or equity and inclusion work over the years, only

¹ Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups for articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.

² [Racist Graffiti at California High School](#)

to be met each time with resistant teachers, parents, and administrators who are uncomfortable with conversations around race. The conversations around the trauma caused by the many racist incidents on our own campus have been met with, (1) the need to protect students who committed racist acts under the assumption that there is no “intentional” racism; (2) overt ignoring of a hate speech written on our walls because “they were removed by custodial services;” (3) and the “I didn’t know how much this would impact students,” which reflects the utter failure to understand and recognize the weight of racial trauma faced by Black students and teachers. All of these attempts to recognize and humanize Blackness have fallen short because no real structural change has taken place. I am left pondering, what ongoing or lasting shift will be made within our hiring practices, curriculum, or punitive, racially-biased response to students of different backgrounds? The last meeting I attended to address racial issues on campus consisted of our principal, superintendent, equity coordinator, board members, the leadership teacher, and a representative from the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). All the “stakeholders” were there and I watched as students told stories of the harm they felt when their teacher read the N-word freely in class, or when their classmate uploaded a video to Snapchat calling Black people “vermin,” or how tiring it is to constantly be pulled out of class to share these stories over and over again. Schools continue to put the burden on Black students and teachers by having them share their experiences in front of an audience, and it usually ends there. This stagnated progress is debilitating.

And just so we’re clear, anti-Blackness isn’t relegated to majority White and integrated spaces. To borrow the words of poet Sunni Patterson, “it ain’t just burnin’ in Mississippi, it’s hot wherever you be.”³ After all, anti-Blackness is a global issue, not one born from integrated schooling. To be a Black student or educator in the United States is to suffer through a constant stream of systemic violence for the sake of privilege. With all of this suffering and wounding, we are still expected to go on and succeed

³ [Sunni Patterson - We Made It](#)

without having the time or space to acknowledge our own wounds. Instead we are given an apology and put on an equity team for the wounded. But no one is really willing to help us heal that wound. We've learned we can't go anywhere to prevent this violence from happening so we stay isolated or assimilate. I am tired of seeing us forced to work through these wounds, pretending they don't exist no matter how battered and ugly they become.

Towards A Solution

The question then becomes, how do we re-spirit our communities? It's not about popping up in politically correct moments, but permanently embedding the importance of Black voices and representation in our schools. We (Eghosa and Gertrude) co-founded Making Us Matter (M.U.M.) as an integral step towards the need to re-spirit Black students and teachers.

We provide challenging and empowering educational opportunities for high school students, free of microaggressions in an environment where they can experience full humanization and visibility. We are also committed to reshaping the experience of Black educators; Making Us Matter creates a space where their voices are consistently valued (not just when overt racism erupts) and their freedom to create culturally-informed curriculum is respected.

Our virtual model taps into Critical Race Theory with a focused goal on connecting Black educators and students across the country (and eventually, the globe). We work one-on-one with educators to help them develop a social justice curriculum that builds on student knowledge and increases cognitive skill sets. Some of our featured course offerings are Hip Hop Ed, Financial Literacy, Art Activism, and The Art of Self-Love. Currently, M.U.M classes are offered on Saturdays as a supplement to the instruction our students already receive in their traditional school settings. While our classes are exclusively taught by Black educators, we welcome students of all backgrounds.

The unavoidable truth is that the institution of education wasn't meant for us; the needs of Black students are rarely emphasized. In

response to this bleak reality, we've created our own educational space that seeks to empower and humanize Blackness through trauma healing and self-knowledge. At its core, we aimed to create an educational platform that (1) positions Black teachers as beacons of wisdom and innovation, (2) unpacks dominant messages of Anti-Blackness, and (3) helps students strengthen their voices and sense of community advocacy.

Why This Work Matters

When the racial pandemic hit peak trauma levels in the middle of our second M.U.M. session in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd (May, 2020) and Breonna Taylor (March, 2020) at the hands of police, there was no need to have a meeting or send an email out to our educators about what to do. There was an intrinsic understanding among us that the curriculum needed to be modified to address the anti-Black violence being inflicted and [digitally consumed](#)⁴ at high rates. Our collective of Black educators (some who are not traditional educators with credentials) didn't need Black History Month to push them towards shifting their lessons. Their unique perspectives and life experiences shaped their curriculum-building organically. Our educators knew on a *spiritual* level that they needed to take a pause and discuss the killing of George Floyd. They knew they needed to discuss the idea of who is deemed a threat with the Amy Cooper incident.⁵ They knew they needed to show clips of Tamika Mallory's powerful [speech](#) on who's really looting in this country. In fact, three of our teachers showed different sections of that speech and asked students to

⁴ Digital Lynching; a term explored by Whitneé Garrett-Walker, see https://www.huffpost.com/entry/stop-posting-videos-of-black-death_n_5f7f601bc5b664e5babaebdf

⁵ On May 25, 2020, a confrontation between Amy Cooper, a White woman walking her dog, and Christian Cooper (no relation), a black birdwatcher, in a section of New York City's Central Park known as the Ramble ended with Amy Cooper calling 9-1-1. She falsely presented herself as "in danger" and Christian Cooper as a threatening Black man. Amy Cooper was later charged with filing a false police report but this incident, which happened the same day as the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police Department officers.

analyze and grapple with her message. All this happened *uncoordinated*. Understand the beauty in that. Black folks, mostly without their formal teaching credential, instinctively knew what to do and how to humanize Blackness in the middle of chaos.

That is the difference. There is no need to try to make the curriculum meaningful or highlight Black voices during Black History Month when you have Black educators at the helm. The emphasis on Blackness isn't relegated to Black History Month as an abbreviation or a blip. After over ten years of working within a profession that attempts to minimize our existence, the only decision that made sense was to take matters into our own hands. Why scream incessantly into the void when you can create your own arena? Our faculty of eight (with a host of guest teachers) built a community where it was safe for us to check in and acknowledge the racial trauma happening around us, a microaggression-free space to collectively build curriculum, and the ability to cultivate an unfettered connection and solidarity as Black citizens. Before we transform, we need to be able to release the weight of our pain and to emancipate our stories so that we may find validation and safety in our communities.

The act of reclaiming our histories and identities are ways in which we can use our bodies as a means of knowledge and theory building. The Black body is full of stories, language, fight, resilience, pain, success, heartbreak, creativity, and innovation. However, in traditional school settings, we only receive a fraction of the narrative (often a false fraction, at that). At Making Us Matter, we believe that it's time to change the narrative; in fact, we're past due. Black people have endured capture, colonization, torture, terrorism, and continued systemic oppression. And we still manage to create the blueprints that the world copies down and then denies where it came from. We created civilizations from dirt under newly-freed feet, financial powerhouses from zero generational wealth. We outperform in pretty much every field we master from the Arts to the Sciences. How great would it be for Black students to learn all this before they make it to graduate school? This is the art of re-spiriting ourselves; not only during a racial pandemic, but indefinitely; "there can be no liberation without education. Education that fails to steer us in the direction of

liberation is not truly education. It may be training, it may be knowledge, but it is not truly education. Education, it seems to me, is about the collective cultivation of the mind, the spirit and the body” (Davis, 2017).⁶ We utilize the injustices around us to develop critical thinking, making us an educational organization that is in direct conflict with the faux neutrality propagated in most schools across the United States.

In Their Own Words

We toil to produce young minds that challenge inequities and burst through the ceiling of marginalization that’s been slammed down upon us for generations. If we do this right, we have the potential to cultivate a generation of students who are informed, unapologetic, and ready to take action. That’s what makes this dangerous work.

But don’t just take it from us. Our success in achieving these gains is best expressed through the words of our students. The following excerpts demonstrate how essential it is to ensure that Black teachers have the pedagogical freedom needed to remove the shackles of cold, White gaze and allow Black students (and arguably, all students) the freedom to envision new systems and ways of being, while dismantling those that do not equitably serve.

Seeing Black Teachers As Beacons of Wisdom & Innovation

“You are one of my favorite teachers I have ever had; you are an awesome Black woman who doesn't give a crap what other people think of you and I love your classes. You teach a lot about Black women and I like that a lot. You are definitely a feminist and it shows in your class and I think that is really cool because not only do most schools not teach about Black people, but they don't teach about

⁶ Dr. Angela Davis, a civil rights activist, spoke at Olympic College’s inaugural event for its Presidential Equity and Excellence series on Jan. 11, 2017. Full video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DqeeVFsZyVk>

women so it is really cool that I can learn about both of those things in your classes and learn a lot about Black women. You are an awesome teacher and I am so honored to be your student.” - (Hip Hop Ed Scholar)

As Black teachers, we’ve grown accustomed to constant second-guessing and challenges made against our professional expertise in racially mixed settings. Our stereotyped identities represent the antithesis of what is culturally accepted as “academic.” In this regard, being confronted with a Black teacher (especially if you’ve never had one) can seem a bit oxymoronic. As members of predominantly White faculties, our color often gets muted and we are encouraged to “stick to the script.” That’s what makes this student’s comment particularly significant. In traditional school settings it is unlikely that a student would feel free to expressly identify a teacher’s race and sociopolitical leanings as a reason for teacher appreciation.

The “B-word” (Black) and the “F” word (Feminist) are considered impolite in mixed settings and depending on which region of the country you live in, could be grounds for being held in social contempt or even fired. I (Gertrude) experienced this first-hand. My choice to sit in solidarity with students in Georgia who peacefully protested against an act of anti-Blackness in the school resulted in my suspension pending a district investigation⁷. Even in the news coverage this incident received, I was invisibilized. There was no mystery behind my “absence”, as the headline suggests; the word “absence” suggested that I’d had a choice. “Absence” shifted the blame away from all the anti-Black actors who didn’t care for my overt activism and chose to sully my professional record because of it. Despite the politicization of my skin, I was accused of bringing my “politics” into the school. As if politics hadn’t built the entire institution. I credit this experience as being the seed that gave life to the realization of a better way. I didn’t know it then, but Making Us Matter was on the horizon. It’s been

⁷ [Teacher missed classes after #BlackLivesMatter sit-in](#)

incredibly liberating to develop a space where Black educators are free to not only allow the experience of their intersections to inform their pedagogy, but to also hold a space for students to unapologetically name this as a reason for enjoying learning. No one should be denied that.

Reckoning with Dominant Narratives

“Black girls are adultified by themselves - they see that they need to be strong and stand up for themselves, and so they do. They see the world treating them like adults who can handle more, so they are forced to see themselves as that, in order to survive. Black women and girls are forced to fend for themselves and each other, becoming what society is telling us that we are. They say that we are strong and can take care of ourselves, so they don’t help us. Then, because we aren’t offered assistance by the rest of the world, we have create our own support” - (Art of Self Love Scholar)

We hadn’t planned it, but we were delighted to discover that all of our M.U.M Summer scholars were girls of color (majority, Black). Given our demographic, we found it crucial to restructure our course curriculum so that it included the unpacking of issues that were central to their identities. Although they are the focus of research less often than their male counterparts, Black girls are behaviorally penalized at statistically higher rates than their peers⁸. Black girls are adultified and critiqued at higher and harsher levels by their teachers. While this is known and felt by Black girls across the nation, there is rarely any open discussion about this experience in school (if at all). As a result, these dominant portrayals are often internalized.

There’s a lot of talk in curriculum development circles about

⁸ Epstein, Rebecca & Blake, Jamilia & Gonzalez, Thalia. (2017). Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls Childhood. SSRN Electronic Journal accesses at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3000695

whether or not we should be providing our students with a mirrored curriculum (that allows them to see themselves) or a take a windowed approach (allowing students to examine the world beyond their four walls of existence)⁹. At Making Us Matter, we say, why not have both? In order for Black children to be free in navigating this world, it's imperative that they are able to see themselves, no matter where they direct their sails. Therefore, it is imperative for students to be able to grapple with stereotyped narratives so that they are able to speak truth to power, whenever they need to articulate it.

Finding Their Voices... and Then Using Them

“You have taught me so much about the environment I live in, my responsibilities toward sustaining it, and how I can advocate for others who aren’t being given a voice to speak out about their living conditions. What I have learned from you will contribute to the rest of my life.” - (Environmental Racism Scholar)

Anyone who cares deeply about Black children or has had the distinct honor of having been one, knows that school can be a dangerous place for a Black child’s voice and spirit. Everything that comes natural to us is criminalized¹⁰; we learn the lesson of quieting down or getting out. Not in this house! We want Black children to fall in love with the sound of their own voices and project them loudly. In the student quote, this scholar not only learned about the inequitable placement of Black and Brown communities in geographically hazardous areas, she was also inspired to make some change of her own. That’s the ultimate goal. We want to foster an unapologetic uprising of voice and advocacy. We need Black children to

⁹ Style, Emily. 1996. “Curriculum as Window & Mirror.” National Seeking Educational Equity & Diversity Project website. Accessed June 1, 2015. <http://www.wcwonline.org/SEED/seed-curriculum-as-window-a-mirror>.

¹⁰ For example, [Tamir Rice](#), [Cyntoia Brown](#), and [Tatyana Rhodes](#)

understand that despite the messages they receive daily in traditional schools that they are bereft of intellectual capacity (or are an exception to the rule when their intellectual capacity is acknowledged), that they come from a rich ancestral culture of movement builders and change makers. Our experiences with the Making Us Matter summer scholars bleakly revealed that when you remove Black children from a traditional institutional setting, they will very much come to life and bring their voices with them, without hesitation.

Not Hopeful, Willful

Our ultimate objective as an organization is to surround ourselves with humanity and justice and to cultivate the need for an equitable world. We took a leap of faith and reimagined schooling for not only Black students, but also Black teachers. M.U.M. intends on shaping the future by ensuring that learning is a byproduct of the human experience and by growing the desire for learners to seek justice. It is on us to demand justice. To *be* justice. Making Us Matter is power for the people. Making Us Matter is for the people. Making Us Matter *is* the people. This is a space to acknowledge and heal trauma. A space to recognize, emphasize, and humanize Blackness.

Book Review

From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation

by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor
Haymarket Books, 2016. 270 pages.
\$17.95 (Paperback).
ISBN: 978-1-60846-562-0

Review by Heather M. Streets^{*}
University of San Francisco

In August of 1955, a 14-year-old Black boy by the name of Emmett Till was lynched after being falsely accused of flirting with a White¹ woman. Till's murder helped fuel the civil rights movement and galvanized Black people, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to speak out against not

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¹ *Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups for articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.*

only his murder, but also a multitude of racial injustices. Fifty-six years later in February of 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was murdered by a White vigilante while walking home from a convenience store. Martin's death and the acquittal of his murderer were the catalysts that prompted the need for three Black women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, to create the declarative hashtag and social movement platform known as #BlackLivesMatter in an effort to expose the wide-reaching impact of state sanctioned policing in Black communities.

Hundreds of years before Till and Martin's murders, countless other Black people in the United States were murdered by vigilantes and police officers without fear of reprisal, and many since then. Most of their names we do not know. However, in recent years, the deaths of a notable few, including Ahmaud Arbery, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, Oscar Grant, George Floyd, Tamir Rice, and Breonna Taylor, caught our attention and pushed the movement for the value and preservation of Black lives further into our collective consciousness.

The liberatory quest to preserve Black life goes beyond the ceasing of Black death at the hands of law enforcement, as police officers' ability to perform state-sanctioned violence is akin to larger, far-reaching problems. In *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Assistant Professor of African-American Studies at Princeton University, points out that the violence of racist policing does not happen in a vacuum—it stems from societal inequity. For Black lives to matter, poverty and unemployment must be eradicated; public education, health care systems, prison systems must be overhauled; and racial profiling must end. In order to fully grasp both the impact of these problems affecting Black people and the liberatory actions needed to eradicate them, we must first ask ourselves, "How did we get here?" Poet, writer, and civil rights activist, Maya Angelou, believed that if you don't know where you've come from, you won't know where you're going. By documenting the social, economic, and political impacts of anti-Blackness, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* explains whence we came. Taylor's book provides a much-needed comprehensive historical look at the deeply rooted, yet evolving movement for social change born from multiple forms of violence against

Black people. Taylor helps us understand how we got here in order to forge a path to achieve Black liberation.

In its introduction and seven subsequent chapters, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* deftly chronicles and contextualizes past wrongdoings against Black people in the United States and ties them to current transgressions, be they the result of capitalism, biased policies, or social subjugation, upon which we are then able to appreciate the ongoing need for Black freedom. The book's introduction sets the stage for how longstanding negative stereotypes about Black people have and continue to serve as permissions for the over-policing of Black bodies and enforcement of other inequalities and how they coincide with the post-racial and colorblind myths used to describe an evolved America governed by former President Barack Obama, culminating in the present-day activist call for Black liberation. According to Taylor,

of course the country has changed, but the passage of time alone is not a guarantee that it has changed for the better. Justice is not a natural part of the lifecycle of the United States, nor is it a product of evolution; it is always the outcome of struggle. (p. 5)

Taylor investigates how violent policing spurred the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement during the tenure of the nation's first Black president while also analyzing the ever-present denial of Black oppression that has fueled the need for civil rights, Black Power, and other movements. In each chapter, Taylor uses a historical lens to explore issues like the persistence of Black poverty, which is rooted in the United States' reliance on slavery; the concept of colorblindness as a tool to challenge the existence of Black inequality; a post-civil rights rise of the Black political elite; separate and unequal standards of justice for Black people; the impetus that drove the creation of contemporary grassroots organizations; Black Lives Matter as a modern-day civil rights movement; and, finally, the argument that Black liberation cannot occur without a holistic strategy that both involves and is enacted by more than just Black people.

From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation is an unapologetically honest critique of the ways in which bipartisan politics and neoliberalism are directly linked to excessive policing and mass incarceration. While

examining American historical epochs, Taylor identifies and calls out the responsible parties, along with those who were complicit—both White and Black—in causing the need for a new era of Black leadership and activism to emerge in the form of the Black Lives Matter movement. Taylor’s critical analysis is done with precise accuracy and presents arguments that are supported with historical facts followed by concrete examples, which would leave most dubious readers unable to question said arguments, no matter their political leanings.

A dominant narrative Taylor repeatedly refutes is the attempt to link and then rationalize Black inequalities, including poverty, high incarceration rates, and racist policing to Black culture, the lack of a family structure, and bad behavior. Reducing the ills of Black people to a lack of morality requires the political establishment to do little and explains, in Taylor’s words, “why Black neighborhoods get police, not public policy—and prisons, not public schools” (p. 48). By referencing the 2014 murder of Michael Brown by Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson, Taylor demonstrates how easily local police departments can sway the court of public opinion by labeling a victim as a bad person in order to justify killing him or her. Brown was painted as a less than perfect individual who was “a victim of his own poor behavior, including defying police” (p. 23). Wilson characterized Brown as a “demon” (Case: State of Missouri v. Darren Wilson, Transcript of: Grand Jury Volume V, 2014), and the positioning of Brown as both far from a model citizen and not human helped the Ferguson police justify his murder: if he had taken greater responsibility in his life, their argument went, he would still be alive.

Although Taylor penned *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* a few short years ago in 2016, much has happened in the Black Lives Matter movement, particularly in the year 2020 as a result of the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, the vigilante murder of Ahmaud Arbery, and the police shooting of Jacob Blake that left him paralyzed from the waist down. I initially found myself pondering how Taylor might have incorporated their tragic stories as historical events in order to further document Black Lives Matter activities. However, while reading the book I was reminded that because history has no end and the chronicling of events

will always be retrospective, Taylor's arguments for the need of Black liberation will continue to hold weight well beyond the foreseeable future. Furthermore, in a moment of foretelling, Taylor notes that political ideas and public perceptions are themselves fluid. Taylor could not have known that the Black Lives Matter protests that followed the murder of George Floyd included an inordinate number of White supporters marching in solidarity, but as if clairvoyant, she did remind us that when Black folks get free, we all get free. Black people cannot get free without everyone's help, including White America's. In conclusion, it is more important to understand the origins of Black oppression to develop a strategy that uses current circumstances to create a future where Black people are truly liberated. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* defines the "what," which is the challenge "to connect the current struggle to end police terror in our communities with an even larger movement to transform this country in such a way that the police are no longer needed to respond to the consequences of that inequality" (p. 219). Armed with the tools of a historical framework provided by Taylor, it is our responsibility to figure out the "how," which is to build a nation where Black lives truly matter.

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Book Review

We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom

by Bettina L. Love

Beacon Press, 2019, 200 pages

\$19 (hardcover)

ISBN: 978-0807069158

Review by Robert Alexander*

University of San Francisco

Bettina L. Love's *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* masterfully explains how people of color (POC) in the United States have been invalidated, humiliated, punished, and criminalized in every corner of society. While no single topic can be identified as the key consequence of systemic racism, regarding educational freedom, Love makes clear that dark bodies are not and have never been treated equally.

POC want to matter, but how can we matter when dominant society imposes insurmountable institutional and structural barriers? So, what do we want? Knowing what we know? What is this thing we are after?

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Although no one person is equipped (nor has the right) to speak for millions, particularly about race and racism, there is one thing I know with everything I am: we who are dark want to matter and live, not just to survive but to thrive.

Love begins the second chapter of *We Want to Do More Than Survive* by describing the discrepancy between the educational outcomes of rich and poor people. Love was a high-school teacher in Florida and many of her students came from families who were just trying to make ends meet. Often these students were from Haiti, Mexico, Colombia, Cuba, and Guatemala, and spoke English as a second language. The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) gave Love's school an "F" grade based on Florida's Standards Assessment, and many of Love's students failed the FCAT several times because it was administered in English. These children are held back by a system that doesn't account for their needs or value their backgrounds.

According to a report by the Equal Justice Initiative (2017), between 1877 and 1950 more than 4,400 Black men, women, and children were lynched in the United States. In her analysis of White¹ rage, Love contends that you cannot discuss White supremacy without also considering this critical component. In *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*, historian Carol Anderson (2016) argues,

The trigger of White rage, inevitably, is Black advancement. It is not the mere presence of Black people that is the problem; rather it is Blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship. (p. 25)

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Of course, education is key to advancement. In presenting what she calls the “educational survival complex,” Love describes how students are taught what it takes to survive but not how to thrive (p. 27). What Dr. Love experienced was a sense of hopelessness. She felt despair knowing that while she was doing her best, the institutional barriers to academic freedom would always counter her best efforts as a teacher. What can be done for frustrated dark students who realize that the system is organized to hold them back rather than to help them excel?

Love details her experience of how schools have become a training ground for racist practices and emulate what happens in the outside world. She describes the feeling before the *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision in 1954, when Black schools were proud institutions that “provided Black communities with cohesion and leadership” (p. 28). Though Black schools’ facilities and books were inferior to their White counterparts, the education they provided was not. In oral history interviews, Black teachers reflecting on Black schools before the *Brown* decision affirmed the success of these schools: “Black schools were places where order prevailed, where teachers commanded respect, and where parents supported teachers” (p. 28). Educating Black children was viewed as the collective responsibility of the community. The *Brown* decision removed Black children from that environment and put them in a position where institutional interests were not in their own interests. Legal scholar Derrick Bell and W. E. B. Du Bois both felt that Black students would have been better off educated by their own.

In her discussion of what she calls “spirit murder,” Love describes numerous incidents demonstrating the racist treatment of Black and Brown students (p. 38). Everything from Latinx students being told to go back to Mexico, to school bullying, to principals’ and superintendents’ anti-Semitic behavior, to lynchings. As a Black man, I too experienced systemic racism in my own schooling, for example, when a math teacher neglected to offer me the same tutoring he made available to White students. Mr. Bettencourt was surprised when I showed up to the weekly tutoring session. He then went out of his way to not assist me and ignored my questions. Love suggests that students’ spirit murder is something we must identify and

rectify. We need to meet Black students where they are, and not take for granted that these experiences do and will occur. We owe it to our students to address each spirit murder, each and every time.

In Love's own experience as a student in Rochester, New York, it wasn't until she attended school number 19 that she had a Black teacher, Mrs. Johnson, and her first Black male after-school program leader, Thabiti. The program was called Fighting Ignorance and Spending Truth (FIST); in this program, Love learned about the work and ideas of Angela Davis, the Black Panthers, Black Liberation, Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela, and leaders of her own community. She didn't understand then why she felt so moved by these ideas, but knew that what she learned was validating and empowering, that it mattered. As Love learned about resistance and the refusal to accept the status quo, FIST gave her the tools to survive school unbroken.

Growing up in the Nineteenth Ward of Rochester gave Love opportunities to explore. She would frequent the Boys and Girls Club, the recreation center called the Southwest Area Neighborhood Association (SWAN), and the Flint Street Rec Center. Community was a big part of Love's life, and what programs they offered or where they went for field trips informed where Love would spend time. Love built a tight connection with the camp counselors until finally she became one herself.

Love emphasizes an idea from organizer Ella Baker's work: participatory democracy and abolitionist teaching go hand-in-hand (p. 89). This includes the Women's Movement's rejection of top-down, patriarchal leadership. Love argues that Baker's action-oriented model is how we go from surviving to thriving.

Taking the lead from Baker, abolitionist teaching is built on several foundations:

- Appreciating the cultural wealth of students' communities and creating classrooms in parallel with those communities aimed at facilitating interactions,
- People mattering to each other,

- Fighting together in the pursuit of creating a homeplace that represents the hopes and dreams of the people in the community, and
- Resisting oppression while building a new future.

Abolitionist teachers are visionaries who fight for their students' freedom, for justice, for the end of gun violence, for the end of the prison industrial complex, and even for students they've never met. This is how important it is to these advocates.

"Freedom dreaming" is a term that Dr. Love uses to describe imagining a new world free of oppression (p. 89). Freedom dreaming is how we take the unattainable and make it attainable. Freedom dreaming is how we go from victim to creator. Freedom dreaming is how we break the school-to-prison pipeline, and dismantle the idea that dark bodies need White people to save them. Freedom dreaming is what is required for abolitionist teaching.

Love contends that we need co-conspirators, not allies. Co-conspirators go above and beyond the call for action. For example, activists Bree Newsome and James Tyson met as strangers at an event that would link them together forever. Newsome, a young Black woman, and Tyson, a young White man: these two decided to put their lives on the line to remove a confederate flag in South Carolina.

I remember taking a diversity course in graduate school, and at the end of the semester, we all agreed to stay in contact as allies. I was the only Black male in the class, and my peers put pressure on me to be the voice for *all* Black people. Love calls this the "teacher education gap" (p. 126). Teacher education programs communicate what is wrong about dark communities and stereotype them, and as a result, such programs often fail to address the systemic racism, trauma, and poverty that have been historically perpetuated by patriarchal Whiteness.

Future teachers learn that dark children experience trauma. Dark children are "at-risk." They are "underprivileged." They fall into the achievement gap. And dark communities are underserved, with residents living in poverty. Love points to the one-sidedness of this perspective. "But how did this reality happen, and is that all? Where is the beauty, the

resistance, the joy, the art, the healing, redemption, and the humanity and ingenuity of people making something out of nothing? Just as important, where is the critique of the system that perpetuates injustice and dark suffering in and outside the walls of schools?” (p. 128).

Love compares her theories to the North Star. Polaris, the North Star, is one of the brightest stars in the sky—and the one runaway slaves would use to guide them towards their freedom. Love suggests that theory is her North Star and suggests that theory can similarly help people contextualize oppression, injustice, cultural relevance, and the intersections with education. Love describes how the stress of being a lesbian, an educator, and a mother started to weigh on her. She couldn't figure out why she was having intense anxiety even while living the American Dream. She had a new home, two healthy babies, and a loving partner—yet she was still experiencing panic attacks. To make sense of all this, Love offers, “To be a Black mother is to be America's punching bag, as you morph into a shield and take every blow for your family, especially your Black children, that will be thrown by America's White rage” (p. 150).

Love states, simply, “We feel no pain because we feel everything” (p. 150). She explains how Black infants are twice as likely to die as White infants. The injustices add up. Love describes how tennis star Serena Williams had a large hematoma that went ignored until she gave birth and had multiple surgeries. Even Michael Brown was compared to Hulk Hogan when the White officer that shot him was on the witness stand. Story after story exposes racists myths about Black people possessing superhuman strength and pain thresholds. However, Love was smart enough to know that she is not invincible, and so she sought help, instead, through therapy.

Love's recommendation is straightforward: Black people must heal. Not only do we need to heal for ourselves, but we need to heal for the generations before us, and to set examples for generations after. In this, Love distinguishes between being “alright” and being “well” (149). I connected with these expressions immediately, because when someone asks me how I'm doing I usually say, “I'm alright.” It often happens at work when I'm just barely making it through the day and I'm just “alright.” I'm not doing “well.” “Well” means that you are thriving. “Alright” means that

you're just surviving. People of color need to go from "alright" to "well," but we need everyone's help.

We must reject Whiteness and everything it represents. White people must acknowledge oppression, privilege, and systemic racism. If it means checking White emotions in the name of abolitionist teaching, we must do what we have to do. Abolitionist teaching rejects the self-centeredness of Whiteness and everything that comes with it. Abolitionist teaching means putting it all on the line. It means using Whiteness to lift and not to demonize, criminalize, and objectify Indigenous peoples and people of color. Only then will we do more than just survive.

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Book Review

Unapologetic: A Black Queer and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements

By Charlene A. Carruthers
Beacon Press, 2018. 162 pages
\$22.95 (Hardback)
ISBN#: 9780807019412

Review by Whitneé Garrett-Walker*
University of San Francisco

The year 2020 has proven to be a historical time period. We are not only living through a global health pandemic, but simultaneously, we are also living through the most united and outward facing racial upheaval since the 1960s. Simply put, we *are* living history, and history has taught us that the times when the institution of “business-as-usual” is actively threatened, comes necessary peaks of progress (Bell, 1992). We are witnessing outrage and global protests that proclaim “Black Lives Matter,” in major cities on nearly every continent, in the workplace and in our

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homes. The senseless murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd at the hands of White¹ police officers or vigilantes, coupled with the disproportional rates of Black death due to Covid-19, ignited a moment where the institutional and systemic oppression of Black people in the United States is being elevated, discussed, and *finally* believed. Simultaneously, this political moment also sparked the necessity to reclaim our joy and ability to live, despite the pervasive negative messaging of Blackness being disposable. *Unapologetic* by Charlene A. Carruthers is a love letter, and a field notebook for all of us to follow. The author's powerful words are delivered with love and with a demand to fight for the liberation of *all* Black people, and break free from the capitalistic, patriarchal, racist, heterosexist, and classist ways of being.

All of Us or None of Us

Carruthers begins her book by acknowledging her identity as a Black, queer woman and she honors the ways in which her intersectional identity manifests in her movement work. To this end, the first major pillar of this book is the demand to center the experiences of those who are Black, queer, women, and trans to ensure that the creation and sustaining of movements are intentionally inclusive of all who have been historically excluded. Thus, the call to critically review the history of Black liberation and its pattern of

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silencing those who do not fit the classist, patriarchal, cis-heteronormative experience of Blackness. Carruthers first walks us through historical movements and moments where folks who identify as both Black and LGBTQ were actively shunned from participating in the quest towards Black liberation and elevating that their needs in this fight look different from the ‘mainstream vision’ of Black freedom. For this reason, her first pillar provides the Black queer feminist framework as a mirror for movement builders, agitators, sustainers, and healers to step up and view. If you call yourself a freedom fighter for all Black people, you must unlearn the patriarchal and heterosexist ways that Black and queer people were silenced throughout the social justice movements of our ancestors. Carruthers defines the Black queer feminism as a

political praxis (practice and theory) based in Black feminist and LGBTQ traditions and knowledge, through which people and groups see to bring their full selves into the process of dismantling all systems of oppression. By using this lens we are aided in creating alternatives of self-governance and self-determination, and by using it we can more effectively prioritize problems and methods that center historically marginalized people in our communities... the Black queer feminist lens calls for us to be individuals and to work collectively, with neither being at the expense of the other. (p.10)

Carruthers calls upon the historical analysis of Danielle L. McGuire, author of *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. This book provides a thorough history of physical and sexual violence against Black women, along with an accurate account of the power of united resistance. Specifically, the book addresses the conditions for which White vigilantes and White supremacy culture and dominance continued to terrorize Black women, and how noted organizations (i.e. NAACP, YWCA) came together to resist (McGuire, 2010). Within this example, Carruthers so eloquently elevates the necessity of unity, but not for the sake of mainstreaming the issue at hand (i.e. cherry-picking the ‘perfect victim’ to fight for and leaving that person behind).

Rather, Carruthers argues that regardless of how movement builders select their cause within the struggle for Black liberation, if it is rooted in the quest for freedom, it must ensure that all are free - and not just those who fit the mold of what free *should* be based on the antiquated mold of respectability and white supremacy.

I want the lie that Black people cannot be Black, queer, trans and women and the same time to die a swift death...I want that lie to die alongside the idea that any one group of Black people is inherently more worthy to be free than any other. (p. 55)

She makes the case for unity of resources as well as intentionality of our collectivity, because our commitment to each other is rooted in freedom and liberation for all regardless of how their story of trauma looks to the masses.

The Black Imagination: Commitments and Questions

In organizing for Black liberation, Charlene A. Carruthers reminds her readers to let go of the harmful and linear notions of freedom for Black people. The first step is to center the most historically marginalized groups, and the second step is the *quintessential* need to tap into the new possibilities of the Black existence, through reclaiming and refocusing the Black imagination. To do this, Carruthers builds upon the pillar of Black queer feminism as a theoretical framework by reminding us of our ability to dream beyond what we know (have known) to create new reality for ourselves. Carruthers guides us through our ability to dream, by offering a collective mindfulness - a caution of the incomplete stories of liberation we tell ourselves and each other.

If the stories we tell about Black people's experiences of resistance and resilience are incomplete, our movement to transform them, to enact them, will be insufficient and ineffective... If we told a more complete story of the Black radical tradition, one that grounds itself in the stories of Black feminist, queer, and trans liberation work, we would have more complete and effective solutions for the problems we encounter. (p. 44 and 58).

In this quote, the author reiterates that the experience of Blackness is not linear and to refuse to include all dreams, all hopes, all identities is counterproductive and counterrevolutionary. The author references the powerful work of Robin D.G. Kelley and the importance of cultivating radical dreams of freedom from all Black people, including our youth. The tradition of engaging the Black radical imagination centers the need to know what you are fighting for and how this is different from what you've fought against. It pushes movement builders to articulate the new reality they've collectively dreamed for themselves and others that is free from systems of oppression because that dream was for everyone (Kelley, 2002).

Unapologetic offers three commitments that must be made as new movements for Black liberation continue to take form, build many strong leaders, adopt healing justice as a core organizing value and practice and finally, combat liberalism with principled struggle. The author is explicit about her belief that "Movement building is spiritual work" (p. 63). These three commitments provide a strong foundation for folks to rethink the way they've been engaging (or will engage) in movement work. Without clear commitments to full Black liberation, systems of oppression will be recreated, thus reifying the very thing we seek to fight against. The author also offers intentional questions for movement builders, sustainers, and healers to consider when collectively and effectively creating a north star, a goal and guide towards where we want to be, as a people. Carruthers offers the following: Who am I? Who are my people? What do we want? What are we building? Are we ready to win?

Unapologetic by Charlene A. Carruthers has provided those of us engaged in the movement towards Black liberation with a field notebook that is specific to movement builders, sustainers, and healers. For those not involved in anti-racist movement work, she has gifted you a starting point for how to think about systems of oppression, how they impact all Black people, and what you can do to get involved. This book is meant for its readers to become active participants on their individual and collective journeys to creating the new world that we so desperately need. This book should be read by anyone who cares about justice, healing, and unity. Given this beautiful work, what will we decide to do with the new world that is on

the horizon? Will we continue down a path that seeks to reify all forms and systems of oppression, or will we seek to reimagine new possibilities of a new world in which all who *live* are seen as whole and equal participants of the new world?

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Book Review

Teaching for Black Lives

Editors Dyan Watson, Jesse Hagopian, Wayne Au
Rethinking Schools Publication, 2018. 382 pages.

\$29.95 (paperback)

ISBN 978-0-942961-04-1

Review by Joseph Ruben Adams*
University of San Francisco

In this transformative age of social justice, the nature and structure of knowledge has become very different from what it has been in past centuries. *Teaching for Black Lives* brings together a collection of writings that aim to assist educators who are committed to social justice and looking to make viable changes in curriculum that humanizes the experiences of Black students and Black lives. Now more than ever, the structure of teaching needs to change to incorporate lessons that connect to the lives and experience of Black students in U.S. society. Due to the radical and racial remarks of the 45th President of the United States, the nation is going through a paradigm shift that is calling for the abandonment of old ideals and the forming of holistic ideals that serve the needs of a pluralistic society. The editors of *Teaching for Black Lives*, Dyan Watson, Jesse Hagopian and

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Wayne Au, structurally designed the book to illustrate to educators how they should make their classrooms and schools sites of resistance to White¹ Supremacy and anti-Blackness. Fundamentally, this book serves to make classrooms and schools a place of hope and beauty as educators explore Blackness.

Teaching for Black Lives is structured in an anthology format to present the worldview of the Black experience in America. The Black experience in America has historically been silenced in order to push the revisionist narrative of White supremacy. Moreover, this book answers the question: What are the Black experiences in America? In each generation educators have glanced over the experiences of Blacks in America and regulated their dissemination of knowledge into the highlight reel of popular Black figures like Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Rosa Parks. The book is divided into five sections that encompass an introductory overview to the Black experience in America.

Section 1: Making Black Lives Matter in Our Schools

Historically, Black students have been underserved, underrepresented, and unsupported to overcome socioeconomic and psychosocial challenges as they pursue education. This section makes the assertion that the educational system should be building a school-to-justice pipeline rather than a school-to-prison pipeline. Social justice movements like Black Lives Matter are rising

¹ Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups for articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.

up and making a stance that the system is dysfunctional and needs correcting. One of the biggest impacts to society is how students are educated about social movements in the classroom or a structural knowledge of society. One of the key purposes of knowledge is to provide an understanding of history, but also a knowledge of one's own history provides a sense of self and the state of affairs in society. Fundamentally, knowledge is a tool to be used to understand and equip oneself with the means to be prepared for an ever-changing society.

In the current structures of education, Black Americans are culturally and historically isolated because of a system that is meant to control institutional knowledge that prepares one for society. Therefore, African American students require extra scaffolding for success in college and careers, including academic and student support programs, and tools needed to be successful. To address such an issue, this section closes with addressing the vision for Black Lives. As mentioned earlier, the nature of the problem is that Black children attend under-resourced classrooms where they are pushed out of an education that was not structurally created for them (Watson, Hagopian, & Au, 2018). The editors and authors call for a restorative justice approach to transform the curriculum that fits the needs of Black students who are being purposely neglected because educators do not have the skillset to support them to overcome their socioeconomic challenges that are brought into classrooms. These socioeconomic and psychosocial challenges are largely associated with the past enslavement of Black people in America.

Section 2: Enslavement, Civil Rights, And Black Liberation

Centuries of enslavement did more than turn Black Americans into second-class citizens. The act of erasing the historical memory of Black people's ancestral land was a psychological and dehumanizing approach to spread the narrative and dominance of White supremacy. This act disabled Black people's innate need to function as a collective unit rather than individuals. With no way to establish collective unity, Black people were prevented from being able to properly process, understand, and respond to

social, political and cultural situations in the best interests of their own culture. This section illustrates that early on in American history, the color line was quickly established to divide not only Whites from Blacks, but also the elites or bourgeoisie from the common people. The United States was structurally created to produce a racial hierarchy that would never challenge the status quo. From the dismantling of slavery to modern day society, White supremacy has instituted law after law in order to keep Black Americans from rising to any form of meaningful political or socioeconomic power.

This section introduces the topic of “medical apartheid,” which refers to how White doctors and physicians have played mad scientist on Black bodies from enslavement to modern day society. Such as Henrietta Lacks, a Black woman whose cells were used to create vaccines and medicines we still use today. The tragedy of her story is that those cells were taken without her permission and no financial compensation has been bestowed to her family, even though pharmaceutical companies have made billions of dollars of her genetic material. While understanding the tragedy of Black people is important for everyone, it is especially important in order for Black people to reestablish collective unity to fight against this barbarous and unjust treatment. With the rise of Black liberation from the claws of White supremacy, greater efforts for solidarity are needed.

Section 3: Gentrification, Displacement and Anti-Blackness

While Black Americans sought to establish their own culture and communities, White supremacy saw this as a threat to their influence on American society. This section begins with portraying the devastating reality that White supremacists burnt down whole communities and cities where Black people lived because of hatred and fear, such as the Tulsa race massacre and many more. Due to the laws of Jim Crow and segregation, Black Americans established their own towns and communities to live separate from White society. Watson, Hagopian, and Au highlight key moments that transformed legal Jim Crow segregation to modern day gentrification. As society moved away from Jim Crow, communities fell into the category of gentrification and displacement.

An important key moment in history is the process of associating the word “urban” with Black communities. Through the descriptive use of language, society is now using words to categorize a particular race of people in order to place them into stereotypical categories. On the topic of displacement, the authors discuss the situation in New Orleans during and after Hurricane Katrina and the adverse negative impact this tragedy had on Black people. This observation becomes important in how we educate Black students on the nature of Black communities, why they are structured in a certain way, and what degree of federal support can be expected. Although laws have been passed to provide Black people with a small fraction of this American dream, White supremacy purports that Black Americans are criminals and dangerous to their way of life. Therefore, White supremacy does what it can to slowly dismantle Black society.

Section 4: Discipline, the School-to-Prison Pipeline and Mass Incarceration

With the downfall of chattel slavery, White supremacy had to find another way to control the minds of Black people. The first topic of this section, entitled “Jailing Our Minds,” by Abbie Cohen, provided a strong title to paint a picture of what has happened to Black society, especially Black men. Beyond a doubt, Black men and boys have been traditionally treated like criminals. The editors brought in the work of Michelle Alexander to illustrate the fundamentals of how this school-to-prison pipeline is apparent in what she calls the era of a new Jim Crow.

This section of the book talks about areas that are not openly mentioned in a K-12 class, or more importantly, a college course, unless the focus is on social justice. Racial and social injustices should be against the law of the land, and this section highlights how Black students are being disproportionately disciplined in the classroom, as are Black people in society. The editors conclude this section with the topic of making strides toward restorative justice. Black people know that issues are occurring, but as a society, we should be trying to make change rather than ignoring the problem.

Section 5: Teaching Blackness, Loving Blackness, and Exploring Identity

Given the fact that the historical memory of African cultures was erased through the trans-Atlantic slave trade and replaced with a White supremacy narrative, Black Americans have been placed in a position where oftentimes they reject their own image and try to become more Eurocentric. Black Americans have been victimized by White supremacy; moreover, they tend to identify themselves primarily with European cultural ideology, language, and ideas of family rather than an Afrocentric way of thinking. The introduction to the section with words from James Baldwin illuminates this entire section of the book and became my favorite area, that merits a second read. While this section covered various areas related to Blackness and the Black experience, I have to wonder if adding in scholars such as Dr. Molefi Asante or Dr. Wade Nobles would have changed the aesthetic of this section. These two scholars are pioneers in the field of Africana Studies and yet they were left out of the collection of articles. Even though they are not included, this section provided a great insight into the clarification and teaching of Blackness.

In teaching Blackness, an educator cannot quantify Blackness. Blackness is not a single ideal or an array of five to six key points. To teach Blackness is to teach the point that Black people are multifaceted beings that encompass all forms of gender identities, socio-economic status, and spiritual faiths. This section implores educators of Black youth to teach them these points of clarification. Overall, this is a great section to conclude the book and provides an area to reflect on further.

Conclusion

After reading this book, I found that it was one of the best texts to incorporate into the classroom of either secondary education or higher education, specifically for educators seeking to get a teaching credential in social science. The text was easy to read, and not structured in the way of a

traditional textbook with academic jargon. My recommendation for this book is to create a separate workbook that aligns with each section. This workbook would function as a guide to assist educators who have never taught about Black lives and can assist them with how to present certain areas and what types of assignments should follow.

Book Excerpt

Women of the Black Panther Party Activity and Coloring Book

By Jilchristina Vest and James Shields

Graphics by James Shields

Graphics inspired by Stephen Shames Photography

2020, 40 pages

\$18.00 (paperback)



Introduction to the Book

By **Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest*** and **Ericka C. Huggins****

Hello Children, big and small! Welcome to the [*Women of the Black Panther Party Activity and Coloring Book*](#). It is our pleasure to introduce you to this activity book both as co-contributors to the *#SayHerName Women of the Black Panther Party Mural* as well as collaborators united in our passion for education, children and preserving the history of the Black Panther Party and its Survival Programs.

Members of the Black Panther Party (BPP) were young, ambitious, and filled with love for all people, committed to change locally and internationally. The fight for human rights was the goal. The members of the BPP fought for that right from the 1960s to the 1980s. When Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale imagined and created the organization in Oakland, California, on October 17, 1966, they started a movement that lit imaginations and changed the lives of thousands of future members and supporters of freedom around the world. They sat together in Oakland and wrote the Black Panther Party 10-Point Platform and Program. It was a call

* **Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest** focuses on the Modern Black Freedom Struggle. She is a graduate of Harvard University with a BA in Afro-American Studies and Stanford University with an MA in American History. The founding director of the Black Panther Party Research Project at Stanford, her work on the history of the Black Panther Party (BPP) includes the history of women, the impact of gender in the Party and the organization's community Survival Programs. Currently, Angela is the director of The OCS Project LLC, and she is directing and producing a documentary about the BPP's Oakland Community School, one of their longest-lasting Survival Programs. She also is a co-founder of the Intersectional Black Panther Party History Project (IPHP).

** **Ericka Huggins** is an activist, former political prisoner and leader in the Black Panther Party, educator and student. Ericka Huggins has devoted her life to the equitable treatment of all human beings—beyond the boundaries of race, age, culture, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability and status associated with citizenship. For the past 37 years she has lectured across the country and internationally on issues relating to the well-being of women, children & youth; restorative justice as the antidote to punitive justice; whole being education, and the role of spiritual practice in sustaining activism and promoting social change.

for basic human rights. Point 10 of the Platform is a summary of them all: *"We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace."*

Women of the Black Panther Party quickly became a main foundation for improving human lives in the U.S. Like many freedom movements throughout history, women were the backbone of the BPP. Tarika Lewis, a sixteen-year-old high school student, asked to join and became the first woman member of the BPP. Many young Black women like Tarika, an artist and violinist, filled the roles of boots on the ground community organizers, Central Committee leaders, Survival Program administrators, BPP Newspaper writers, artists and editors, community board members, teachers, mothers and grandmothers. They were coalition-builders who learned from the people on the job.

Women of the Black Panther Party were harassed and attacked by federal and local law enforcement in the same way as the men of the BPP. Whether they worked in the Bay Area, Philadelphia, Boston, New Orleans, Atlanta, Winston-Salem, Houston, or abroad in Algeria or Tanzania, they sacrificed their lives to challenge the old ways that served a few, to work toward implementing the Ten Point Program, to serve many.

Of course, the BPP made mistakes along the way, as young organizers with an average age of 19; they tried to fashion a new world that blended ways of thinking and create solutions to worldwide problems using the teachings from a variety of international revolutionary women and men of that time. These thinkers and doers helped party members to face the reality that most men and some women, were raised or trained to believe that boys and men are smarter and stronger than women and girls. Just as millions are taught that the lives of people of color, Black, Brown and Indigenous (Native) people are less valuable than the lives of White¹ people.

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As well, the ideas that it's best to be rich in money and that if you live in conditions of poverty, it's your fault.

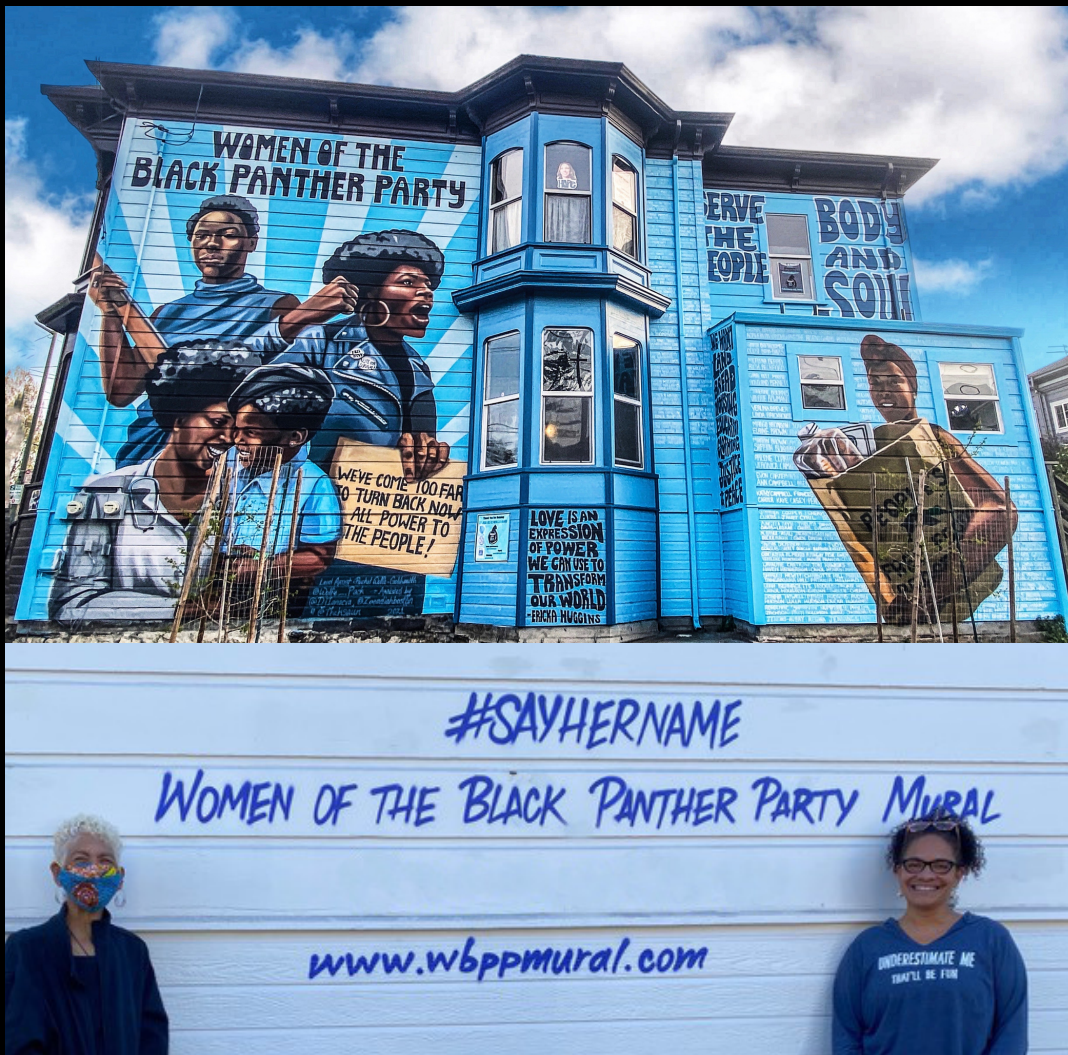
Indeed, women of the BPP challenged themselves and the men to rise to a higher standard, to dig deep inside themselves, and do the work required to rebuild Black and other poor communities. At the center of their struggles, was a love for humanity; a big heart for the people.

This activity book honors the lives of Women of the Black Panther Party, seen and unseen, alive and in the ancestral realm, who dedicated their lives to uplifting the quality of life for Black and poor communities. This book is a companion to the West Oakland Mural Project and the *#SayHerName Women of The Black Panther Party* mural dedicated to women of the BPP. We know that one mural and one little book will never do full justice to the beauty of these women's lives. However, it is a starting point for learning more. These pages contain a concentration of information about some of the women in the Black Panther Party; the most information that has ever been amassed. Yet, we hope that this small tribute will spark greater interest. May it function as a springboard for more research and the collection of more oral histories and materials that archive the lives of women of the BPP. More importantly, we hope that this activity book will inspire young women and men today to make a positive difference in their communities, wherever they live in the world.

Black Panther Party members, women and men alike, did not wait for the right time. They declared that the time for change was/is now.

All Power to all the People!

International Journal of Human Rights Education



Ericka Huggins and Jilchristina Vest in front of the Women of the Black Panther Party Mural

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