

Parallels and Tangents between the Black Panthers Party and the Black Lives Matter Movement

-Dr. Srishti

Abstract

The Black Lives Matter is a social movement that emerged through social platforms using a Hashtag which gained attention instantly and forayed into intellectual circles internationally in 2013. It created a ripple of solidarity and resistance against the anarchy of lawlessness which is exhibited repeatedly by the police against the blacks. The movement has maintained its stance and the intensity of protest with similar zeal since its inception till the present day. This paper endeavours to carry out a comparative analysis of the Black Lives Matter Movement with the Black Panther Party of the 1960s in America. While both movements were fighting for the same cause, there was the difference of the radical approach of 'Self Defence through Guns' supported by the Black Panthers and the peaceful protests on the streets which defined the Black Lives Matter movement. The Black Panther Party gained momentum among the masses and initiated several programs for the betterment of African Americans in America, yet the movement dissolved within two decades due to internal strife. There are prominent parallels and intersections between the two movements and studying both through the lens of objective impartiality can lead to significant insights for the revolutionaries of the present and the future.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter; Black Panther Party; Social Media; African-American.

Let ruin end here

Let him find honey

where there was once a slaughter

Let him enter the lion's cage

& find a field of lilacs

Let this be the healing

& if not let it be.

- Danez Smith, Little Prayer.

This short verse by Danez Smith symbolizes a heart wrenching rendition of the trauma that the African-Americans have been subjected to through the passage of recorded history. It is imperative to recognize the complexity encapsulated by this deceptively simplistic prayer for the resolution of inherited collective consciousness marred by discrimination and dejection. Recent theoretical developments have revealed that even in the contemporary modern world of the twenty-first century, the predicament of the racial profiling continues to trouble the **marginal racial groups** in manners both subtle and crude. This research paper endeavours to analyze the augmentation of youth participation in the recent Black Lives Matter movement through the social media platforms playing the role of a global diplomat and comparing it with the Black Panther Party of the turbulent sixties whose members were striving to resolve the same issues but through the medium of grass root interactions and community programs. Although both the movements were conceived more than 50 years apart, yet they galvanize a similar counter-hegemonic discourse against the traditional media which comfortably promotes racist ideologies. There are numerous potential connotations that can be derived about the changes in the aesthetics of protest from a comparative study of the two movements. There is a considerable progress in the way that these aesthetics have evolved over the passage of time and that forms the focal point of this research.

In order to analyse these two movements, it is crucial to understand the history of the quintessential malignancy of white supremacy which is so deeply embedded in the cultural imagination of the world that **privileges one racial group over the other based on the degree of melanin in their skin.** **The social and political concept of 'Double Consciousness'**(1) **of the blacks, as posited in *The Souls of Black Folk (1903)*,** on the other hand stands on the memory of slavery and racial oppression imposed upon them by the European colonizers. James Baldwin rightly sums up the emotions of the people in the United States as “still trapped in a history

which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it.”(8) The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a landmark movement which outlawed any discrimination on the basis of race, colour, class, sex or religion. It was considered to be a panacea for all the hyphenated-minorities against their exclusion from the equality of rights. The faith in the ‘dream’ of Martin Luther King Jr. infected a major population of the world but it was soon diffused by his assassination in 1968. The optimism that the non-violent stance of Martin Luther King infused in the disvalued African-Americans was an iconic moment in the history of Civil Rights. But the failure of that peaceful stance in bringing about a significant change for the disadvantaged races allowed alternative ideologies to germinate. In the same vein, the rise of the Black Panther Party in 1966 in Oakland, California came as a shock to the masses and the government for their radical stance of picking up the gun for self-defence against the draconian police. It was founded by two young men Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale who had witnessed and experienced police brutality and they decided to combat it by brandishing legally owned guns and defend their community by observing law enforcement from a legally permitted distance. (Street 2) Their presence in the ghettos of California reinstated a sense of power among the people who had been betrayed by the legal authorities at multiple instances. The Black Panthers amalgamated the tenets of Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement to enforce a structural and organised protest which appealed to the aggrieved youth who were pent up with frustration against the logic of unquestioned white supremacy. The image of young Black men dressed in black and brandishing weapons and law books to defend their community by observing law enforcement from a lawful distance had a visual cachet with the youth of those times and they encashed that through educating the masses politically and morally in order to offer an alternative to the non-violent approach propagated by Martin Luther King Jr. The autobiographies of Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale clearly state how the masses who had unwavering faith in King’s philosophy of Non-violence, felt utterly dismayed after his sudden assassination. The Panther’s radical stance for the advocacy of armed self-defence was a reaction to the disappointment that peaceful measures had brought with them.

On a more recent spectrum, the recent killing of George Floyd on 25th May, 2020, at the hands of the police in Minneapolis, America has flared a series of worldwide protests against institutional racism and police brutality. (Hill 1) The sombre incident of the killing of a man living in a developed country in the year 2020, has

reverted the global memory to innumerable incidents of unfair treatment towards the **Africans in America** since times immemorial. The series of mass protests and rallies that followed the onslaught were reminiscent of 2013 when the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement had originated in the United States of America as a protest against the violation of the rights of African-Americans **spurred on by police brutality**. The movement was a campaign against the racial profiling of Africans by the criminal justice system in America. Black Lives Matter was a hashtag that trended on multiple social sites and became the new face of modern activism. It began as a medium to disseminate information on the Twitter and Facebook and in very little time began reflecting in the physical movements on the streets. Deray Mckesson, a Black Lives Matter activist, rightly defined this metamorphosis through the example **of Ferguson**, where riots broke out a day after the fatal police shooting of Michael Brown in August, 2014 as:

In those early days, we were united by #Ferguson on Twitter. . . . And once the protests began to spread, we became aware of something compelling and concise, something that provided common language to describe the protests: the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. . . . Many of us became friends digitally, first. And then we, the protestors, met in person. (37)

An exhaustive research in the field of racism might persuade one to optimistically covet its final demise with the spread of education and awareness in the present times, yet, this nightmare refuses to evade from every waking eye. In times when the world is professing to unite against the corona pandemic which is too novel to be configured yet by the medical scientists, the world is still marred by **the mental, institutional and structural** barriers which safeguard certain preconceived racial notions against the people of colour. The death of George Floyd holds uncanny resemblance to the death of Eric Garner, another Black man killed in New York, in 2014, by the police while he similarly pleaded that he couldn’t breathe (Southall). There are many such incidents which have added to the global context of public executions of the blacks by the police.

But what made the death of George Floyd gain more attention was the media outrage that followed the **viral video of Floyd screaming “I can’t breathe”, as he was pinned down by three police officers**, and the call for protests spread through the social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. It becomes crucial to observe the evolution of a political response in the age of social media which is handling international

mass movements through the convenience of smart phones. And to make things convenient for **the screen-addicted generation**, who were tired of scrolling down the dance challenges and make-up videos, they were offered with the opportunity to join the protest on the streets or even contribute by sharing the hashtag or changing their profile pictures to black on Facebook and Instagram. Although a majority of the participants supporting the cause of the Black Lives Matter movement lack a foundation of political ideology and ground reality, yet there are many intellectual forces which have nurtured the movement into one of the most visible and consistent movements of the twentieth century in the United States. While social media is a functional platform for spreading information, it cannot guarantee assimilation of the emotion and the cause. Most of the people involved in the Black Lives Matter protests and marches showed an uncanny inclination towards achieving social media presence. Similarly, the Black Panthers encountered some shortcomings in their ideological machinery which led to the early dissolution of the party in 1982. **The internal strife of the members and the intrusion by the intelligence agencies of the US Federal department corroded the structure of the party.** Since the Panthers had chosen a radical stance for their party, it was imperative to ensure that its members held a holistic approach towards their choice of guns for self-defence. That is why they focused intensely on teaching political science to all its members and ensuring their contribution in their famous community survival programs such as the Free Breakfast for Children Program, Free ambulance program and many others. **They believed that they would succeed in earning the trust of the people only through their civil actions as against their vilification that the government was intent upon. Yet, when the leadership of the party began to crumble under the state's institutional and legal pressures, the rest of the party began fragmenting into ideological rifts which proved to be detrimental for the ultimate goal of the Black Panthers. Like the Black Panthers, the Black Lives Matter Movement has also had to face assassinations and imprisonments of its members. The approach of the two movements might be different, but the state agencies continue to use the same scrupulous devices to make the opposing ideologies crumble.**

Thus, it is pertinent to identify the parallels between the two movements which have opened possibilities for debate and discussion for widening the spectrum of equal and just human rights. Both the movements began in response to the injustice of the police forces towards blacks. Alicia Garza initiated the Black Lives Matter

movement in America, with Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi to oppose the acquittal of George Zimmerman for killing 17 year old unarmed Trayvon Martin in 2013 during a neighbourhood watch. Similarly, the Black Panthers owed their inception in part to the unjust killing of Matthew Johnson, an unarmed 16 year old boy in San Francisco in 1966. Secondly, both these movements have strived to maintain a strong and unforgettable visual presence though using several tactics of appearance. The Black Lives Matter is a movement that has been defined by the videos of police encounters made on cell phones and photos of protests becoming viral on Instagram. The supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement pay significant attention to visual culture and reveal the widespread evil of white supremacy at work under the guise of law and order. As Nicholas Mirzoeff has pointed out some interesting facets of the new way of prefiguring American way of protest as:

This “America” is made visible the intersection of three streams of visibility: first, the witnessing of these scenes, depicted in cell-phone videos and photographs and supplemented by machine-generated imagery from body cameras, dash cams, and closed-circuit television (CCTV); second, the embodied protests and actions taken to claim justice and to make injustice visible; and finally, the sharing of these images and actions by social media posts that in turn made their way into mainstream media. (1)

Thus, the movement focuses on such tactics that can keep the movement sustainable so that it can persistently retain a presence in the information ecosystem and not get washed under the white noise of disinterestedness which is a disease that plagues the contemporary screen-addicted generation. Their dissent and political involvement significantly depends on social media communications. By reclaiming the public spaces like roads, parks, buses and trains through mass gathering and marches, the supporters of Black Lives Matter challenge the segregation which is enforced by the claim of police and police authorities over these spaces. The sociological concept of ‘copresence’ also becomes crucial in context of spaces of appearance through the interactive networking-via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and cell phone videos- which create a unique space between the binary of physical and digital. (Campos1) This digital form of copresence has been defined as “the diverse ways in which people maintain a sense of ‘being there’ for each other across distance.”(Baldasser 135)

Similarly, the Black Panthers heavily relied on visual aesthetics to gain the attention of the government and the masses. They understood the significance of imagery and repetitions and used both as a tool in their public appearances. The iconography of the Panthers left an indelible impression on its members and scholars who study the movement years after. Their insistence of the iconic uniform of Black leather jackets, black berets, dark sunglasses and blue shirts, the shotguns that they carried on their shoulders and the counter cultural art that they promoted through their newspaper added to the visual effect that they were aiming for. They had a set of norms for the party and all members would strictly adhere to them. The image of these young men equipped with the knowledge of their constitutional rights, surveilling the streets of Oakland, California and observing the police officers from a distance to ensure lawful interactions were a sight that attracted youth to join the party and gain a sense of authority over the usual discrimination. They fostered an image of black masculinity which reflected organizational cohesion and social pride. The Panther's outfits were a representation of Black power and established a political statement which is still recognized as powerful. But their image was not solely dependent on their physical attributes. Their community programs for the education, health and upliftment of the blacks in need attracted both positive and negative attention. On one hand, their affinity with the social cause rocketed their popularity among the masses, and on the other, the political lobbies began feeling threatened by their rising appeal in the society. That is why FBI was approached to clear the existence of the party from the face of America so that they couldn't fuel more revolutionary protests. It resulted in the Black Panther Party being called out as a threat to the internal security of the country and the Director of FBI, John Edgar Hoover in 1969 was instructed in clear crudity to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities of the Black nationalists." (Newton 13) The involvement of the Panthers was misinterpreted as 'infiltration' by the authorities in power and the systematic erasure of the party became their sole mission. The revolutionary nationalism of the Panthers was a thoroughly planned state repression and the same party that had mushroomed to more than 50 states across America was put to a formal end in 1982. The Black Panther Party is one of the most controversial parties of the 'High Sixties' in America and has inspired many of the following generations to draw lessons from them. The Black Lives Matter movement also endorses a reflection of the revolutionary propaganda that the Black Panthers had disseminated among the aggrieved masses. It is interesting to funnel an analogy between the guns of the Black Panthers and the cameras of the Black Lives Matter movement. The guns

that became an identifying feature of the Panthers were a well discussed and theorized choice that served as an organizational tool. Similarly, the cell phones that can record any injustice on the streets are a tool of surveillance that the common masses utilize to monitor the legitimacy of police actions. Thus, there are relevant intersections between the two movements regarding their struggle and their methods.

Therefore, the systematic racism of the people in power is exposed and opposed through visual evidence produced by just a flick of a finger on screen of mobiles. Technology has become a platform for the Black political expression.

The Black Lives Matter movement is a step up from the Black Panther party because it avoids the mistakes that the Panthers fell prey to. The guns that the Panthers relied on were the mistake that the Black Lives Matter movement has strictly out-ruled. The BLM also holds the advantage of decentering the traditional form of social movements and protests where participation was confined to the state that the action took place in. Hashtags have facilitated coalition and communication among various diasporic groups. The Black Panthers became too egoistic with the attention that they got at an early stance in their inception and they got distracted from the core values that they had committed to. Their obsession with the guns brought widespread notoriety to the movement because they became an easy target for the government agencies to defame as “gun crazy criminals”. (Jenkins-Bell 1) They drifted apart due to their tactical wrangling and ideological divergence. The Black lives matter activists have improvised on the mistakes of their activist ancestors and chosen the smart phones as their weapons which can amplify their message by immediate access to millions of viewers through social media.

Conclusion

Thus, a counter discourse is developed against the hegemony of the white narrative and it becomes a profound blueprint that the future generations can draw lessons from and decide what to learn or unlearn. It becomes crucial to discuss this historic violence of the white supremacist Americans against blacks in order to respond to the conservatives who have been so blinded by their privilege that their retort of “All Lives Matter” only exposes their assumed world views structured on their racial privilege. The history of America is a witness

to struggle of the blacks that hasn't attained its culmination despite efforts that began centuries ago and remain in the present too. It remains to be seen how the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 will be any different from the protests that the American streets have been witnessing since centuries, but given the fact that the movement is so interracial, with Africans, Latins, Hispanics and Whites joining hands in the protests, the curve seems to be leaning towards justice for victims of racial prejudices. Social media has allowed the masses to harness the energy of millions of web connected minds to dismantle the global system of racial oppression.

Works Cited and Consulted:

Baldasser, Loretta., Et al. "ICT-Based Co-Presence in Transnational Families and Communities: Challenging the Premise of Face-to-Face Proximity in Sustaining Relationships." *Global Networks*. April, 2106.134. Web.

Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. Vintage: New York. 1993. Web.

Campos-Castillo C, Hitlin S. "Copresence: Revisiting a Building Block for Social Interaction Theories." *Sociological Theory*. 2013;31(2):168-192. doi:10.1177/0735275113489811

Cleaver, Kathleen, and George Katsiaficas. "Revolutionary Art Is a Tool for Liberation." *Liberation, Imagination and the Black Panther Party: A New Political Science Reader*. London: Routledge, 2000. 175-87. Print.

Hill, Evans. "How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody." *The New York Times*. 25 April 2020.

Jenkins-Bell, Tina. "Black Panthers See Echoes in Today's Freedom Movement, with Focus on Cell Phones, Not Guns." San Francisco Public Press. 23 June, 2020. <https://sfpublicpress.org/black-panthers-see-echoes-in-todays-protest-movement-with-focus-on-cell-phones-not-guns/>

MCKensson, Deray. "Ferguson and Beyond." *The Guardian*, 9 August, 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/09/ferguson-civil-rights-movement-deray-mckesson-protest>

McNair, Kimberly. "Beyond Hashtags: Black Twitter and Building Solidarity across Borders." *#Identity: Hashtagging Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation*, edited by Abigail De Kosnik and Keith P. Feldman, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2019, pp. 283–298. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvndv9md.21. Accessed 27 Aug. 2020.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "Tactics of Appearance for Abolition Democracy #BlackLivesMatter." *Critical Enquiry*. https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/tactics_of_appearance/. Web.

Newton, Huey P. *Revolutionary Suicide*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973. Print.

Pittman, John P., "Double Consciousness", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/double-consciousness/>>.

Seale, Bobby. *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton*. Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1991. Print.

Smith, Danez. "Little Prayer." *Poets.org*, Academy of American Poets, 2017, poets.org/.

Southhall, Ashley. “‘I Can’t Breathe’: 5 Years After Eric Garner’s Death, an Officer Faces Trial.” *The New York Times*, 12 May 2019.

Street, Joe. ‘Free Huey or the Sky’s the Limit’: The Black Panther Party and the Campaign to Free Huey P.

Newton , *European journal of American studies* (Online). <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/14273>