

3 *This chapter describes how present conditions in Black communities have fostered the development of new modes of youth leadership that focus on hope, love, and joy, and are ultimately restorative and redemptive.*

## Radically Healing Black Lives: A Love Note to Justice

*Shawn A. Ginwright*

The air in Tanisha's apartment was thick and humid, like the air outside. The small fan in her bedroom did little to cool the mammoth heat that had covered Jennings, Missouri. She was running late for work this morning. In fact, she had to force herself out of bed, and felt guilty about not wanting to explain to her classroom of eighth graders at Gateway Middle School why the world had descended on their neighborhood with bright lights, news cameras, and trucks with big satellite dishes pointing up to the sky. Despite the fact that she was tired from the march and late-night community meeting about the events in nearby Ferguson, she washed her face, slid on her jeans, and buttoned up her yellow short sleeve blouse. She headed to school to teach her 30 eager eighth grade students the most important lesson they would ever learn in school: why their lives really mattered.

Tanisha, along with thousands of other citizens, joined the protests in Ferguson, MO, to help bring worldwide attention to the police shooting of unarmed Michael Brown. She had grown frustrated by the ways in which the news had portrayed the protestors, and admittedly she was somewhat naïve about how the police treated Black citizens in the area. She joined her friends and thousands of other protesters expressing their moral outrage about a justice system that sanctioned the murder of an unarmed citizen. She expected a peaceful protest, but just after 9:15 p.m., her group was ordered by police to disperse. Without notice the police, decked out in their military regalia, unleashed tear gas, flash grenades, and dogs on her group of friends. She was terrified, and at that moment she knew that her life would never be the same. Instantly, her fear had transformed itself into righteous indignation, and blossomed in her an uncompromised love for

justice. When she arrived at school the next morning, she smiled at her colleagues, waved to parents, and happily greeted each child as if she had never smelled the burning fear of tear gas in her eyes, and nostrils. But when she entered her classroom with her freshly pressed yellow blouse, she explained to her students that America was broken, and together they could fix it.

This chapter is about the convergence of love and justice, and examines how young leaders of color are expanding conventional modes of civic engagement in order to assert human dignity collectively. This chapter illustrates how present conditions in Black communities have fostered new modes of leadership that focus on hope, love, and joy and are ultimately restorative and redemptive. With the use of the radical healing framework, this chapter explores how the campaign #Blacklivesmatter represents a growing movement for healing justice in Black life.

## Why Black Lives Matter

In the months after an officer shot and killed unarmed Michael Brown, there were numerous other cases of unarmed Black men, boys, and women killed by White police officers across the country, including Ezell Ford in California; John Crawford, Tamir Rice, and Tanisha Anderson in Ohio; and Eric Garner and Akai Gurley in New York. Over the past 2 years, the country has been riveted to social media, radio, and television to learn about accounts of police shootings of unarmed citizens. On July 13, 2013, a jury found George Zimmerman not guilty of homicide for shooting the unarmed teen Trayvon Martin. Ironically, on July 12, a day before the Zimmerman verdict, the film *Fruitvale Station* (Coogler, 2013) was released, depicting the life and humanity of Oscar Grant, a young man fatally shot by police officers after stepping off a Bay Area Rapid Transit train in Oakland. A little over a year later, on July 17, 2014, Eric Garner was choked to death in broad daylight by a New York City police officer. Again the officer was not indicted. Almost a month later on August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teen, was shot and killed by a police officer. A grand jury was not convinced that there was sufficient evidence to indict the officer. Thousands of people—a multiracial coalition of gay, straight, poor, and wealthy—were outraged, not so much about the specifics involved in each of these cases, but about who we have become as a society. Thousands of people asked questions about America's moral compass in regards to the lives of African American young men and women.

Unlike other forms of collective action in the past (e.g., the Occupy protests of 2011–2012) that begin with the general public's moral outrage, compel thousands to take to the streets, and spark disruption in the calm daily lives of citizens, these recent protests are different. These mass mobilizations, consisting of thousands of young people from around the world, seem to be pushed by moral outrage and pulled by a love ethic. A love ethic

is an unconditional desire for human dignity, meaningful existence, and hope. #Blacklivesmatter is a movement of dignity, meaning, and hope in a critical moment when race in general, and Blackness in particular, has become a third rail, and avoided in policy debates. The statement “Black lives matter” also gives others permission to practice courageous love and to celebrate and protect the dignity and humanity of all people. The #Blacklivesmatter campaign is rooted in an understanding that in order for everyone to enjoy the fruits of civic engagement, the dignity and humane treatment of Black young men, women, families, and communities must be central to our political analysis, organizing strategies, and policy solutions.

Unlike the mass Civil Rights Movements of the 20th century that ushered in groundbreaking legislation, today’s events require new modes of organizing that are both inwardly focused on meaning making and healing from the wounds inflicted from structural oppression, as well as outwardly focused on social change (Ginwright, 2010). This dual focus represents a new way of movement building by engaging a collective conversation about the power of hope and the meaning it holds for each of us. Young community leaders increasingly acknowledge that both organizing and healing together are required for lasting community change. Both strategies, braided together, make a more complete and durable fabric in our efforts to transform oppression, and hold the power to restore a more humane, and redemptive process toward community change.

## Challenges to Black Organizing and Youth Leadership

African American communities in the post–civil-rights era have dramatically changed. Crack cocaine, caste-like poverty, the diminishment of living-wage jobs, and the lack of state intervention have eroded an important political and activist infrastructure in Black communities. The dramatic changes in Black political and civic life have perhaps had the greatest impact on Black youth. Where once there was a vibrant civic and political life among Black youth in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements through organizations like SNCC, Black Panther Party, and CORE, today civic life and political engagement for Black youth is threatened by the inability of organizations to confront some of the most pressing issues facing Black youth. Organizations like the NAACP, National Urban League, Links, and other organizations that traditionally played a significant role in the development of political leadership have been unable to grapple with the issues facing African American communities. These changes in Black community life have created three barriers to Black activism and leadership in the post–civil-rights era. Together these barriers continue to threaten the capacity of effective organizing in Black communities.

**Lack of a Black Organizing Infrastructure.** Since the 1970s community organizations dedicated to activism have experienced a steady decline (Jenkins, 1995; McAdam, 1982; Piven & Cloward, 1979). This decline can

largely be attributed to (a) the growth and expansion of government and nonprofit social support services in African American communities, (b) the stigma of activism and organizing following the attacks on organizing by COINTELPRO and other assaults on Black activism, and (c) lack of resources for building the capacity for Black organizing. Together these factors have marginalized organizing as a meaningful and effective tool for community change (Churchill & Vander Wall, 2002).

For example, in late 1990s, communities throughout the country saw a dramatic expansion for strategies that included youth organizing. The Ford Foundation's leadership expanded the terrain for numerous other foundations to follow suit and support youth organizing. Although Black organizing occupied only a fraction of the philanthropic resources, there were key efforts that contributed to a burgeoning Black organizing infrastructure consisting of key organizations, annual training and convenings, and opportunities to share best practices among youth organizers. This period of philanthropic attention, however, was short lived. I recall the comments of one program officer at the Ford Foundation, who stated in a meeting, "the revolution will not be funded." She was correct, and as a result very little philanthropic attention has been focused on organizing since the early 2000s. The lack of investment in organizing has limited the available pathways for new Black activists to enter organizing work, and the places where African American activists convene, share lessons, and learn about organizing efforts.

**Fragmentation and Isolation.** There are a number of tensions that complicate organizing in African American communities. First are the growing class tensions between educated professional and working poor communities. These tensions, while rarely discussed publicly, have fostered different and sometime conflicting views on how to address pressing issues. Although some view community organizing and building power among constituents as an important strategy to change unjust policies, others focus almost entirely on political power and voting as the secret sauce to social change. Although it is true that this is false separation, these issues have made it difficult to close ranks and coalesce around a common agenda.

The significance of #Blacklivesmatter in some ways bridges this gap because, rather than only focusing on a specific policy, like stop and frisk, it calls for an overarching appeal to basic human dignity. Although the movement has been criticized for its lack of strategy to achieve policy goals regarding policing practices, it provides meaning and the framing necessary for collective action. #Blacklivesmatter allows us to interpret and assign specific meaning to injustice and collectively act to bring about desired social change. Snow and Benford (2000) have labeled the process of interpreting and assigning meaning to social issues as collective action framing. Collective action frames allow individuals to simplify and interpret the complex social world in ways that are meaningful, and functions to organize belief systems that encourage collective action (Benford & Snow,

2000; Goffman, 1974). Building from Goffman (1974), Benford and Snow (2000) argued that frames “are action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate” social movement activities (p. 614). Snow and Benford (1988) later argued that successful mobilization is contingent upon “its ability to affect both consensus and action mobilization” (p. 199), which can be achieved through specific framing processes.

**Lack of Meaning and Hope.** Growing challenges in Black communities such as violence, substance abuse, joblessness, and lack of trust have become increasingly toxic to vibrant community life. Leaders of color have expressed that one of the greatest challenges facing social justice work is the growing sense of spiritual emptiness and burnout. These issues, as earlier discussed in Chapter 1, “Beyond individual leader development: Cultivating collective capacities,” can result in activists who leave social justice work altogether, or who simply lose faith in organizing as a tool for social change. Creating and sustaining social justice movements require intense dedication and commitment that often breed burnout, which in turn fosters loss of purpose. Activist Yashna Maya Padamsee (2011) observes:

We put our bodies on the line everyday—because we care so deeply about our work—hunger strikes, long marches, long days at the computer, or long days organizing on a street corner, or a public bus, or a congregation. Skip a meal, keep working. Don’t sleep, keep working. Our communities are still suffering, so I must keep going. (para. 10)

These challenges to African American youth leadership organizing are even more difficult with policies that restrict, control, and contain young people. For example, police departments’ stop-and-frisk practices and zero-tolerance policies in schools disproportionately criminalize young men of color for willful defiance and all have negative impact on young people’s social emotional health (Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, 1999). Young people in urban settings who have fallen prey to these discriminatory practices often have few opportunities to address the psychosocial harm resulting from persistent exposure to an ecosystem of violence. Their experiences are not only traumatizing, but often have a profoundly negative impact on their sense of efficacy and agency.

This means that we have to view structural issues such as poverty, unemployment, underfunded schools, incarceration, lack of access to quality health care, and poor-quality housing as representing a collective experience shared by young people, and their families. These structural issues contribute to socially toxic environments (Garbarino, 1995). Environments where lack of opportunities, blocked access, constrained resources, and unclear pathways to a better life can erode trusting relationships, and severely constrain agency required for collective action (Ginwright, 2010). Paul Farmer (2004) called this structural violence, where structural oppression destroys and harms communities. He accurately highlighted the ways in

which racism, homophobia, classism, sexism, and other forms of systemic exclusion are embedded in social institutions and harm communities and groups in our society.

## Leadership, Love, and Healing Justice

These barriers require a new strategy to revive the vibrant leadership and organizing potential within Black communities. In Black communities ravaged by violence, crime, and poverty, organizing is often created and sustained by building healing communities where individuals restore a sense of hope, and possibilities for community change. Healing justice is an emerging movement that seeks both (a) collective healing and well-being, and also (b) transforming the institutions and relationships that are causing the harm in the first place (Wallace, 2012). This transformation requires us to address the ways that social institutions and policies harm more than help, while simultaneously building practices in communities that promote well-being. As such, healing justice focuses on both the systemic consequences of oppression on hope and how communities can heal and be restored to vibrant, healthy communities. Healing justice practitioners are acutely aware of the ways in which stress, lack of resources, violence, and prolonged exposure to trauma, all present tremendous challenges in creating community and/or social change. Similar to environmental justice activists, who view policies that harm the earth as political issues, healing justice activists view policies that harm individual and community well-being as political as well. For example, environmental justice activists view policies that promote pollution and fossil fuels as harmful to the earth and our environment. Much of their activism focuses on protecting the environment from harm created by lack of awareness or concern for the natural environment. Similarly, healing justice activists view policies that promote violence, stress, hopelessness in schools and communities, as harmful to our collective well-being, human dignity, and hope. Rather than viewing well-being as an individual act of self-care, healing justice advocates view the practice of healing as political action.

Nicole Lee (2014), Executive Director of Urban Peace Movement in Oakland, CA, commented that we often think of social change occurring from the top down (i.e., government programs), or from the bottom up (i.e., grassroots community organizing). However, the conditions in urban communities of color also require that we address the long-term exposure to social trauma. This means social change from the inside out by working on self-transformation, healing, hopefulness, and fostering a general sense of well-being. By and large, these practices do not exist in urban schools and community organizations, as we now know them. As a result, their absence has been the Achilles heel of modern organizing's effort to engage constituencies in a deeper way. Inside-out social change simply means examining both the root causes of barriers to building effective, healthy, and vibrant

communities, and focusing on caring for our collective mental and physical health. Healing justice advocates examine the process that contributes to individual well-being, community health, and broader social justice.

Lee is a long-time community organizer in Oakland. After years of front-line organizing, she recognized that healing from years of exposure to toxic public policy was also key for community change. She commented that sometimes she wondered if the young people of color would be able to absorb the benefits of the policy wins for which they worked. In her poignant paper on healing-centered organizing, she wrote,

I heard environmental author Paul Hawken use the metaphor of a healthy watershed in a speech about creating sustainable local economies. He said that in a healthy watershed, fertile soil absorbs rain when it falls, and the rain feeds the whole ecosystem. The local environment flourishes as a result. However, environmental degradation has left many places around the world with dry, cracked soil. In these places, the rains seldom come. But, even when they do, the soil is so damaged that it can't absorb the rain. The water runs off elsewhere. Hawken described this as a metaphor to illustrate issues surrounding local economies, but I found it just as helpful when thinking about my work with Oakland's young people. I wondered and worried whether the youth I worked with would be ready to take whatever green jobs we helped create. Did they even know what a "green job" was or why it was important? I came to understand that. . . the policy wins that we seek are the rain, and the youth are the soil. The soil has to be tended to and cared for so that it can absorb the rain. (Lee, 2012, p. 7)

Increasingly, social change youth leaders are focusing on ways for other young people to absorb the rain, or heal so that they enjoy benefits of policy wins. #Blacklivesmatter is one example of healing justice because it highlights three important features of the healing justice framework, which are restoration, resistance, and reclamation.

**Restoration.** The first feature, restoration, involves actions and activities that restore collective well-being, meaning, and purpose. Restoration in this sense is a political act because it recognizes the collective nature of well-being, and moves away from individualistic notions of health, and views restoration of community as the result of political power agency, voice, and action.

#Blacklivesmatter activists share a common awareness of restoration as an important political and organizing strategy. For example, after the slogan #Blacklivesmatter spread like wild fire across the media, into political commentary, throughout popular blogs, BLM activists were asked shift the slogan to "Alllivesmatter" to capture the essence of how other groups embraced the term. BLM activists rejected the intentional diminishing of "Black" in the phrase. Their rejection called attention to how other progressive groups viewed the term *Black* as alienating and divisive. The

#Blacklivesmatter movement is unapologetically Black, choosing to embrace the term “Black lives,” which restores a healthy, holistic, and purposeful placement of Blackness into meaningful political action and discourse.

**Resistance.** The second feature is resistance, which involves disrupting and rejecting hegemonic notions of justice, particularly in regards to race. One example from the #Blacklivesmatter movement occurred in December, 2014. Fourteen #Blacklivesmatter protestors brought the entire Bay Area Rapid Transit system to a halt when they formed a human chain through a BART train and locked themselves to the West Oakland BART platform. Their protest appeared on blog posts and news outlets, and called attention to how the comfort of our routines rarely require us to question issues of justice. The passengers sat for nearly an hour before the trains restarted. These protests among young people are eloquent acts of resistance, and point to the inextricable connection between power and well-being. Well-being is a function of control and power young people have in their schools and communities (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006). Resistance among #Blacklivesmatter protestors signals an important source of hope, a necessary ingredient to social change.

**Reclamation.** The third feature of radical healing is reclamation, the capacity to reclaim, redefine, and reimagine a possible future. The #Blacklivesmatter movement is more than a hashtag, and is reclaiming Black organizing by departing from conventional tropes of the Civil Rights Movements. In fact, Alicia Garza, one of the initial founders of the movement, commented in a recent speech that #Blacklivesmatter is not the new Civil Rights Movement, but rather a movement of our time, on our terms, for our issues (Stelzer, 2015). We should pay attention to the innovative leadership and innovations in movement building. One only needs to recall the events of the Arab Spring in 2010 that toppled the Egyptian government in part by using social media to communicate and organize thousands of young people. Similarly, #Blacklivesmatter has ruptured the static civil rights modes of protests that focus on mass demonstration, taking dissent to cyberspace. By deploying social media technology like Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram, this movement has blazed new and important ground about civic engagement and technology.

## Healing Justice: Toward Transformative Organizing and Leadership

During the 2010 U.S. Social Forum in Detroit, nearly 300 organizers packed into Cobo Hall in the convention center to attend a workshop for organizers about a topic that deeply resonated with them, but few had actual language to describe. Eric Mann, director of the Strategy Center in Los Angeles, and N’gethe Maina, Director of Social Justice Leadership in New

York, eloquently codified the issue and provided a new way to think about organizing. N’gethe Maina opened with this statement:

As we try and transform the structures and systems around people . . . the assumption is that, if you change the conditions around people, then that’s going to allow people to change and to begin to lead good lives. But it is something of a gamble to believe that simply changing the conditions around any of us is going to remove the toxicity of oppression from inside us. (The Labor/Community Strategy Center, 2015, para. 3)

Healing justice is not an entirely new idea. There are numerous leaders from past movements for justice who taught us that social change first begins with shifts in how we relate to others and treat the world. Cesar Chavez, Gandhi, Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X all taught us that social change is the result of deep healing and spiritual practice. Gandhi’s satyagraha movement was rooted in using inner truth, love, and faith in order to transform oppressive economic and political systems.

Young social justice leaders are deploying the healing justice framework to transform schools and policies that harm young people. Similar to #Blacklivesmatter, youth leaders of color share the idea that it is important to develop an awareness of how toxic policies and structures influence their relationships, values, and behaviors. The broader healing justice movement to restore, resist, and reclaim is also present in young people’s campaign to dismantle the willful defiance category of school misbehaviors in Los Angeles public schools. On May 14, 2013, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) School Board voted to approve the School Climate Bill of Rights and roll back zero-tolerance discipline in all Los Angeles schools (Contractor & Staats, 2014). The decision was the result of organizing work of Brothers, Sons, Selves, a coalition of Los Angeles-based youth community organizations that developed the School Climate Bill of Rights, which outlines policies that promote student achievement and healthy school environments conducive to learning. The decision to adopt the School Climate Bill of Rights in LAUSD marked the first district in California to bar willful defiance as criteria for suspension (Contractor & Staats, 2014). Willful defiance is a rather vague category of behaviors ranging from dress code violations, refusing to complete classwork, to disrespecting a teacher. Researchers have found that willful defiance was largely responsible for disproportionate suspensions of African American and Latino students in urban districts like Los Angeles. These zero-tolerance practices gained momentum in the late 1990s (Skiba, 2000), in response to school shootings, and was rooted in the assumption that young people’s behavior could be improved and modified by adopting zero tolerance for unwanted behaviors, which ultimately meant harsh punishment for violations of adult expectations of good behavior. Restorative justice represents an alternative to zero-tolerance policies that fueled and supported draconian discipline policies.

The district will employ restorative justice programs, which use peer support groups and group agreements to resolve conflicts between students, and students and teachers.

Young people, themselves the targets of these punitive policies, organized around implementing restorative practices rather than punishment in schools. Their campaign for restorative justice in Los Angeles is another example of how the healing justice movement shifts institutional and social values toward healing damaged relationships and community bonds. This organizing effort involved both changes in the harmful policy, and also shifts the relationship between the victim(s) and offender(s) in order to heal the harm. Repairing the harm often involves the offender accepting responsibility and agreeing to some form of restitution and/or compensation to the victim.

Restorative justice is an important strategy in the broader healing justice movement, particularly among communities of color. Not only do restorative justice strategies represent a fundamental shift in policies and practices in urban schools, they also provide important opportunities for young people and adults to prioritize healing and wellness, placing these values at the very center of classroom and school practices. Within school environments, restorative justice encourages administrators, teachers, and students to ask different questions. For example, rather than asking how might we stop fights at our school, a restorative approach might ask, “How might we increase and enhance peaceful interactions, and solutions among students, teachers, and the broader school environment?” Given the ways in which punishment-focused zero-tolerance policies have disproportionately harmed African American youth, and their communities, restorative justice strategies offer an important alternative to building peace, healing, and justice.

## Conclusion

How do young activist leaders in Black communities respond to hopelessness in ways that restore human dignity, meaning, and possibility? How can these responses inform broader structural changes in civic, educational, and public safety? The healing justice movement offers one way to understand the unconventional, messy, and unclear path to justice.

Both #Blacklivesmatter and local efforts to dismantle zero-tolerance policies in schools illustrate how the fabric of justice is woven together by the brilliant strands of healing, love, and dignity. Together this fabric offers a mosaic of political possibilities that expand the confines of what constitutes civic and political. Leadership, in this sense, is much more like a love letter to justice than a prescriptive set of attributes. The love letter is vulnerable, honest, and imperfect, yet all the while striving, in all its might, to reach freedom and simply tell us how young people try to make the world a little

better than it was when they arrived. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968) in his speech, “Where Do We Go From Here” said,

One of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.

The new leadership of Black youth is fueled by majestic dignity and courageous love.

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SHAWN A. GINWRIGHT is an associate professor of education in the Africana Studies Department and senior research associate for the Cesar Chavez Institute for Public Policy at San Francisco State University.

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