Making a Movement

Marcia Chatelain

American Book Review, Volume 37, Number 3, March/April 2016, p. 6
(Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/abr.2016.0041*

Making a Movement

Marcia Chatelain

When does a moment become a movement?

Is it in when the wails of grief over a person gunned down by police or a neighborhood vigilante become a rallying cry for change?

Is it when a three-word slogan or sixteen-character hashtag deftly represents the fight to dismantle racial injustice, to uproot economic inequality, and to end state violence?

Or does the transformation begin when organizers appear on cable news, are evoked by presidential candidates, or are welcomed to the White House?

Since the late summer of 2014, when police officer Darren Wilson killed teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the world has witnessed the evolution of an unprecedented movement. At every moment of this process, this movement has elicited a number of questions and debates about social change in the twenty-first century. The movement that calls itself Black Lives Matter has provided new models of a freedom struggle—from what leaders look like to what direct action requires to how the seeds of a struggle are planted in ground fertilized by social media.

As a historian of African American people in the twentieth century and an admirer of Black Lives Matter, I'm often asked if I think that this movement "measures up" to the so-called Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. This line of inquiry—whether it comes from a place of wonder or is wrapped in a tone of dismissiveness—reveals why accessible scholarship on social movements is desperately needed. Although recent monographs on black freedom movements have used nuance and texture to dispute a sanitized, Hollywood version of the 1950s and 1960s, it is still common to hear misunderstandings of Civil Rights and how movements coalesce and define themselves. These constant mischaracterizations imperil rich storytelling and the process of building a truly democratic state. So, I relish the opportunity to participate in this special issue devoted to the critical work of social movements and to provide a few reflections on a momentous movement.

We are not without texts that allow us to answer questions about the current activism landscape, from Barbara Ransby's groundbreaking biography of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee founder Ella Baker to Danielle Maguire's masterful reconsideration of civil rights as a resistance movement against the sexual exploitation of black women. Recent scholarship that has centered women and gender analysis in the history of civil rights has provided an important warning call to activists about the way sexism can undermine the most principled of movements. Women's and gender studies gives us the critical frames for scholars to demand an accounting for the women seen and not heard in movement leadership. These intellectual forces have sparked creative writers, historians, and documentarians to capture the stories of activists who struggled with the seemingly disparate aims of feminism and anti-racism. The tensions that sparked the introduction of the "woman question" into the mid twentieth century race moment have not disappeared, but the ability to articulate an intersectional justice movement is due, in part, to the rewriting of the master narrative of great men leading great movements.

Similarly, the thoughtful inclusion of violence against transgendered women within the Black Lives Matter platform highlights just how unbound today's activists are by earlier movements' dependence on only welcoming bodies that comply with normative, and even heroic, standards. The brilliance of Black Lives Matter is its resistance from the character assassination of the victims of state violence and their insistence that black lives are substantive and valuable. In a piece for *The Feminist Wire*, movement co-creator Alicia Garza wrote:

> Black Lives Matter…goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all. 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. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement.

Garza, with movement co-founders Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi's, unapologetic acts of self-defense for black lives and for black women's existence, are the clearest distinction from past movements that believed that gender justice was either unsuitable as an organizing principle, or even worse, considered feminism and womanism as parasites on the fight for liberation. Although organizations such as SNCC, the NAACP, and Congress of Racial Equality included feminists and womanists in ranks, these voices were never able to set the tone for the movement's direction.

Black Lives Matter, like all successful movements before it, relies on building communities locally, nationally and internationally—gathering people in common cause.

Black Lives Matter, inspired initially by the killing of Trayvon Martin, is not rehearsing the scripts of endangered black manhood and their survival as critical above all things. Rather, Black Lives Matter provides the ideological space to imagine a world without patriarchal imperatives that demand the disappearing of women's bodies.

Black Lives Matter, like all successful movements before it, relies on building communities locally, nationally and internationally—gathering people in common cause. Activists holding banners that proclaim commitments to black lives have been seen in front of police stations; protestors linking arms across the entryways to freeways and highways have strained their voices proclaiming that they bear witness to the violence that has become a quotidian part of many communities. And, people have taken to social media to recirculate the message of the movement. All these actions—each with various levels of perceived risk and vulnerability—have met with a form of scrutiny that valorizes an imaginary, monolithic era of non-violence in which protestors never disrupted civil society. The accompanying critique usually charges that the use of social media as an organizing tool makes the work of organizers easy and dilutes the level of concern among citizens. Yes, the March on Washington may have had an easier time organizing if Twitter and Facebook existed in 1963, but tools can never replace the work of gathering people of conscience, instructing them on resisting police and oppositional violence, breaking bread with communities navigating trauma, and spreading a message. The derisiveness inspired by hashtag activism suggests that millennials have given up on action, and even worse, that the circulation of information online is done without any risk. This charge does not hold up against the fact that we know social media is also an efficient means of state surveillance, has resulted in professional reprimand for some, and can open movement supporters to vitriol and threats. In her fascinating study of civil rights photography, Leigh Raiford uncovers the strategic use of imaging campaigns among major organizations. Raiford's analysis of SNCC's various use of images and slogans demonstrates how the student movement is a direct descendant of Black Lives Matter and its peers. Memes, images of struggle on the frontline, and viral videos can do the work that posters and flyers once did. In 1966, a "Freedom Now!" button did not create movement action; rather it was an invitation to the ignorant and uninitiated to come closer to the thoughtful work of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and its voting rights appeals. In 2015, hashtags like #ayearwithouttamir and #sayhername memorialize the black dead while also welcoming the reluctant or the confused to think deeply in the moment for the benefit of the larger movement.

Of the many critiques leveled against Black Lives Matter are questions of its leadership structure and a misinterpretation of its aims. In the winter of 2015, media mogul and producer of the Civil Rights Movement film *Selma*, Oprah Winfrey, expressed confusion over what Black Lives Matter was all about. Using her film's depiction of nonviolent protest as a convenient foil in her critique of Black Lives Matter, Winfrey remarked:

> What I'm looking for is some kind of leadership to come out of this to say, "This is what we want. This is what has to change, and these are the steps that we need to take to make these changes, and this is what we're willing to do to get it."

The notion that Black Lives Matter is disjointed without clear leaders and goals is endemic of the misrepresentation of civil rights past and present. In its structural critique, Black Lives Matter takes its cues and constructs from a rich understanding of how white supremacy wraps itself around the everyday lives of the marked and the marginalized. Black Lives Matter is an attack on the subprime lending and the mass eviction and asset loss of blacks. It exposes the murky processes that allow many police departments to avoid public censure, prosecution for excessive force, and oversight in the acquisition of military equipment. Black Lives Matter leaders attend to the incarceration of transgendered woman Cee Cee McDonald, the lead that coursed through Freddie Gray's veins before he was killed in the back of a police truck, and the tear gas aspirated in Ferguson protestor Alexis Templeton's lungs. Perhaps the challenge that Black Lives Matter presents—in its expansiveness, in its refusal to be singularly led or institutionally bound—will deem it unable to fit on a movie screen, but I have no doubts that it will capture the imagination and the intellectual curiosity of scholars and strugglers for years to come.

Marcia Chatelain is Associate Professor of History and African American Studies at Georgetown University. She is the author of South Side Girls: Growing up in the Great Migration *(2015).*