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#RESISTCAPITALISM TO #FUNDBLACKFUTURES

BLACK YOUTH, POLITICAL ECONOMY, AND THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY BLACK RADICAL IMAGINATION

David C. Turner III



FIGURE 1. CHARLENE CARRUTHERS, NATIONAL DIRECTOR OF BYP 100 (CENTER) WITH OTHER ACTIVISTS PROTESTING THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHIEFS OF POLICE (IACP) CONFERENCE IN CHICAGO IN OCTOBER OF 2015
PHOTO CREDIT: BYP 100 TWITTER PAGE @BYP100

“Stop the cops, and FUND BLACK FUTURES!” “NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE! DIVEST FROM POLICE!” These chants echoed through the hall of a Chicago-based credit union for police officers from the counter, where organizers from the Black Youth Project 100 (BYP 100)¹ took over the main lobby of the bank in protest of state-sanctioned violence in Chicago, the most notable in recent memory being the release of the tape of the murder of Laquan McDonald. McDonald was allegedly armed with a knife, and was gunned down with sixteen shots by Jason Van Dyke, a white Chicago police officer who was bailed out of jail through the fundraising efforts of that same credit union. Wearing black sweaters with the phrase, “Fund Black Futures” emblazed across

1. byp100.org

their chests in red and green letters, the organizers made explicit connections to the financial investment in the policing of Black communities and the divestment from social services and education that had plagued the city of Chicago. Speaking about urban decay and what Joe Soss, Richard Fording, and Sanford Schram refer to as neoliberal paternalism,² in other words, the ways that poor Black people in urban cities across America are forced to be governed in a series of racialized policies and practices that shape a deficit oriented framework for their proximity to poverty, members of BYP 100, who were largely femme presenting and young, made connections to the political economy and racialized state-sanctioned violence. They used direct action to make their grievances explicit during MLK weekend in a tactful series of events to combat the ahistorical narratives of Dr. King that domesticate his views.³

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY BLACK RADICAL IMAGINATION: ENGAGING A CRITICAL BLACK YOUTH POLITICS

When I was an undergraduate, one of my Africana Studies professors had us read *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* by Robin D.G. Kelley for an Africana Political Thought class in the spring of 2012. Trayvon Martin had just been murdered, the Marissa Alexander case was slowly gaining national recognition, and I was closing my second year out as the president of the Organization of Africana Studies, the student arm of the Department of Africana Studies at California State University, Dominguez Hills. We also had to read Michael Dawson's *Black Visions: Roots of Contemporary African American Political Ideologies*. In both of these works, Dawson and Kelley call for activists to move beyond one mode of analysis and mode of being, and adopt a multiplicity of political ideologies to gain freedom, with a center

2. Joe Soss, Richard C. Fording, and Sanford F. Schram, *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

3. This story was in part assembled through a combination of corporate media accounts (the *Chicago Tribune*) and of Twitter accounts of the day, mainly from the twitter page of BYP 100: twitter.com/BYP_100.

on complete social transformation.⁴ They encouraged us to dream and inspired us to work toward a radical future, not just to fight against white supremacy but to fight for something: to fight for us, our futures, our lives. This would become my introduction to the ideological framing of our current movement: The Movement for Black Lives.

I did not know it then, but three years later, I would be a doctoral student at UC Berkeley and knee deep in the Movement for Black Lives. The example that BYP 100 set for us during MLK Weekend reminds us of the radical potential of Black youth politics. Here you have folks—who are guided by a Black queer feminist lens—organize for redistribution with a thorough critique of the political economy and its connections to state-sanctioned violence. They see the connections to the investment in carceral technologies of violence⁵ and the divestment in their lives through the neoliberal marriage between the state and public services.⁶ I participated in BlackXMas actions, which were a series of events across six cities nationwide to disrupt the consumerist culture of capitalism and private complicity in the assault on Black lives. Members of the Afrikan Black Coalition, a Black youth-led organization made up of students from California's institutions of higher education, pressured the University of California system to divest twenty-five million dollars from the private prison industry, which represents the worst of racialized neoliberal capitalism.⁷ In August of 2016, over fifty organizations came together to put forward an M4BL (Movement For Black Lives) Policy Platform.⁸ In this platform, the common thread was a focus on state-sanctioned *and* funded models of violence, and they all became targets.

4. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press Books, 2002); Michael J. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

5. Rashad Shabazz, *Spatializing blackness: Architectures of confinement and black masculinity in Chicago*. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015.)

6. Soss, et al., *Disciplining the Poor*; Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

7. Anthony Williams, Afrikan Black Coalition Accomplishes UC Prison Divestment!" Accessed April 24 2017, available at afrikanblackcoalition.org.

8. policy.m4bl.org/platform.

Within the social movement repertoire of this new generation, the digital literacy of young activists was activated in order to spread a coherent message about the need to divest monies from oppressive entities and invest them in the growth of our communities, which can be seen in Figure 3.⁹ In conjunction with the assault that Black students took on their universities across the country, we are witnessing something that is otherwise unprecedented: the radical potential of Black youth organizing and politics.

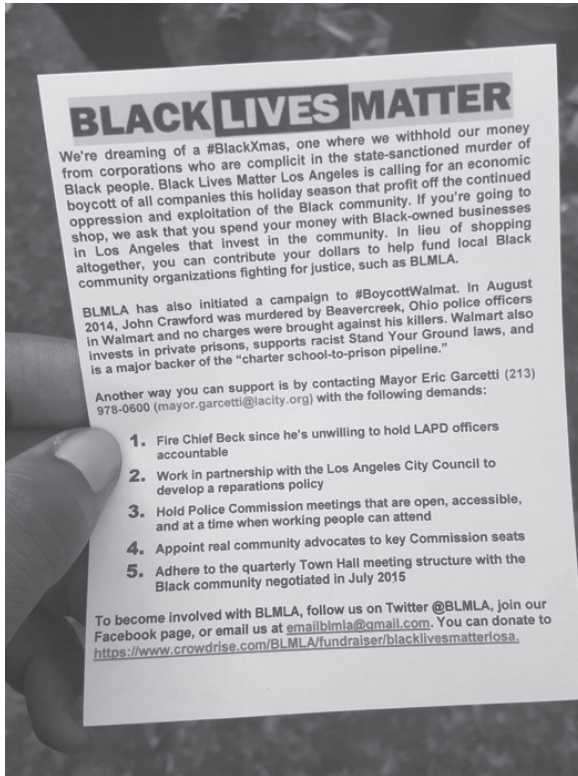


FIGURE 2. PHOTO OF THE LEAFLET THAT MEMBERS OF BLACK LIVES MATTER LOS ANGELES PASSED OUT DURING A BLACK THEMED "CHRISTMAS CAROL" EVENT AT THE GROVE, AN AFFLUENT SHOPPING CENTER IN LOS ANGELES, IN DECEMBER 2015.

PHOTO CREDIT: AUTHOR.

9. Charles Harlod Frederick Davis, "Dream Defending, On-Campus and Beyond: A Multi-sited Ethnography of Contemporary Student Organizing, the Social Movement Repertoire, and Social Movement Organization in College." PhD diss., University of Arizona, 2015; Michael J. Dumas, "A Cultural Political Economy of School Desegregation in Seattle," *Eric* 113, no. 4 (2011): 703-34.



FIGURE 3. MATERIAL FROM THE MOVEMENT FOR BLACK LIVES' INVEST-DIVEST CAMPAIGN, EMPHASIZING THE NEED TO INVEST IN YOUTH, PARTICULARLY BLACK GIRLS

PHOTO CREDIT: M4BL POLICY TEAM

I call this moment, and the general frame for the movement “Critical Black Youth Politics.” Critical Black Youth Politics serves three major purposes, which are situated in 1) intersectional analyses of power, oppression, and hegemony; 2) radical participatory praxis; and 3) collective resistance and healing. I do not pose these as tenets of a new theoretical model. I do, however, offer these as a way to engage the types of politics that Black youth are engaged in and committed to practicing.

INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSES OF POWER, OPPRESSION, AND HEGEMONY

The term “critical” in Critical Black Youth Politics serves a specific function, and that function is rooted in an analysis of the ways that hegemony, dominance, and social stratification shape our everyday lives. This particular segment of Critical Black Youth Politics is predicated on the idea that power has an influence in our collective life outcomes, and that by naming the ways that this power operates, one can work to transform the context where power is situated. Without that analysis, specifically of race, class,

and gender, one can be motivated by social justice to try and create change, but not have a critique of social oppression, which Daniel Solorzano and Dolores Bernal call “conformist resistance.”¹⁰ Without being critical of oppression, one can potentially reinforce respectability, and reinforce the standards of “who” gets to be advocated for and who gets to be a political actor.

RADICAL PARTICIPATORY PRAXIS

The Ella Baker model of leadership, even though it can be difficult and long, has become the central model for organizing among Black youth.¹¹ This is rooted in the notion that the people who are the most impacted by interlocking systems of oppression are the experts in their own experiences, that they have the knowledge to liberate themselves. This tradition of participation and inclusion fueled the Mississippi freedom movement and organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC),¹² which are being adopted today by organizations such as the Black Liberation Collective,¹³ the national organization that helped to coordinate the #StudentBlackout movement.¹⁴

COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE AND HEALING

In a memoir with Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, Pedro Noguera recounts his personal connections to youth resistance and activism.¹⁵ Through a critical reflection on youth studies and his own growth as an activist, Noguera recalls how he learned to organize, the methods used to organize, the campaigns he either launched

10. Daniel G. Solorzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal, “Examining Transformational Resistance Through a Critical Race and Latcrit Theory Framework: Chicana and Chicano Students in an Urban Context,” *Urban Education* 36, no. 3 (2001): 308–42.

11. Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black freedom movement: A radical democratic vision*. (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

12. Chares M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition of the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

13. For more information on Black Liberation Collective, see blackliberationcollective.org.

14. Black Liberation Collective, “On Urgency, Frustration, and Love: A Love Letter to Black Students,” December 10, 2015, accessed April 19, 2016, available at blavity.com.

15. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, eds., *Youth Resistance Research and Theories of Change* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

or took part in, and the state of youth resistance studies now. Noguera warns young scholars not to conflate all forms of opposition with “resistance,” or what Solorzano and Bernal will call “self-defeating resistance.” Noguera suggests that agency should not be: “My school is bad, so I’m going to cut school”; Noguera asserts that if we are to think about resistance as a precursor to building social movements and as agency, it should be a student “organizing a walk out.” The tension point, in this case, is what we actually count as agency, and what gets to be resistance. Collective resistance and healing is dedicated to two aims. First, it is dedicated to resistance that seeks to build movements that can change the material conditions for everyone in their respective communities. Second, it posits that resistance to systems of domination and oppression are learned skills that can help one heal from the impact of systemic oppression.¹⁶ *Critical Black Youth Politics* takes all forms of resistance into account, and suggests that riots are just as important for democratic repair as nonviolent civil disobedience.¹⁷

AGAINST THE NEOLIBERAL TURN IN BLACK (YOUTH) POLITICS

Even though Black youth are positioned in civil society as amoral, deviant, and in need of state intervention, young Black people across the country are engaging in a new wave of intersectional Black organizing that has not been seen on such a popular scale in this country. These young people—my generation—are currently providing a counter to the cultural matrix that some scholars use to examine the plight of young Black people without seeking the transformation of the context that caused said plight.¹⁸ This deficit model of understanding fails to capture political agency, and presents Black youth as merely static in our conditions. However, for some scholars, engaged Black youth are not enough. Technologies of control are the only interventions that come from scholarship

16. Shawn A. Ginwright, *Black Youth Rising: Activism and Radical Healing in Urban America* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010).

17. Juliet Hooker. “Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of US Black Politics: From Democratic Sacrifice to Democratic Repair.” *Political Theory* 44, no. 4 (2016): 448-469.

18. Orlando Patterson, ed., *The Cultural Matrix: Understanding Black Youth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

that focus on our “decisions” to buy fast food and not catch the bus, without questioning the structural conditions that lead to such decisions.

The political and intellectual left, even with claims to social justice and social change, still cannot reconcile the call of Black people to make their lives matter to a state that is literally invested in their demise.¹⁹ The unsettling notion of Black Lives Matter highlights a fundamental flaw in racial equity reform logic: that Blackness cannot be reconciled in an anti-Black state with a political economy built on their backs and indigenous land. This is why claims to “reform” are largely absent from the rhetoric of Black youth organizers in this movement. We recognize the failures of attempting to be incorporated into a state dependent on our suffering, and that is why we are calling for abolition, redistribution, and intervention into the settler colonial project of expendable Blackness.²⁰ We also recognize what Lester Spence refers to as the neoliberal turn in Black politics.²¹ As corporations and the privatization of activism have invested interests in our continued racialized suffering,²² we have largely rejected the calls of “efficiency” and “participation” in a polity where marginalization is its only frame of reference.²³

MOVING FORWARD:
ENGAGING CRITICAL BLACK YOUTH
POLITICS AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY

While a critique of capitalism is not new at all to radical Black organizing,²⁴ it certainly is not one of the most popular frames of reference when thinking about racial justice. Yet, even with a

19. Anthony Williams. “The Road to Private Prison Divestment.” *Boom: A Journal of California* 6, no. 2 (2016): 98–103.

20. Jared Sexton, “Unbearable Blackness,” *Cultural Critique* 178, no. 90 (2015): 159–78; Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

21. Lester Spence, “The Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 14, no. 3–4 (2013): 139–59. Available at tandfonline.com.

22. Michael J. Dumas, “‘Losing An Arm’: Schooling as a Site of Black Suffering,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 17, no. 1 (2013): 1–29. Available at tandfonline.com.

23. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

24. Joshua Bloom, and Waldo E. Martin. *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.

slew of Black activists who have been influenced by radical leftist thought such as Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, Huey P. Newton, and others, somehow liberal racial integrationism finds its way to the center of analysis for scholars who are interested in justice, either through critique or through endorsement. While the conflating of Black power with Black capitalism has been analyzed as a point of departure for radical Black movements,²⁵ our new generation of activists are well aware of the mistakes of their predecessors. Young Black people, who have lived through events such as Hurricane Katrina,²⁶ the “Great Black Depression,” and America’s first Black president, have all but abandoned traditional social movement frames of political participation and incorporation. As Eddie Glaude writes in his new work, *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves America’s Soul*, he states, “They came of age politically with President Barack Obama in office and now they bathed in the intense rage of Ferguson. In so many ways, these young people were unprecedented.”²⁷ Black youth are engaging in forms of activism that deeply connect systems of oppression, especially how these systems are monetized, and no singular theoretical analysis can possibly capture all of it. Our youth are giving us new ways to reimagine and think about the world: it’s about time we pay attention.

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26. Vincanne Adams, *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith: New Orleans in the wake of Katrina* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

27. Eddie S. Glaude, *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves America’s Soul* (New York: Broadway Books, 2016), 4.

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