#BlackLivesMatter and Black Power: A Black Feminist Outlook

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This paper argues that Black Lives Matter is a modern day Black Power Movement, and shares many key ideological commonalities with Black Power. However, its designed leadership and tactics differ in very pungent ways. Henceforth, I suggest this is in large part due to its female leadership and points to a contemporary black feminist paradigm for pursuing similar goals. Among these: violence, alliance, and decentralized leadership. My analysis suggests that the feminization of radical activism in Black Lives Matter has changed society’s perception of the movement, and the black feminist perspective that I contribute to the literature furthers this analysis.

Black Power and Black Lives Matter Analysis: Compare and Contrast

Stokely Carmichael critically analyzes perceptions of Black Power, which are often misguided in “deliberate and absurd lie[s].” (47). White people viewed Black Power as a movement for achieving “domination or exploitation of other groups” when in reality Black Power sought to gain “an effective share in the total power of the society.” (47). Carmichael warned against the misconceptions of Black Power, urging that:

There is no analogy-- by any stretch of definition or imagination-- between the advocates of Black power and white racists. Racism is not merely exclusion on the basis of race but exclusion for the purpose of subjugating or maintaining subjugation. The goal of the racists is to keep black people on the bottom, arbitrarily and dictatorially.... The goal of black self-determination and black self-identity-- Black Power-- is full participation in the decision-making processes affecting the lives of black people, and recognition of the virtues in themselves as black people. (47). Hence, Carmichael points to a sharp difference between a movement embedded in racism and a movement seeking to increase the political influence of a group of people who have been systematically subjugated by a dominant social group. This is especially true because black people’s rights were stripped from the very beginning of American history due to slavery. A similar phenomenon rises with Black Lives Matter. Critics claim Black Lives Matter to be a
movement entrenched in “reverse racism” because of its exclusion of all lives. Anna Bax, a sociocultural linguistic defines “reverse racism” as “racism against whites... evidence to support this perception of ‘whiteness as disadvantage’ is highly suspect (Winant 1997); indeed, the ideology of reverse racism ‘runs counter to or ignores empirically observable racial asymmetries regarding material resources and structural power’” (3). Take for example a Fox News coverage on Black Lives Matter’s 2017 Memorial Day celebration. For this celebration, an invitation was only extended to black people. Tucker Carlson interviewed Lisa Durden, an ex-professor from Essex County College who was fired after the interview gained media attention. In the interview, Carlson stated that Memorial Day was a good way to unite America “unless you decide to promote segregation while you do it” referring to Black Lives Matter in New York City. The interview consisted largely of Carlson interrupting Durden’s responses to his questions, as he did not care for Durden to “contextualize” any of her responses. The beginning dialogue is enough to give readers an idea of the overall interview:

Durden: “I need to contextualize...”
Carlson: “Whoah, woah, woah, slow down I don’t want you to contextualize...”
Durden: “because memorial day was created by black former slaves in 1865...”
Carlson: “You’re attacking people on the basis of their race...”
Durden: “to honor those individuals who were union soldiers who fought and died for our freedom. So Black Lives Matter in that same vein decided to get together with black folks to honor black folks and make sure that their murders by racist terrorist are memorialized.”
Carlson: “If you don’t like people excluding others on the basis of race, why are you doing it?”
Durden: “You’ve been having white day forever...”

The interaction between Carlson, a critic of the movement, and Durden, a member of it, draws parallels to the misconceptions Carmichael warned the critics of Black Power against. Carlson’s critique has a similar narrative to the critique of Black Power in that he discards the exclusionary nature of the Memorial Day celebration as racism in reverse. Yet, Durden responds
by stating that the all-black celebration was intended to serve as a space for black people to reclaim history that has been whitewashed, a history that oppressed a specific group of people. Carlson also describes the all-black celebration as “attacking people” who were not able to go because they are non-black. The idea behind “attacking” perpetuates the message that BLM is violent and by excluding non-black people, BLM is acting violently towards non-black people. In this way, the very nature of an all-black event, as well as its pushback by critics who consider the exclusion an act of violence draws parallels to the separatist goals of Black Power. On the critique of reverse racism, Carmichael states “whenever black people have moved toward genuinely independent action, the society has distorted their intentions or damned their performance.” (84). In other words, when black people seek autonomy (both socially and politically) over their communities, it is commonly mistaken as violent and anti-white. Similarly, Black Lives Matter, by its mere name, is not saying that other lives do not matter. Rather, it is saying that for every life to matter, black lives must no longer be subject to marginalization and oppression that is both systematic and institutional. All lives can't matter until black lives do.

Patrisse Khan-Cullors acknowledges past movements when she states, “We were and are their progeny, called to pick up a torch no generation wants to or can ignore... no isolated acts of decency could wholly change an organization that became an institution that was created not to protect but to catch, control, and kill us.” (186). The “isolated acts of decency” she mentions references the conceptualization of violence in the Black Lives Matter Movement. Activism cannot stop at a mere act of decency, it has to be loud, public, and unapologetic. When Khan-Cullors pays tribute to the past movements, she mentions Ida B. Wells, The Deacons of Defense, Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. She does not mention Martin Luther King Jr. or
any other well-known leader of the Civil Rights Movement. This within itself is enough to draw a parallel between Black Lives Matter and Black Power. She writes, “A generation ago, it was another group of young Black activists, the Black Panthers, who had come together around police violence, who were in law enforcement’s crosshairs.” (188). Directly including the Black Panthers in her text, which is the very first published text of any BLM founder, reveals the connection between BLM and Black Power. Khan-Cullors also mentions the Black Panthers to contextualize law enforcement’s view of the Black Lives Matter movement as a threat, just like law enforcement viewed Black Panthers as a threat. This direct connection allows us to investigate the similarities between the movements, while at the same time giving us a reference point from which to find BLM’s deviations or differences from Black Power. In doing so, we begin to draw associations to my argument about the black feminist paradigm that Black Lives Matter implements in its principles as the root of BLM’s differences from Black Power.

**The Black Feminist Paradigm**

Black Lives Matter is a movement founded by an all-black female leadership. While this tends to be less publicized-- which is something I will touch base on later-- Black Lives Matter adds a new component of feminization of radical activism. A social movement run by black female leadership is a unique characteristic of Black Lives Matter that the Black Power Movement lacked. In the following section I will develop the implications of my argument that a black feminist paradigm exists within Black Lives Matter, and that this paradigm points to the reasons why there are sharp differences within BLM and Black Power, even though BLM is arguably a modern day Black Power Movement.
One of the guiding principles of the Black Lives Matter Movement is “ensuring that the Black Lives Matter network is a black women-affirming space free from sexism, misogyny, and male-centeredness,” along with calling out cisgender privilege. (Khan-Cullors, 203). In addition, Khan-Cullors writes “Not only are we unapologetically black... but we are also Queer-and Trans-led and non-patriarchal.” (216). While the founders of BLM are all women, the Black Power movement consisted of an all-male leadership. This leadership explicitly excluded women, as leaders such as Stokely Carmichael are regarded saying that women were only to play a sexual role in their movement. But this also sheds an interesting light on the gendered differences between Black Power and Black Lives Matter. Black masculinity has historically and up until present day been stigmatized and criminalized as dangerous to white women and white society in general. While the violence attached to black masculinity is beyond the scope of this paper, I draw attention to it because it unveils the feminization of activism within Black Lives Matter. The perceived attachment between black masculinity and violence by whites makes a compelling case because the Black Power Movement was run by all men. In the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, this perception is critiqued when Malcolm X writes, “‘Malcolm X Advocates Armed Negroes!' What was wrong with that? I'll tell you what was wrong. I was a black man talking about physical defense against the white man.” (375). Ergo, critics of the Black Power Movement associated violence to the movement because it was advocating for protection against white men who were in fact the ones perpetuating the violence (white police men, white jail guards, lynch mobs). It was a threat to hegemonic white power to have a movement spearheaded by black men who justified the use of self-defense against those white people who were violent to them.
On the contrary, Black Lives Matter is founded by only women, and is inclusive of all
gender identifications. Therefore, my main contribution to this discourse, and one that has not
previously been explored, is that the feminization of radical activism inherent to the female
leadership of Black Lives Matter is a deviation from its “progeny,” the Black Power Movement.
For disclosure, this argument is not to say that Black Lives Matter is any less successful,
powerful, or strong in nature. Its primary purpose is to reveal the unique black feminist quality in
Black Lives Matter, and to suggest that there was a lack thereof in the Black Power Movement.
Black Lives Matter, in its own ways, also rejects hegemonic structures through its black female
leadership, just how Black Power resisted hegemonic structures through the encouragement of
self-defense. The fact that Black Lives Matter has gained a tremendous amount of momentum on
an international scale through its black woman, queer accepting, trans accepting structure is
enough to demonstrate the movements protest of respectability politics. Black Power stuck to a
patriarchal lineage of male spearheaders while Black Lives Matter is unapologetically
demanding international space all while resisting the patriarchal and queerphobic tradition within
Black Power.

The leadership of Black Lives Matter is not as publicly visible as the leadership in prior
social movements. The founders are credited for founding the movement, and there are
interviews with them as well. However, the leadership extends beyond the founders of the
movement. There are also leaders on a local level, leaders whose names are not recognized by
mainstream culture but are dedicated to “fighting the fight.” Khan-Cullors brings up the
leadership component of the movement when she states that “we, Alicia, Opal and I, do not want
to control it. We want it to spread like wildfire.” (204). She goes on further by saying that “we
were purposeful about decentralizing our role in the work. But neither did we want nor deserve to be erased.” (220).

The decentralization of leadership within BLM also relates to the concept of non-violence, especially given the femme component of the movement. The Black Power Movement and other Civil Rights movements of the era had highly publicized, famous male leaders: Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, Huey Newton, Martin Luther King Jr. In fact, their efforts within the movements have been archived into history through textbooks and other scholarly works. On the other hand, Black Lives Matters’ decentralized female leadership is not given this same attention, especially in academia. The question arises: would the Black Lives Matter Movement be perceived differently if it had all male leadership? Would the male leaders also go through the hardship of having no recognition from academia? When Black Lives Matter is discussed, its leadership is rarely a topic of conversation. There is a more common understanding when it comes to protests and cities where BLM is predominantly present. But there is rarely any mention of the founders of the movement, let alone those cities’ chapters or chapter leadership.

The concept of allyship differs within the Black Power movement and BLM. Carmichael explains the ideological roots of the relationship (or lack thereof) between Black Power and other coalitions. He cautions that it is a “myth” to believe “the interests of black people are identical with the interests of certain liberal, labor and other reform groups.” (60). No matter how liberal a white person might be, they cannot ultimately escape their whiteness in a racialized society. In other words, whites simply can’t put themselves in the shoes of blacks. Reformer democrats have a concrete, militant viewpoint on civil rights issues but delegitimize the militant nature of black
organizations like Black Nationalists because their ideologies of black power are too “race conscious.” This is not to say that there can be no allies in the Black Power Movement. Allyship of white folk can exist within Black Power “only after [black people] are able to ‘stand on [their] own.’” (Carmichael, 81). In his speech, Carmichael says that the Civil Rights Bill is a product of the ignorance and racism of white America. It may sound paradoxical but he argues: these bills would not exist if it weren’t for white people’s inability to understand that black people are born free and equal just like them. He states, “It is the incapability of whites to deal with their own problems inside their own communities. That is the problem of the failure of the civil rights bill.” (Black Power Speech). On the other hand, Black Lives Matter invites allyship. It takes on the position that white people can use their privilege in a manner that is conducive to the goals of BLM. I assert that this is also a modern day black feminist adjustment of the Black Power Movement. In a TED interview with the founders of BLM, Opal Tometi says that “Black Lives Matter is a tool for our allies to show up differently for us.” In this way, Black Lives Matter invites allyship to the movement. In order to be an ally, however, actions need to extend beyond a hashtag. Khan-Cullors informs that “This is more than a hashtag. This is about building power. This is about building a movement...” (198). Contrary to Black Power, becoming an ally is part of the movement for Black Lives Matter. It is a mobilizing aspect of the movement. When there are allies, there are more people showing up for the call to action. This fundamental difference can be attributed to the feminization within the Black Lives Matter movement in two ways: it can be a representation of nonviolence, but it can also be a perpetuation of traditional gender roles for women. The former acknowledges the fact that allyship is about building interpersonal relationships between groups of people. The latter acknowledges the fact that traditionally,
women figures are not perceived as independent or strong. While these perceptions may also step outside the scope of the paper, I incorporate them into my argument about the black feminist paradigm because it is important to contextualize the role that black feminism has traditionally been assigned in America, both historically and contemporary. While allyship is an empowering tool to build power because it enables the privileged to use their resource to advance the cause of Black Lives Matter, this emphasis on allyship can also be critically assessed to fit the hegemonic understanding of black women in society. It sends an implicit message of black female leadership not being strong enough to survive independently, which is an antiquated and problematic message but nevertheless an important one to consider.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and the Black Lives Matter Movement of today share striking similarities in their ideologies, goals, and principles. Both movements aim to solve the issues of local black communities by gaining political power and representation. In fact, the founders of Black Lives Matter have made explicit connections to the Black Power movement and have shared their inspiration from the works of much of the leaders of Black Power.

Though Black Lives Matter can be considered a modern day Black Power Movement, there are complex differences between the two movements. These differences, I argue, are a result of the feminization of radical activism that is taking place in Black Lives Matter through its black female leadership. This black feminist paradigm is a new outlook on Black Lives Matter, and has enabled this paper to extend academia’s research and focus on Black Lives
Matter. The major differences between Black Power and Black Lives Matter deal with its leadership, tactics on violence and nonviolence, and its stance on allyship.

Looking forward, I suggest that the black feminist paradigm present in Black Lives Matter gives the movement a great deal of potential. The Black Power Movement was not as successful as its leaders planned for it to be, as the problems it sought to overcome in the black community (police brutality, war on drugs, economic disparities, political suppression) are still present today. In fact, these are the same problems BLM hopes to alleviate. The inclusive nature of the black feminist paradigm, as well as its ability to incorporate allyship shows promise for the future. I assert that this is because Black Lives Matter’s black feminism is filling in the gaps in the movement of Black Power that did not allow for its full potential to be reached in the 1960s. All in all, Black Lives Matter’s futurity is promising, and this promise gives its members hope for racial justice, even in the devastating political climate of 2019.
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