

## **Black Feminist Visions and the Politics of Healing in the Movement for Black Lives<sup>1</sup>**

“The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel; therefore, I can be free.” –Audre Lorde

### Introduction

Shalon Irving was an epidemiologist who studied inequality in health provision and outcomes. At 36, she was a lieutenant colonel in the uniformed ranks of the U.S. Public Health Service. She had a B.A. in sociology, two Masters degrees and a dual-subject PhD. In the summer of 2016, she found, to her delight, that she was pregnant. However, after giving birth to a healthy daughter, Soleil, she hadn’t been feeling well. She was lethargic and swollen. So, she called on the excellent team of doctors she had assembled for treatment. Shalon was prosperous, she had education, extensive knowledge, and a “rock solid support system.” None of that mattered. Her concerns were not treated with urgency. Three weeks after giving birth to her baby she collapsed on the floor of her home and died.

Erica Garner, an impactful activist in the Movement for Black Lives, and daughter of Eric Garner, who was strangled by a police officer on the street for selling loose cigarettes while pleading “I can’t breathe,” had a heart attack after the birth of her second child, a son, named Eric for her dad. She survived, and doctors discovered she had an enlarged heart. Erica was a new mother, but she didn’t stop working for justice for her father and the one black person killed every 21 hours by police in this country.<sup>1</sup> In a radio interview in November of 2017, Garner reflected on her health, noting that political struggle takes a personal toll. “Look at Kalief

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Browder's mother, she died of a broken heart. She had heart problems because she kept fighting for her son. Like I'm struggling right now with the stress and everything."<sup>2</sup> Three weeks after saying these words and three months after giving birth, Erica Garner suffered a fatal heart attack.

Dr. Shalon Irving and Erica Garner are both victims of a growing crisis of maternal mortality in the United States. America, rhetorically possessed of the most "advanced" medical apparatus in the world, nevertheless has the worst maternal mortality rate among industrialized nations, with almost 27 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. The next worst maternal mortality rate among peer countries, held by Britain, is only 1/3 that rate, with 9 maternal deaths per 100,000. As with all things American, race is the decisive factor in the likelihood that a new mother will have poor access to healthcare, that her care will be impacted by racial prejudice, and that she will die within the year of her child's birth.<sup>3</sup> Black mothers are 3 to 4 times or 243% more likely to die during birth or the post-partum period than their white counterparts. As with the illustrative stories of Dr. Shalon Irving and Erica Garner, the statistics bear out that this discrepancy is in no way tempered by economic or educational advantage. In New York City, for example, the Department of Health found that black college-educated mothers are more likely to have serious complications in pregnancy and childbirth than white high school graduates. They are also 12 times more likely to die.<sup>4</sup> And, trends in maternal morbidity have been worsening since 2000. Health researchers suggest that neither access to care nor prejudice in care providers can explain the whole of this colossal discrepancy. Instead, the culprit in the lethal heartbreak of new black mothers is chronic stress brought on by racism and sexism, a process that Dr. Arline Geronimus calls "weathering." This weathering changes the biology of black women, accelerating aging at the cellular level, making black women more susceptible to infection and causing the early-onset of chronic diseases, particularly hypertension and diabetes.<sup>5</sup>

The “weather” that comprises the nexus of structural oppression that black women have experienced since the dawn of modernity, marked by the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, has given rise to a distinct political philosophy. Black women have been situated as the gendered victims of domination perpetrated by white men and women and by black men, as well as the racialized carriers of the oppressive burden of care-for-others through the reality of a lethally disciplinary state and a political economy that proscribes, devalues, and excludes them from prosperity.

This essay proceeds in two broad sections: The first focuses on the long-term trauma of black women’s oppression, an oppression that operates in the interlocking registers of gender, race, and class and is both carried as a bodily and psychic memory and reinforced by daily experiences of devaluation, discrimination, domination, and exclusion.<sup>6</sup> The second part explores the kind of mobilization that acknowledges and names this trauma as well as charting a course toward recovery, healing, and justice. Under these two broad sections, I examine four distinct phenomena. In part one, I discuss the theory of historical trauma and its embodied impacts. I also review the empirical deprivations that black women suffer because the interlocked social forces of race and gender, operating as gendered racialization, damage their life chances via the mechanisms of both domination and oppression. In part two, I discuss the political implications of these realities and elaborate the idea that black women’s situation at the juncture of interlocked oppressions has given rise to a political philosophy that understands justice as a state that can arise only from confronting the lived experience (as opposed to the abstract conditions) of those at the margins of political, social and economic rights, concern, and privilege. Finally, I undertake an explanation of the ways that the Movement for Black Lives, popularly known as #BlackLivesMatter,<sup>7</sup> is seeking to institutionalize both the recognition and treatment of racial

trauma and the margin-to-center conception of justice that has long animated black women's political thought, into a set of beliefs and practices that participants call "healing justice." In sum, I argue that the Movement for Black Lives has developed a political philosophy, organizational practices, and mobilization strategies aimed at achieving these goals. The political philosophy is rooted in the insight that centering the most marginalized is the only path through which just practices and policies can be obtained. This view inspires both social practices and political action that are meant to answer the structural oppression that the most marginalized face. To do so, movement actors begin by acknowledging that feelings are not the opposite of intellect and that care and affirmation are not only personal, but critically, political resources. The social practices that characterize both individual orientation and organizational approaches to the contemporary black freedom struggle include encouraging what activist Elle Hearn calls "collaborative solidarity" and unapologetically defending black joy. These social practices support political action that consists in first, changing the mainstream American political conversation about white supremacy and anti-blackness, organizing direct action both on and offline, crafting the Movement for Black Lives political platform, and recruiting and supporting candidates to run on that platform. The movement's approach, which self-consciously integrates affective sustenance and practical politics is one that 21<sup>st</sup> century politics cannot do without if we hope to confront the most vexing problems that the last century has left to us.

## **PART I: MEMORY, TRAUMA, AND THE CONCEPT OF JUSTICE**

Iris Marion Young writes that oppression is "the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of ... society." These "systemic constraints ... are not necessarily the result of the intentions of a tyrant" they are instead "embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the

assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules.”<sup>8</sup> Oppression, then, is “the institutional constraint on self-development,” which always operates in concert with the related social condition of domination, which is “the institutional constraint on self-determination.”<sup>9</sup> These collective consequences accrue in an intersectional hierarchy with relative privilege coalescing at the top and lethal disadvantage pooling at the bottom. It is important to note that these consequences are not only distributive – that is, oppression’s harm is not only that it results in the maldistribution of rights and wealth. Additionally, oppression prevents self-development. One of the ways this happens is through the trauma that oppressive conditions inflict on those on the wrong slope of the hierarchy of privilege. Likewise, this trauma is not only something that afflicts individuals; there are individual and familial traumas that are so severe and persist for so long that they have broad social and political consequences. We call such effects *generational trauma*.

Though we often locate the political genesis of the Movement for Black Lives in police shootings, a more accurate assessment of movement motivations must consider what Audre Lorde calls the “institutional dehumanization” that plagues black life.<sup>10</sup> This institutional dehumanization includes racism, but also incorporates other fulcrums of oppression such as sexism, classism, and state and social violence predicated against people with non-conforming gender identities and manifests empirically in bodies and lives of people who belong to the marked social groups.

Although I speak specifically of black women here, psychologists note that any group of people who suffer long-term or ongoing systemic oppression may exhibit symptoms of generational trauma. Indeed, the bulk of the research on historical trauma focuses on post-genocidal societies including the “soul wound” sustained by the Indigenous people of the

Americas and the psychic strain borne by Jewish people after the holocaust.<sup>11</sup> Recently, “researchers have ... identified race-related historical trauma as a large-scale, systems-related macro-stressor that adversely impacts both the physical and mental health of the affected racial/ethnic group”<sup>12</sup> This kind of generational trauma “originates with the subjugation of a population by a dominant group.” To exhibit measurable effects, this subjugation must include: 1) sustained physical and psychological violence 2) segregation and/or displacement 3) economic deprivation 4) cultural dispossession. Under these conditions, the trauma of oppression can be so severe that it is passed down epigenetically from one generation to the next. For example, “Type 2 diabetes in adults may be caused by metabolic adaptations of the fetus in response to maternal malnutrition. The disorder is then propagated throughout subsequent generations via hyperglycemic pregnancies.”<sup>13</sup> In this way, the experience of subjugation affects an entire population.<sup>14</sup>

What generational trauma theory enables in public health is contextualization; it connects the past with the present and “creates an emotional and psychological release from blame and guilt about health status, empowers individuals and communities to address the root causes [rather than proximate causes] of poor health and allows for capacity building unique to culture, community, and social structure.”<sup>15</sup> By the same token, the acknowledgement of generational trauma can improve both our understanding of current political and socioeconomic phenomena and inform our responses to those realities. The Movement for Black Lives is one of the first to take up this insight and center it in their political philosophy, organizational practices, and mobilization strategies. In this sense, the movement mobilizes the memory of trauma and dehumanization for change.

What movement participants know is that it is impossible to organize people at the margins – those subject to oppression and its generational effects – without considering “the impact of oppressive trauma [that] creates cultural and individual wounding. [...Such wounding] becomes an impediment to the individual and collective’s ability to transform and negotiate their conditions.”<sup>16</sup> As a result, many of the organizations leading the work in the Movement for Black Lives, such as Black Lives Matter Global Network and BYP100 have official positions for “healing justice” directors, coordinators, and councils who draw personnel, inspiration, and knowledge from professional therapists, social workers, and other healers such as members of the Kindred Collective, a group founded in 2007 to provide counseling to victims of Hurricane Katrina. Healing justice then, is a collection of commitments and movement practices promoting the health, healing, and joy of black people, by acknowledging the trauma that oppression and domination cause, and by trying to understand and address both the historical root and proximate causes of the structural violence that impacts black lives.

### Black Women’s Empirical Deprivation

Black women’s trauma has been specific – characterized by domination and oppression that is enacted in line with racialized and sexist beliefs about what black women, often defined by their bodily capacity, are and are not good for. Shatema Threadcraft argues

Scholars of black women’s history agree that the development of a ‘distinctly feminist consciousness’ among black women began during the period of enslavement. [...] enslaved women devoted considerable attention to liberation from constraints on their bodies, which limited their ability to make choices regarding whether or not to engage in sexual relations, to reproduce, and to provide care. [...] they were expected to relinquish the most feminine capacities of their bodies to the use and control of white men, to make the most intimate capacities of their bodies available to slave masters and in truth, with regard to sexual relations, to all men. They were compelled to provide sexual services, they were forced to reproduce, they were forced to provide care, often wholly inadequate, to enslaved dependents and to provide far better resourced care to white children.<sup>17</sup>

She goes on to say that “racialized labor arrangements ensured that the white body had received far more than the physical and emotional support it was due while, conversely, the black body had received far less—a justice claim, and noticeably one that is not wholly about the problematic redistributive aspects of the arrangement.”<sup>18</sup> Today, the gendered racialization of the labor market continues to disadvantage black women due to race, sex, and for gender nonconforming women, transphobia. Black women make 67 cents for every dollar given to non-Hispanic white men. The Economic Policy Institute notes, that though the gender wage gap has decreased overall in the past 40 years, progress is actually slowing for black women. In a recent report, the researchers find “Despite the large gender disadvantage faced by all women, black women were near parity with white women in 1979. However, in 2016, white women’s wages grew to 76 percent of white men’s, compared to 67 percent for black women relative to white men.” In other words, for black women, the “trend is going the wrong way.”<sup>19</sup>

This trend obtains even though black women work more hours than white women and two-thirds of those in the workforce have undertaken some post-secondary education. “Between 2004 and 2014, median annual earnings for black women who worked full-time, year-round, declined to \$34,000, lower than for most groups of men or women in the country.” This is partly because 28 percent of black women are employed in the service sector, which tends to offer low wage jobs that often have unpredictable hours and offer neither healthcare coverage nor sick leave. This means that “while many black women have jobs that involve caring for the children and family members of others, they often can’t afford the same services for their own families.”<sup>20</sup>



As the structure of gendered racialization in the labor and care that has occupied black feminist political thought since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century remains largely the same, it serves up an historical oppression that lives not only in the social and epigenetic memory, but in the current lived experience of black women. Gillian White notes that these economic problems are compounded by social inequities: black girls are more likely than their white counterparts to be disciplined within public schools and punished within educational institutions; they're also more likely to be arrested or experience domestic violence." In addition, they are "more likely to be afflicted with serious illnesses and less likely to have the health care coverage to treat themselves."<sup>21</sup> Additionally, sociologist Matthew Desmond has found that "in high-poverty black neighborhoods, one male renter in 33 and one woman in 17 is evicted. In high-poverty white neighborhoods, in contrast, the ratio is 134:1 for men and 150:1 for women." Eviction is an economic stain that can be as detrimental to achieving basic needs as a felony conviction. Desmond reports "landlords like to say, 'I'll rent to you as long as you don't have an eviction or a conviction.' These twinned processes—eviction and conviction—work together to propagate economic disadvantage [...] poor black men are locked up while poor black women are locked out."<sup>22</sup>

A less discussed, but no less materially relevant deprivation suffered by black women is violence perpetrated by black men. Black women are battered by their partners at a rate 35% higher than white women, making domestic violence the leading cause of death among black women under the age of 34. However, "they are seldom viewed as proper victims and are rarely cast as total innocents." To wit, "when black women defend themselves, they are more likely to be criminalized, as per the example of Marissa Alexander, who was infamously slapped with a

mandatory minimum twenty-year prison sentence after firing a warning shot at her abusive ex-spouse.”<sup>23</sup>

As the #metoo movement (itself started by a black feminist organizer, Tarana Burke in 2006) reveals, any woman can be subject to male harassment or attack; however, due to the shared condition of racial oppression and its traumatic impacts on all black people, black women may be less inclined to report the patriarchal violence they might endure at the hands of black men. Brittney Cooper writes, “Black women’s knowledge production has always been motivated by a sense of care for black communities in a world where non-black people did not find value in the lives and livelihoods of these communities”<sup>24</sup> That means that it can be difficult to forego the care and love for black boys and men who, we know, are both under attack and attacking us. Mayisha Kai reflects, “I never told my parents about the first time I was hit. Not because I thought I wouldn’t be believed, but because even at 11, I understood that I was to protect this boy, even above myself.”<sup>25</sup>

These data show both the logic and vital necessity of black feminist political philosophy and a black feminist oppositional movement. Given the way that black women are situated at the conjunction of oppressions, it makes sense that when they consider what justice consists in, they are moved to center the most vulnerable.

## **PART II: HEALING AND JUSTICE FROM MARGIN-TO-CENTER**

In her influential book, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, bell hooks describes the special perspective of those who are positioned at the margins of society. “To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body.”<sup>26</sup> She contends that this marginality is reinforced daily as black people move through the world. In the small Kentucky town where she

grew up, the railroad tracks were the physical symbol of the margin. She writes, “across those tracks were paved streets, stores we could not enter, restaurants we could not eat in, and people we could not look directly in the face.”<sup>27</sup> Today, the margins are marked differently, by neighborhoods that are neglected and derided by city officials, stores that offer fewer choices yet charge higher prices, restaurants that serve food that leads to obesity, disease, and premature death, police who shake down and shoot bystanders and people suspected of minor crimes on sight and with impunity, and people who deny that any of these racialized phenomena amount to more than problems of personal responsibility. “Living as we [do] on the edge,” hooks explains, “we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. Hooks characterizes this awareness as a “mode of seeing” that reminds black people “of the existence of the whole universe,” a perspective that is “unknown to most of our oppressors.”<sup>28</sup>

By these lights, those who are relatively more privileged in the hierarchy of intersectional oppression lack a perspective that can inform them about the lived experience of the marginalized. Such a perspective is necessary to imagine and apply transformational, yet practical corrections to institutions that will otherwise (re)produce debilitating, often lethal unfairness. Alicia Garza, one of the founders of the Black Lives Matter Global Network, explains,

When we think about how we address problems in this country, we often start from a place of trickle-down justice. So, using white folks as the control, we say that well, if we make things better for white folks, then everybody else is gonna get free. But actually, it doesn't work that way. We have to address problems at the root. And when you deal with what's happening in black communities, it creates an effervescence – so, a bubble up, rather than a trickle down.<sup>29</sup>

However, organizing people who suffer the effects of generational trauma is no small task. The question is: what is required for healing justice to be possible? Nigerian-British journalist and activist Esther Armah argues that the path toward emotional healing begins by “finding and creating the language to describe [generational] trauma and articulating it as a reality; creating space to explore it; dealing with it by developing a counter-narrative.”<sup>30</sup> The Movement for Black Lives attempts to create language, make space, and build counter-narratives in a variety of ways. One is by cultivating practices of *collaborative solidarity* another is by encouraging *self-care*, and a third technique is by unapologetically celebrating, and *defending black joy*.

Each of these practices is undertaken with the guiding margin-to-center ethic as a foundation. This foundation is critical because it both helps to keep the reality and effects of trauma in view and avoids what Cathy J. Cohen calls “secondary marginalization,” which is the practice of defining certain members of a marginalized group as “innocent and worthy of mobilization, while others [are] labeled deviant, immoral, and bad.”<sup>31</sup> Secondary marginalization is the name of a social dynamic in movements that causes them to reproduce the privileged to oppressed social hierarchy that exists in the wider society. For example, in the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, LGBTQ people were marginalized in this way; in the Feminist Movement’s “second wave” women of color and their concerns were often forced to the sidelines; and, in the Gay Rights Movements of the 1980s and 90s, queer people of color were often excluded or ignored, with deadly consequences.

### *Collaborative solidarity*

The shaming of certain black people in an attempt to uphold the moral rightness of others takes place in both colloquial exhortations to “pull your pants up,” and “take off that hoodie,” and the practices movement organizations employ to distribute resources – toward college funds

and job training rather than support for sex workers or the incarcerated, for example.<sup>32</sup> The Movement for Black Lives endeavors to avoid this pitfall by demanding that social problems be approached with an intersectional lens from the point of view of the most impacted.

“Intersectionality” and its theoretical “grandmothers,” as Charlene Caruthers puts it, “double jeopardy,”<sup>33</sup> “triple oppression,”<sup>34</sup> “simultaneity,”<sup>35</sup> and “interlocking oppressions,”<sup>36</sup> all arise from black feminist theory and describe the same social fact: that is, oppressive institutions and dominative arrangements of power are interconnected and cannot be examined separately, especially because their effects are impossible to disentangle in people’s lived experiences.

To accomplish this goal, the movement has developed the language of “unapologetic blackness” to ensure that “disreputable” black folks will not be cast from the circle of movement concern, political analysis, and organizational work. This is the reason that the Movement for Black Lives deliberately foregrounds issues such as violence against trans black people, support for sex workers and the incarcerated, as well as the abolition of police and prisons.

The movement endeavors to avoid secondary marginalization not only in its public campaigns, but also in its internal organizational practices. This requires participants and leaders to “make space” for and be willing to learn from those whose voices are not often heard –this is the heart of the process of what Elle Hearn, a black trans woman and activist calls “collaborative solidarity.” Charlene Carruthers, the National Director of BYP 100, explains it this way:

It is a difficult and heart-wrenching struggle, [because] when you commit black queer feminist values, you actually have to struggle with [people] and not throw them underneath the bus or throw things under the carpet. You must name what you don’t know and go to people who do know way more than you know and we have a responsibility to actually put our values into practice and to struggle with that and not be perfect. Perfection isn’t the goal, but integrity and accountability to our values is.”<sup>37</sup>

Kei Williams, an organizer with Black Lives Matter Network New York, interprets it this way:

we need to center to the most marginalized and the most marginalized need to lead the work [...] Collaborative solidarity says whenever we build, from the beginning you must center those most marginalized. [...] In practice, this looks like always going to the community that's being impacted and never speaking on their behalf. Or coming in our capes and saying "this is the work that we've been doing, you guys get on board with this." <sup>38</sup>

For example, Williams reports:

recently, [...] the confederate flags that were hanging up in [an apartment building] on the Lower East Side was a hot topic. Those flags had been there for more than five months. All of a sudden, someone took a picture and it went viral and then there was a community call out for what should happen. And some white allies of mine reached out to me and their response was, "we want a build a huge sign, lit up with lights, that says Black Lives Matter and put it directly across the street from this apartment building." What I urged them to do was actually contact a community liaison – someone who lives in that building. Because yes, you might come down here with that sign, but once you leave that sign, what is the impact it's going to have on that community? [...] At the end of that block, there's already a police precinct. And so police are commonly driving up on the sidewalks, undercover cops are commonly riding around in that area [...] there are huge flood lights that beam into the windows every single night – they come on at about 11 o'clock and they don't go off until about 5:30 in the morning. This community is already hyper-policed. So, you bringing this huge sign and bringing more attention – how does that impact the community once you go back to your apartment in your gentrified neighborhood of Brooklyn? <sup>39</sup>

Centering the marginalized is not a matter of designating the winner of what is sometimes derisively called the "oppression Olympics," because it is not a matter of determining whether one individual or group's pain is more valid than another's. Instead, the centering of the marginalized is a pragmatic, experience-based solution to the problem of how to envision and enact a more just society given that abstract universalisms have a track record of failing all those who do not inhabit the specific body and structural position of white upper-class manhood that stands-in for the universal human.

*Defending black joy*

Black joy is the defiant affirmation of blackness in spite of the material and psychic deprivation that often marks members of the group. Importantly, this kind of joy is experienced by both the individual and those participating in the group. It is what Emile Durkheim called “collective effervescence,” a sensation of euphoria that one feels in the presence of others who are aligned in thought and action. Deborah Gould notes “such happenings have an almost sacred quality to them.”<sup>40</sup> They induce participants not only to cognitively realize, but to feel the potential power to affect change that they might wield, if they continue to act in concert – with and for each other.

Alicia Garza, writes, “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.” It is the anchoring of the movement for black lives in this defiant affirmation that undergirds the group consciousness of the movement participants. And, the willingness to participate in this affirmation is one of the defining practices of membership in the collectivity. Whether at organizational meetings, movement-wide convenings, at demonstrations or on social media, organizers are intentional about making space for language and practice that celebrates black joy and develops a narrative to counter anti-blackness. For example, a common chant at protest begins with the call “unapologetically” and is answered “black!” and continues from the caller “unapologetically” bringing the answer from the crowd “black, black, black, black!” Another goes, “I love black people! You don’t love black people? What’s wrong with you?” The last line is repeated in a polyrhythmic round that circles the crowd, which acts as a chorus, until a caller anchors the chant again with, “I love black people!” starting the joyous communal claiming of black-identity over again.

This kind of affirmation of blackness is not entirely new. For example, the *négritude* movement, an African diasporic movement of the 1930s and 40s, expressed an artistic aesthetic that aimed to uplift the beauty of black cultures and point out their profound influence on the world. Likewise, the slogan “black is beautiful,” which rose to popularity in the late 1960s, along with the afro hairstyle, marked a period in which black Americans sought to deliberately embrace phenotypical characteristics that have come to define blackness and to develop a loving aesthetic celebrating these traits in the face of the devaluation and disparagement aimed at them under white supremacy. However, the current movement’s approach to this affirmative politics is distinct in that it is avowedly feminist and centers the most maligned – the dark-skinned, those with the kinkiest hair, those who are fat, those who are disabled, those who are gender non-conforming, and those who have offered their bodies to the labor of sex work. In the contemporary movement, the affirmation of black beauty and brilliance begins with the illumination and celebration of those who have, in the past, been hidden from view, thus offering standards of beauty and value that emanate from the margins.

Declarations like this one penned by social justice educator and blogger Cody Charles are common practice among people immersed in the cultural tide created by the movement. He writes,

“This world tells me constantly that this Black, FAT, queer body does not deserve joy. Not ever. It tells me that my trauma should consume me. It tells me that I should wait patiently, expecting violence at any moment. It tells me that joy can never reside here, in my body; only shame, guilt, and struggle can sleepover. But I got another plan in mind. I’m going to claim joy for myself. [...because] Black Joy is resistance. And Black Joy is tradition. Today I’m not interested in exploring struggle, I’m choosing to center Black Joy.”<sup>41</sup>

This frank declamation of unapologetic black beauty is, in the margin-to-center philosophy, the only way to defend black joy and, in turn, harness that joy as a mobilizing resource. Importantly,



this bedrock commitment is not to the “inclusion” of the marginalized among the rest, but instead a mandate that serves both the ethical and political purposes of preventing secondary marginalization and therefore constructing a politics in which “justice for all” is a real possibility rather than a rhetorical recitation.

Another example of the affirmative social practice of the movement is exhibited on social media. The unremitting tide of stories documenting the abuse and killing of black people is pushed back by hashtags like #BlackGirlMagic, which caption images and descriptions acknowledging and praising the accomplishments of black women or, #MelaninOnFleek, which captions pictures of black people dressed up, expressing their personal style. #YouGoodMan, encourages black men to reach out to each other and check in regarding stress and mental health, and #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies is a hilarious parade of memes and gifs that lovingly poke fun at common colloquialisms and cultural habits that black people are likely to encounter on the last Thursday of November.

Importantly, this joyous affirmation is not just about making people feel good. Its more precise impacts are that it first, helps black people *understand themselves* in the world in a different way and second, acts as a tool for mobilization. Gould explains, “in a world where impersonal, abstract forces” of oppression “shape daily lives and can generate sentiments of being out of control, of inefficacy, of helplessness and hopelessness, social movements are often a space that engenders rich and textured counterfeelings.”<sup>42</sup> As Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes, “most folks I know come to activist spaces longing to heal ... The good kind of healing. Healing that is affordable, has childcare and no stairs, doesn't misgender us or disrespect our disabilities or sex work, that believes us when we're hurt and listens when we say what we need.”<sup>43</sup> Critically, this kind of affirmation helps to build and maintain organizations.

We know that selective incentives help people to participate in activities that are costly and may be dangerous – there is always a pleasure in solidarity and the technology of social media have allowed the movement to reshape even casual observers’ relationship to blackness.

A movement culture like that in the Movement for Black Lives, which self-consciously understands collaborative solidarity and the defense of black joy as part of the purpose of their political action, provides a unique opportunity for participants to heal themselves in and through the political work of securing justice for the most marginalized. To defend black joy, in this sense, is a political act of not only joy, but *jouissance*, which, in this context, is the feeling of mastery in being the author of one’s own experience and having the authority to explode the taken-for-granted. This is what allows people involved in the movement to create a political program that challenges and changes the terms of the American political conversation on racism and white supremacy, to have the audacity to collectively author a policy platform that is available online in six different languages, and to establish initiatives like the Electoral Justice Project,<sup>44</sup> which seeks to recruit and support black candidates who advocate for those policy proposals in running for political office.

These kinds of practices, in combination with the official institutional space that movement organizations have made for healing practitioners of various kinds – from licensed therapists to masseuses, chiropractors, and intuitive witches – are an essential, yet often overlooked and devalued part of giving movement participants the individual capacity, organizational strength, and ideational clarity that can help them find practical political paths through the world as it is, toward one that is capable of justice, properly understood.

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Sinyangwe, “The Police Violence Report: March 2015,” Mapping Police Violence retrieved on Jan 4, 2018 at <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>

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<sup>2</sup> Katie Mitchell, “After Erica Garner We Need ToTalk About How Maternal Mortality Affects Black Women,” December 31, 2017 retrieved on Jan 4, 2018 at <https://www.bustle.com/p/after-erica-garners-death-we-need-to-talk-about-how-maternal-mortality-affects-black-women-7739678>

<sup>3</sup> Joia Crear Perry, “The Black Maternal Mortality Rate in the U.S. is an International Crisis,” *The Root*, Sept. 30, 2016 retrieved on Jan 3, 2018 at <https://www.theroot.com/the-black-maternal-mortality-rate-in-the-us-is-an-inter-1790857011>

<sup>4</sup> New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (2016). *Severe Maternal Morbidity in New York City, 2008–2012*. New York, NY.

<sup>5</sup> Nina Martain and Renee Montagne, “Nothing Protects Black Women from Dying in Pregnancy and Childbirth,” *Pro Publica* and NPR, Dec 7, 2017 retrieved on Jan 2, 2018 at <https://www.propublica.org/article/nothing-protects-black-women-from-dying-in-pregnancy-and-childbirth>

<sup>6</sup> Interlocking or intersectional oppression and its structural consequences is a hallmark of black feminist philosophy. See Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua ed., *This Bridge Called My Back: Fourth Edition* (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 2015) and Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> #BlackLivesMatter is the popular hashtag that catalyzed the current iteration of the black freedom struggle in 2014, it is also the name of one organization involved in the movement. However, beginning in 2015, individuals and organizations involved in this movement have introduced the name The Movement for Black Lives in order to acknowledge that the movement is broader than either the hashtag or the organization that bears its name. In addition, in 2016 The Movement for Black Lives, which is a de-centralized collective of organizations and individuals working in myriad capacities from communications to law and education, released a policy platform that serves as the codified collection of movement positions on contemporary issues, including both short and long-term policy proposals <https://policy.m4bl.org/platform/>

<sup>8</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 41.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 37

<sup>10</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister, Outsider: Speeches and Essays*, (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007): 39.

<sup>11</sup> For reference see: Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, “Oyate Ptayela: Rebuilding the Lakota Nation through Addressing Historical Trauma among Lakota Parents,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 2, nos. 1-2 (1999): 109-126; Rachel Yehuda et al., “Holocaust Exposure Induced Intergenerational Effects on FKBP5 Methylation” *Biological Psychiatry* 80, no. 5 (2016): 372-80; Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Michelle Sotero, “A Conceptual Model of Historical Trauma: Implications for Public Health Practice and Research,” *Journal of Health Disparities Research and Practice*, 1, no. 1 (2006): 96.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>14</sup> See also, DR Williams, HW Neighbors, and JS Jackson, “Racial/ethnic discrimination and health: findings from community studies,” *American Journal of Public Health* 93, no.2 (2008): 200-208; Larry Higginbottom, Omar Reid, and Sekou Mims, *Post Traumatic Slavery Disorder* (New York: Xlibris, 2004); Rachel Yehuda, et al., “Transgenerational Effects of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Babies of Mothers Exposed to World Trade Center Attacks During Pregnancy,” *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism* 90, no. 7 (2005): 4115-4118; Steven Southwick et al., “Resilience definitions, theory, and challenges: interdisciplinary perspectives,” *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, no. 5 (2014).

<sup>15</sup> Sotero 2006, 102.

<sup>16</sup> Yolo Akili, “The Immediate Need for Emotional Justice” *Crunk Feminist Collective*, Nov 16, 2011 retrieved on Jan 2, 2018 at <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2011/11/16/the-immediate-need-for-emotional-justice/>

<sup>17</sup> Shetema Threadcraft, *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016): 10.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Valerie Wilson, Janell Jones, Kayla Blado, and Elsie Gould, “Black Women Have to Work 7 months in 2017 to be Paid the same as White Men in 2016” Economic Policy Institute, July 28, 2017 retrieved on Jan 3, 2018 at <https://www.epi.org/blog/black-women-have-to-work-7-months-into-2017-to-be-paid-the-same-as-white-men-in-2016/>

<sup>20</sup> Gillian B. White, “Black Women: Supporting Their Families with Few Resources,” *The Atlantic*, Jun 12, 2017 retrieved on Jan 3, 2018 at <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/06/black-women-economy/530022/>

<sup>21</sup> Gillian B. White, “Black Women: Supporting Their Families with Few Resources,” *The Atlantic*, Jun 12, 2017 retrieved on Jan 3, 2018 at <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/06/black-women-economy/530022/>

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- <sup>22</sup> Matthew Desmond, *How Housing Matters: Poor Black Women Are Evicted at Alarming Rates, Setting Off a Chain of Hardship* (New York: MacArthur Foundation, 2014).
- <sup>23</sup> Sikivu Hutchison, “The Wars Inside: Black Women and Deadly Intimate Partner Violence,” *Huffington Post* May 15, 2017 retrieved on January 2, 2018 at [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-wars-inside-black-women-and-deadly-intimate-partner\\_us\\_58f0644fe4b048372700d72a](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-wars-inside-black-women-and-deadly-intimate-partner_us_58f0644fe4b048372700d72a)
- <sup>24</sup> Brittney Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*, (Bloomington, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017): 2
- <sup>25</sup> Mayisha Kai, “Dancing With the Devil We Know,” *The Root*, July 26, 2017 retrieved on January 3, 2018 at <https://www.theroot.com/dancing-with-the-devils-we-know-what-the-cdc-s-new-in-1797219681>
- <sup>26</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston, South End Press, 2000).
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.
- <sup>29</sup> TED interview with the Founders of Black Lives Matter. Retrieved on July 20, 2017 at [https://www.ted.com/talks/alicia\\_garza\\_patrisse\\_cullors\\_and\\_opal\\_tometi\\_an\\_interview\\_with\\_the\\_founders\\_of\\_black\\_lives\\_matt](https://www.ted.com/talks/alicia_garza_patrisse_cullors_and_opal_tometi_an_interview_with_the_founders_of_black_lives_matt)
- <sup>30</sup> Dalila-Johari Paul, “Emotional Justice: What Black Women Want and Need,” Dec 3, 2015 retrieved on Jan 2, 2018 at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/03/emotional-justice-what-black-women-want-and-need>
- <sup>31</sup> Cathy J. Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999): 346.
- <sup>32</sup> Respectability politics and secondary marginalization are a common feature of the way social movement organizations prioritize issues, frame issues and distribute resources. It is not a phenomenon limited to black social movements. See: Deva Woodly, *The Politics of Common Sense* (Oxford 2015), Chapter 3, on the gay respectability politics that undergirded the turn toward marriage in gay politics during the late 1990s and early 2000s.
- <sup>33</sup> A reference to the pamphlet “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” by Frances M. Beal (1969).
- <sup>34</sup> Phrase attributed to Claudia Jones, a prominent member of the Communist Party in the U.S., discussed at length in Angela Davis’ *Women, Race, and Class*. 1983. New York: Vintage Books
- <sup>35</sup> Combahee River Collective Statement, April 1977 retrieved on March 15, 2017 at <http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html>
- <sup>36</sup> Patricia Hill Collins. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge
- <sup>37</sup> Black Feminism and the Movement for Black Lives panel with Barbara Smith, Charlene Carruthers, and Reina Gossett (recorded remarks), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Creating Change Conference 2016 retrieved on March 20, 2017 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eV3nnFheQRo>
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- <sup>41</sup> Cody Charles, “Black Joy, We Deserve It,” *Medium*, Feb 17, 2017 retrieved on Jan 4, 2018 at <https://medium.com/reclaiming-anger/black-joy-we-deserve-it-1ab8dc7569b1>
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- <sup>43</sup> Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha “a Not-so-brief Personal History of the Healing Justice Movement 2010-2016” retrieved on January 2, 2018 at <http://micemagazine.ca/issue-two/not-so-brief-personal-history-healing-justice-movement-2010%E2%80%932016>
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