Five Years after Ferguson

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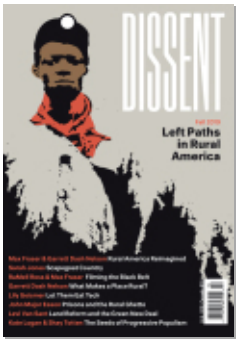

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Five Years after Ferguson

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In the winter of 1965, as the fifth anniversary of the Greensboro, North Carolina, Woolworth's lunch counter sit-in approached, reporters from around the world penned pieces looking back at the historic protest that sparked similar acts of civil disobedience across the South. The sit-in had led to the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), one of the era's most important movements. In one form or another, the news articles all asked: "What has happened?" Where was the nation after four North Carolina Agricultural and Technical students struck out against the state's segregation laws?

SNCC workers had fanned out across the state of Mississippi to register voters, provide civic education, and cultivate food collectives among the state's most dispossessed. President Lyndon Johnson had signed the Civil Rights Act the previous summer. But the anniversary wasn't necessarily a moment for celebration. SNCC's ambitious Freedom Summer in Mississippi was met with violence, and volunteers mourned multiple murder victims. Although the federal government outlawed "whites-only" counters, "colored bathrooms," and separate water fountains, access to public accommodations was not as urgent as the other priorities on the freedom agenda.

Black unemployment was twice the rate of white joblessness. Housing discrimination was a fact of life for black people across the country. Racist, abusive policing continued to terrify local communities. And a decade after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, black children were still in schools with a fraction of the economic resources afforded white children. Jibreel Khazan, a member of the sit-in quartet, told the *Washington Post* that he had been chastened by the lack of change since he and his classmates remained unmoved on those stools. "You know how kids believe in Santa Claus. . . . that's how we believed we would win the sit-down. . . . But it is a mistake to think time alone will win for us. Time is a neutral factor. You have to work in that time to get anywhere."

Black Lives Matter protesters confront a line of California Highway Patrol officers during a demonstration on March 30, 2018, in Sacramento, California. (Justin Sullivan/ Getty Images)

Looking back is difficult, imprecise work. Five years after the Ferguson uprising, sparked by a white police officer, Darren Wilson, killing teenager Michael Brown in a St. Louis County, Missouri, town—the moment when the nascent Black Lives Matter movement became internationally recognized—journalists have in many ways taken the same tone as their predecessors in 1965. There are endless angles: the unmet promises to revitalize Ferguson, the continued struggle to reform policing practices to ensure accounting of and accountability for misconduct and brutality, and the ways that mass mobilization has become one of many strategies in the fight against the current White House's excesses. The headlines ask: "What happened to Black Lives Matter?" Some have asked Ferguson residents their thoughts on BLM and the protests that stretched from the summer into the winter on the streets of the town of roughly 20,000. The most thoughtful have even pondered, "What have we learned?"

Like past analysis of movement organizing in the mainstream press, reporters have tended to answer their own question—by saying that BLM has perished, or at the very least, withered on a vine poisoned by the rise of Donald Trump. A smaller cohort may have even recognized the success of the Movement for Black Lives, but in the same breath suggest that the voices that called for an upending of white supremacy after Brown's death, and the death of Trayvon Martin beforehand, have been muted by the choirs of white nationalists in the White House and the public square.

Five years after Ferguson, BLM remains a potent political and social force. Its power rests on the organizing principles that grounded it: a radical, intersectional critique of racism; locally based organizing that respects the autonomy of its affiliates; and multi-modal activism that does not restrain the definition of politics.

Black Lives Matter—the creation of Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi—actually predates Ferguson by a year, but the movement's critical turn coincided with the expansion of organizing in solidarity with the besieged black community. Between 2014 and 2017, BLM was a national racial Rorschach test. For the right, BLM was a national threat. The FBI created an entirely new hate group category—black identity extremists—to justify surveilling and disrupting the movement, an old strategy used to target black activists. Centrists could not tolerate the confrontational, direct action strategies adopted by local chapters and campus networks—die-ins on the carpeted grounds of shopping malls, obstructions of major highways, and direct confrontations with riot-geared police. Liberals questioned what they believed was a lack of leadership structure in the BLM network. They based their critiques on narrow memories or perceptions about the civil rights movement of yore, neglecting to acknowledge the internal conflicts that permeated both hierarchical and more democratically organized groups. For those active in the movements, BLM provided a vision of the future that would allow black people to do more than simply survive; the movement reinforced the importance of valuing and nurturing black life in all spheres.

One of the reasons for the prevailing idea that the movement has disappeared, or, even worse, abandoned its goals, was a shift from direct action protest to other forms of activism and institution building. BLM responded to Trump's election, among other ways, with the 2017 Platform for Black Lives, which translated the shout for black freedom into concrete demands. The platform called for an "end to the war on black people at home and abroad," as well as for economic justice measures like the restoration of Glass–Steagall. It acknowledged the need to shift consciousness about black life, while also calling on us to reinvigorate the common good in the service of the end of privatized education and reparations for slavery—two issues that have already animated the 2020 electoral race.

Across the ideological spectrum, critiques of BLM have disregarded the nuances of black politics. The right vilifies black activism that challenges white supremacy for undermining national myths, including the idea that all change happens gradually. The left, meanwhile, which has fully embraced class analysis but still struggles to grasp the depths of anti-blackness, is often unable to understand black activism's many shapes and forms, including the black feminist principles that have been so central to the organizing of the last five years. Since its founding, BLM has also been criticized

as rudderless or leaderless. But we cannot define movements so rigidly. To want BLM to act like a coherent operation, with a central staff and official spokesperson, is to want racism in the United States itself to be neatly contained, when it is in fact chaotic and far-reaching and must be dynamically and creatively addressed. BLM has provided a vision of change that can adapt to local conditions and different kinds of struggles.

BLM has also, inevitably, been coopted in a number of ways, leading to poorly written television episodes (*Law and Order: SVU*), corporations using scenes of protest to sell products (Pepsi), and awkward declarations that "all lives matter" by presidential hopefuls (Martin O'Malley). These affronts were laughable at best and irritating at worst.

The internal struggles among BLM-aligned activists were more difficult to dismiss, and they were instructive about how a movement's flexibility gets tested. In October 2016, Campaign Zero co-founder Brittany Packnett endorsed Hillary Clinton. She was soon joined by Ferguson protester DeRay Mckesson. Their call to support Clinton was a personal one, but their endorsements and their respective associations with Teach for America—a force that undermines the public elements of public education, which flies in the face of the Platform for Black Lives—placed them at odds with some of their BLM colleagues.

The big tent of BLM—which has no mechanism for induction or expulsion, and relies on local decisions and the accountability and grace of people doing movement work—reflects the contours of black life in the United States itself. The struggles over alliances, methods, and political positions within BLM are evidence that there is no black political monolith. But there is also no part of black life that is not under assault by white supremacy. Although criticism is important for any political formation, attacks on BLM that do not recognize these nuances reflect an ill-informed romanticism about the mid-twentieth-century civil rights movement and hold BLM to standards and goals that the movement itself never set.

The evolution of social movements has never been easy to communicate; many observers want a seamless story of how change unfolds or rely on spectacle to feed their interest in politics. Shifts and realignments in movements cause fear and anxiety even among their own captive audiences. But BLM's experiment in participatory, feminist praxis required movement participants to understand that change is at the heart of survival. Direct action organizing makes for good television. The dramatics of confrontations with police, the cleverly made signs, can provide object lessons for supporters and detractors to use when hashing out their perspectives, but they aren't ends in themselves.

In a recent interview with Chris Hayes, BLM co-founder Alicia Garza declared, "I can tell you Black Lives Matter is still very much alive. I think

what's hard is that people measure movements by how much they perform for you. So if there's not hundreds or thousands of people in the streets, there's no movement." Garza has contributed to carrying the movement beyond those demonstrations. In 2018, she established the Black Futures Lab, which is directing the Black Census Project, to capture what black communities—as broadly defined as possible—are doing to live. She told Hayes that "one of the things that we are really trying to get across is that black people are not a monolith. We are LGBT, we are urban and rural, we are liberal and conservative, and the candidate and the campaign that is going to energize us the most is going to act like they know something about us."

When SNCC took similar turns in the summer of 1965 by revamping its policy arm and deepening its commitment to building local infrastructure throughout the South, their protests garnered criticism for lacking the focus of their earlier work. After staging a rain-soaked protest outside the White House, the *Philadelphia Tribune* chastised, "Picketing and peaceful demonstrations are part of a great American tradition. But protests without specific objectives or just any zany behavior are self-destructive." SNCC's 1965 plans may have been unimpressive to some, but like Black Lives Matter, SNCC helped catapult black women into running for office. In the mid-1960s, after working inside and outside of SNCC for years, three of the black women at the core of the SNCC-supported Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party ran for Congress: activists Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Gray Adams, and Annie Devine. In the same spirit of bringing black women's leadership into spaces that had often excluded them, Black Lives Matter activism has developed and supported an array of women of color in politics. There is no question that black women were interested in political office prior to Black Lives Matter, but the urgency that surfaced after 2014 was undeniably linked to the movement's feminist underpinnings.

Not all elections ended in victories on the scale of the election of Congresswomen Ilhan Omar and Lucia McBath, but the power of black women's electoral activity surfaced in victories like the narrow defeat of Roy Moore in Alabama and fueled the ascendancy of progressive candidates like Stacey Abrams, who narrowly lost the governor's race in Georgia. And although Lesley McSpadden, the mother of Michael Brown, lost her bid for Ferguson city council, the victor was another black woman, Fran Griffin. As McSpadden explained in the announcement for her city council run: "I wanted to go back and do something right in a place that did something so very wrong to my son, and I think that's what my son would want as well."

In the orbit of Black Lives Matter, there have been many losses that go far beyond elections: the death of Erica Garner, whose father was killed by a Staten Island NYPD police officer a month before Michael Brown, and the deaths of six Ferguson-based activists in Missouri under circumstances that have frightened and alarmed their communities, among others. More

broadly, the state has responded to activists with hyper-policing and surveillance, including excessive prosecution for protest activity under the guise of ensuring that "blue lives matter."

Yet the grief and disagreements, the quiet and public retreats from movement activists, have not diluted the capacity for Black Lives Matter—in phrase and in function—to stir action. Movement leaders have not conceded to this conservative moment, even in their respective pivots toward organizing immigrants, creative arts, ensuring mental health resources for people in state custody, and simple rest. (Some activists had to step away from organizing to attend to their mental health needs.) Black Lives Matter can claim victories as broad as elective wins, legislative shifts, and engagement with everything from polling to pedagogy.

To find signs of the durability of BLM's influence, just listen to the questions being asked of the Democratic presidential candidates. Kamala Harris has been forced to contend with her record as a prosecutor. Cory Booker has had to explain his support for charter schools. Elizabeth Warren had to specify what her mentions of reparations meant in policy terms. These gestures by political candidates will not usher in freedom for black people, but they are undoubtedly products of—if not whole-hearted tributes to—BLM's work.

Anniversaries—joyful ones and mournful ones—invite different forms of remembrance. The death of Michael Brown and memories of the state's attack on town residents and protesters in Ferguson will generate tears, while the music and artwork and the alliances and kinships that formed in the struggle will unleash joy. But this anniversary is not an occasion to perform an autopsy on Black Lives Matter. As Jibreel Khazan said on the fifth anniversary of the Greensboro sit-in, he didn't have too much time to lament the past; he needed to focus on "the next step," jobs, "and to get votes." Our time is better spent drawing new life from the struggles that have made it possible to imagine a world in which black lives indeed matter.

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