

Political Agency and the Fractions of Civil Rights Leadership

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ABSTRACT: The United States is in a peculiar situation: a democracy with the highest per capita incarceration in the Western world. The United States sub-regulates its internal police forces. The racial profile of police violence is not diminished. They seem effectively incapable of reforming their public security institutions. Black Lives Matter became a phrase in a worldwide coda expressing that vulnerable and devalued communities affected by racist violence resist. The concept of “Tenth Talented” is more familiar to Americans than to Latin Americans. It responds to the belief that 10% (literally or figuratively) constitutes the elitist leadership to govern 90% of the dispossessed or marginalized in a democracy due to racism and classism. In contrast, current movements that influence local, state, federal and international politics are deployed with the language of non-elitist political actors.

KEYWORDS:

- US policing
- black leadership
- police homicides
- political leadership
- the talented tenth
- radical activism
- political censorship and violence.

Organismos Políticos y Fracciones del Liderazgo de los Derechos Civiles

RESUMEN: Estados Unidos se encuentra en una situación peculiar: una democracia con el mayor encarcelamiento per cápita en el mundo occidental. Los Estados Unidos sub-regulan sus fuerzas policiales internas. No se disminuye el perfil racial de la violencia policial. Parecen efectivamente incapaces de reformar sus instituciones de seguridad pública. Black Lives Matter se convirtió en una frase en una coda mundial registrando que las comunidades vulnerables y devaluadas afectadas por la violencia racista resisten. El concepto de “Décimo Talentoso” es más familiar para los estadounidenses que para los latinoamericanos. Responde a la creencia de que el 10% (literal o figurativamente) constituye el liderazgo elitista para gobernar el 90% de los desposeídos o marginados en una democracia debido al racismo y el clasismo. En contraste, los movimientos actuales que influyen en la política local, estatal, federal e internacional se despliegan con el lenguaje de actores políticos no elitistas.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

- policía estadounidense
- Liderazgo negro
- El liderazgo político
- el talentoso décimo
- el activismo radical
- la censura política y la violencia

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Black Lives and Western Democracy

Differences in language and location might veil a common dilemma shared by those seeking justice throughout the Americas: the inability of elite progressive leadership working in conventional and legal frameworks to control and diminish police terror and corruption that destabilize communities most vulnerable to violence. The United States is in a peculiar position: a democracy with the highest per capita incarceration in the western world, it engages in militarization of police and mass surveillance but does not possess the technology or means to accumulate accurate data on police homicides of civilians or to diminish racial-profiling and racially-motivated police violence. The U.S. under-regulates its domestic police forces for abuses and seems incapable of effectively monitoring and reforming its police units despite documentation of malfeasance, corruption, and homicidal violence – understood by segments of the population, to be murder.

In 2014, the deaths or disappearances of college students in Mexico, and the torture, killings and disappearance of youths in favelas in Brazil occurred conterminously with the homicides of black women, men, and children by police or deputized whites in the United States. The 2014 killing of black eighteen-year-old Michael Brown by white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, sparked protests that led to demonstrations and riots, and national scrutiny of police violence and municipalities taxing and penalizing the poor and working class through legal and criminal citations, and international condemnation through the UN Committee Against Torture on the militarization of U.S. police with surplus weaponry from U.S. foreign wars. Michael Brown's death became an international symbol for racist police brutality in a message disseminated through the hashtag Black Lives Matter. That phrase became a worldwide coda registering that vulnerable and devalued communities afflicted by racist violence would also resist. Reiterations or variations of black vulnerability and agency continue to be disseminated in social media: Brown Lives Matter; All Lives Matter and Muslim Lives Matter use rhetoric based in the activism of black women focused on anti-black violence. Current movements influencing local, state, federal and international politics deploy the language of non-elite political actors— young black women who were traumatized by the 2012 shooting of seventeen year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida, and the acquittal of his killer the following year.

¹ See Alfred and Ruth Blumrosen, *Slave Nation*, Sourcebooks, Naperville, IL, 2005.

Opal Tometi, Patrise Cullors-Brignac, and Alicia Graza, the co-founders of Black Lives Matter, mobilized in Ferguson after Wilson shot Brown multiple times and the teen's body remained exposed in the street for over four hours. The three women began organizing and theorizing against anti-black white violence that focused on unarmed black teenagers. They first focused on Zimmerman's community patrol pursuit and fight with Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, even after police dispatchers told him not to accost the youth who was walking back to his family after buying candy and a soft drink from a convenience store. Zimmerman did so and during an altercation caused by his racial profiling shot Martin dead. The demonization of Martin in the press (the same would happen later to Brown) preceded Zimmerman's acquittal with the defense invoking Florida's "stand your ground" law.

In the United States, police homicides (murders) or self-deputized whites' killings of blacks inspired mass public demonstrations that appear to have no counterpart in mass protests against prison deaths or torture by guards and jailers. Although the phrase "the New Jim Crow" – referring to racially-driven mass incarceration and prison profiteering – was popularized, emanating from academic sectors, it lacked a mass mobilization that took to the streets and then took over streets. The killings of blacks in stores, on streets, in homes by white police or deputized whites culminated in civil disobedience and unrest that appeared to democratize leadership.

The abolition of police violence, torture and terror are related to but distinct from the abolition of mass incarceration. Police homicides are denounced with references to historical lynchings; that police kill unarmed blacks with near immunity from prosecution and conviction adds a layer of outrage that appears to be a more heinous betrayal of democracy than prison violence fueled by racism and economic profiteering. U.S. law has historically wedded democracy to captivity: the 1776 colonial revolutionary war was based in anti-abolitionism – not merely taxation without representation – as colonialists sought to limit the expansion of Britain's 1772 Somerset ruling emancipating a slave from the American colonies who was brought to England.¹ Following the civil war that eventually became an abolitionist war, the 13th amendment or Emancipation Proclamation legalized slavery for those convicted of criminal acts; and the 14th amendment shifted protections from black Americans to white corporations.

If we think about political factions among progressives, we can think about fractions or fractionating: that is culling and promoting percentages of a democracy as elite or official leadership for social change; and designating only those with specific training and access to resources as "authorized" political actors. Who "authorizes" or empowers

and legitimizes an elite to be public representatives of “reasonable” and “responsible” leadership? Perhaps the state and corporate sectors who position and fund that leadership sector, which was historically known as the “talented tenth,” and the population that believes in or concedes as inevitable the centrality of elite leadership cadres.

The concept of the “Talented Tenth” is more familiar to U.S. Americans than to Latin Americans, the belief that 10% (literally or figuratively) constitute the elitist leadership to govern 90% of those dispossessed or disenfranchised in a democracy due to racism and classism.

The concept of “fractionation” –taken from the verb “fractionate,” to reduce into fractions– is unfamiliar in political thought about police violence but may be useful here. Yet, think about it, managerial elites in colonies or managerial elites in the metropole for populations designated as racial or caste outsiders are educated and financed in ways that creates an artificial leadership cadre, one fractionated off from the whole. That is *fractionation from above*. When spontaneous organizing or rebellions emerge on the streets, then that leadership, culled and trained to work through governmental administrative, corporate or legalistic channels, has its legitimacy, and perhaps its identity as authorized by the mass, that is *fractionation from below*.

It might be too simplistic to refer to the talented tenth as political leadership that is compromised, bought-off. Rather than depicted as “pseudo-radicals,” one might argue that they have shifted radicalism into liberalism, and so their stability is invested in the very structures which reproduce the inequities –in health and safety, education and employment– that need to be undone. At times this leadership views and projects itself as responsible pragmatists operating in a violent world shaped by inequalities enforced by violence. This is not only a national formation within the United States, it is a global formation in which “talented tenths” as local or indigenous leadership broker power between capital and government. When the U.S. founded or colonized Liberia, when elite black Americans take up residence in South Africa, or when Historically Black Colleges and Universities offer studies abroad in China and in Mandarin to leverage their students into managerial positions tracking China’s expansion into Africa and its natural resources, all that was and is the positioning of elite black leadership into leadership positions compatible with existing structures of capital and racial-driven democracy.² The key points argued in *Transcending the Talented Tenth* were the talented tenth was a sexist or masculinist concept that obscured or co-opted the leadership of black women; it was an elitist formation eventually repudiated by W. E. B. Du Bois given its disinterest in economic justice; it was deradicalized through the retreat of black intellectualism

into the academy as a conformist, isolationist environment funded by either by the corporate sector or the state. This talented tenth would not spark a mass rebellion or discussion about anti-black violence, although it would facilitate, support and moderate such discussions and analyze or criticize supporting actions. In the absence of a coherent, contemporary theory of self-defense in the face of anti-black state violence, the conventional talented tenth would be either radicalized or marginalized in the face of what preceded and followed Ferguson.

White Police and Black Homicides

In the first decades of the 21st century, the men, women, and children detained, imprisoned or slain by U.S. police in excessive and grotesque uses of force remain disproportionately black.³ Rarely viewed as activists, these persons have formed a space between conventional progressive leadership and radical confrontations with police and state-sanctioned violence. This fractionating, or dividing into factions, of leadership from below has opened a void favoring new forms of political agency and community engagement.

Those killed by police are remembered as innocent civilians made helpless by the racist fear and arrogance of whites authorized to kill with impunity. These martyrs have no public histories of known organizing or family connections to social justice movements. Yet with their deaths, they have contributed to mobilizations, protests, lobbying and legislation for reform. The homicides of black Americans by deputized whites or white police include the slayings of Sean Bell, Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, Akai Gurley, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Yvette Smith, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Tamir Rice, John Crawford, and Tarika Wilson who died holding her 14-month old son, Sincere, who was also shot but survived. Police have been held unaccountable for these homicides by their departments, unions, district attorneys, grand juries and sizable segments of the public. It is that lack of accountability before the law (some US federal investigations are still pending) for criminal acts by police that incites outrage. That rage was recently expressed among youth, female and queer black leadership followed by tens of thousands of multi-racial, diverse protestors and organizers chanting “Black Lives Matter!”

² In *Transcending the Talented Tenth*, I focused on W. E. B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells and contemporary debates about black “public intellectuals”. Joy James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth*, New York, Routledge.

³ This reflection focuses on males; but I recognize the maternal or the black matrix as the basis for change. See Joy James, *Seeking the Beloved Community*, SUNY Press, New York, 2013.

The protestors and families of those slain have emerged as national spokespersons against torture⁴ and police violence; they thus seem to have deflected attention from formal civil rights leadership privy to state-corporate power. Diverse actors for rights are found in one movement. Yet, the professionalization of civil rights through philanthropy only began in the 19th century. It increased during the southern civil rights movement in the mid-twentieth century, and today shapes leadership for the reform of mass incarceration in alignment with liberal perspectives on social change. That leadership is now being contested not only by those who deny the existence of white supremacy as a structured evil and so oppose rights (from voting rights to prisoners' rights), but also those who find the "deliverables" of professionalized liberal or neoradical⁵ leadership, embedded in corporate-state structures resistant to change "from below," too paltry.

This elite could either join or expand upon the street protests and prayer vigils. But it would not be allowed to lead the grassroots movement that exploded in Ferguson, Missouri. For that movement had a proximity to sorrow, tears, and blood, and the conditions of subjugation tied to non-celebrity queerness, blackness, maternal femaleness familiar with trauma and poverty. Uprisings are not the same as movements; they often refuse gestures of welcome to those considered "outsiders." The civility of muted applause can be easily replaced with jeers towards elites and police. It is insufficient to be in favor of civil rights; one must be in favor of following, rather than attempting to lead

⁴ For a brief comparison between the 2014 Senate Intelligence Report on Torture and the policing of black Americans, see George Yancy and Joy James, "Black Lives: Between Grief and Action," "The Opinionator", *The New York Times*, 23 December 2014.

⁵ I explore the term "neoradicalism" in "Radicalizing Black Feminism", which first appeared in *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2002. Its edited reprint in *Seeking the Beloved Community*, contains the following paragraph:

According to consumer advocate Ralph Nader, being raised in American culture often means "growing up corporate." (For those raised "black," growing up corporate in America means training for the Talented Tenth.) One need not be affluent to grow up corporate; one need only adopt a managerial style. When merged with radicalism, the managerial ethos produces a "neoradicalism" that, as a form of commercial "left" politics, emulates corporate structures and behavior. As corporate funders finance "radical" conferences and "lecture movements," democratic power-sharing diminishes. Radical rhetoricians supplant grassroots organizers and political managers replace vanguard activists. (p. 59)

⁶ Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1971.

or control protests in the streets and speech on screens that emanates from the most disenfranchised groups.

There is always push back against unauthorized activism. Police spectacles of racist denial challenged demonstrations against police violence: white New York police officers take selfies wearing "I Can Breathe" t-shirts, mocking the shirts donned by protestors of Eric Garner's death by chest compression and chokehold. Police wives protest with placards "Blue Lives Matter" ("White Lives Matter" might have been seen as too provocative) mimicking the "Black Lives Matter" coda. While others translate the coda into "All Lives Matter," this deflects from black vulnerability and agency.

For spectacles to usurp the public stage and deflect from serious debates, there must be spectators and performers. For debates to dominate the public arena and foster strategies and the implementation of useful plans, there must be leadership based on democratic power that moves beyond the elites. Such leadership would not be self-serving or pragmatically opportunistic, with a vision limited by liberalism or neoradicalism, such leadership would be inspired by an agitated mass that may or may not see eye-to-eye with parvenu (Ivy League-trained) or pariah (lesser educated) professional leaders.

In order to command loyalty, leadership must deliver to its constituency. The rise and fall of funding for social welfare programs seems to follow at times the rise and fall of riots, as Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward argue in *Regulating the Poor*.⁶ Funding in the absence of incisive analyses and agency is not sufficient to distract from traumatizing spectacles replayed constantly through memories and on screens.

Narratives and visuals radicalized segments of the public (some prepared by academic texts on mass incarceration). Michael Brown's body lies in the streets for hours without comfort from and to family. Tamir Rice stomps on snowballs, points a toy gun at the sky and several pedestrians, sits under a gazebo by himself, stands up as a police car races onto the pavilion and is shot in seconds by police who offer no assistance to the twelve year old, yet tackle his teen sister who runs to his aid and handcuff her in the back of the police car; a US federal detective passing by gives the CPR—that police are not legally obligated to administer—but the boy dies. Eric Garner pants "I can't breathe" nearly a dozen times while white men pin him to the concrete. Later only Ramsey Orta, the Latino friend of Garner – who filmed, denounced and shared the killing with the public through the internet – is indicted on an alleged gun possession charge. John Crawford, toy gun in hand, does pre-Christmas shopping in Walmart, in an aisle where a families stand unalarmed at their carts, and is shot moments later by Ohio police in a state that

legalizes unconcealed weapons (elsewhere in the store running frantically escaping gunfire, a white shopper, Angela Williams, suffers a fatal heart attack later ruled a homicide).

These graphic illustrations of ghosting black life and collateral damage to non-black life coexist with data on incarceration and policing that is less visibly embodied but equally disturbing. With 2.3 million people incarcerated, the United States has 5% of the global population and 25% of its prisoners; blacks are nearly 50% of the incarcerated. Racial disparities abound: whites are five times more likely to use drugs yet blacks are ten times more likely to be imprisoned for drugs; blacks' state prison sentences for drug offenses is only slightly less than the sentences whites serve for violent offenses (five years plus). Penal captivity stabilizes the middle class and upper class with jobs that factory work and industry no longer can fulfill.⁷ Policing and incarceration also provides economic growth for investors and professional critics. Violence and economic exploitation are unevenly distributed both within and across races. Under-theorized, the role of violence in sparking civil rights movements, the perception of police killings as lynchings meant the declaration of crisis or states of emergencies (declarations not yet made with equal force concerning the death penalty or mass incarceration) from non-elite leadership. The absence of acceptable public platforms for critiques of progressives or leftists suggested that there was nothing of value left of the "left." Hence, until Ferguson exploded, many progressives were told to work harder for change – not to critically examine violence in the very structures within which they are instructed to labor. Of course, this state of affairs, a crisis in transformative leadership that destabilized radicalism and replaced it with progressive liberalism, did not happen by accident.

Robber Barons, the Talented Tenth, and the Dispossessed Radicals

During the period called Reconstruction following the end of the War between the States, the convict prison lease system emerged in which blacks were essentially worked to death, with a life expectancy shorter than that of the plantation – they died for mining, lumber, and the industrialization of the South.⁸ Robber barons expanded their great wealth (J. P. Morgan had been a war profiteer during the War between the States).⁹ Corporate leaders took a fraction of the wealth accrued from the post-civil war industrialization of the south through black slavery in penal servitude (legalized through the 13th amendment) and endowed educational industries to train the talented tenth. The black talented tenth has its prototype in every ethnic/racial grouping. Philanthropy fractionated black leadership, but not just black leadership. Corporate leaders

Rockefeller, Carnegie, Cornell and others funded colleges and universities (some carry their names) that are predominately white and work to maintain a social order controlled by corporate elites who redirect law, government and police-military power in their favor. The 14th amendment, written to benefit emancipated blacks, was interpreted and altered by the court rulings in order to bestow "political personhood" onto corporations. Thus economically empowered through the 13th amendment to enslave, and politically empowered through the 14th amendment, to be protected as it expanded to the detriment of mass democracy, corporate or philanthropic funded training of the educated class influenced multiple fractions of leadership against racism and poverty.

The American Baptist Home Mission Society (ABHMS), funded by corporate magnates, coined the term "Talented Tenth" in 1896.¹⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr.'s alma mater, Morehouse College, is named in honor of ABHMS secretary Henry Morehouse. The equally prestigious Atlanta Spelman College is named after the wife of John D. Rockefeller, Laura Spelman. In theory, the worst effects of racist oppression and poverty are mitigated by

⁷ The African American president of the largely black/brown correction officers' union for the Rikers Island jail in New York City, Norman Seabrook, has built a comfortable lifestyle through overseeing a large complex known for its brutality, particularly against youth of color. Governor Andrew Cuomo has authorized legislation to ban housing teenagers in adult prisons and people under 21 in solitary confinement. New York is one of the few states to treat teens as adults and has consequently seen the rise of teen suicides in captivity as youth too poor to post bail, wait for trials under horrendous conditions.

⁸ White philanthropists fractionated black leadership, and filled a void the US federal government created by renegeing on its protection of black life under Reconstruction. The key promise here was safety from racial terrorists, and the ability to work freely. As Du Bois notes in *Black Reconstruction*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company (1935) –with chapters on the "black proletariat" and the reinstatement of slavery and historical propaganda, misery followed emancipation– US federal intervention in the South was in favor of capital, not the worker or laborer or neoslave.

⁹ Wealthy philanthropists, understanding themselves to be without peers, offered themselves as role models and tutors. They ruled empires securitized by a state that would not police them, but would deploy violence against those who resisted racial capital. That historical trajectory continues, protected by a buffer zone funded by corporate wealth.

¹⁰ Henry Lyman Morehouse, "The Talented Tenth", *The Independent*, Vol. 48, 1896; see also Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880 – 1920*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1993.

the philanthropic intervention of capitalists. In practice, their wealth, derived from exploitation and degradation of workers and neoslaves, uses police-military violence and law for maintenance and expansion.¹¹

With the 1903 publication of “The Talented Tenth” in *The Souls of Black Folk*,¹² W. E. B. Du Bois became temporarily a promoter of a talented tenth of “race” men and women modeling the path for a democracy against the “color line.” This formally educated black leadership cadre based in elitism and race management, funded by blacks as well as state largesse and private benefactors, was trained to remain with southern, historically black colleges, in order to serve as both a model for minorities and a buffer zone between emancipated blacks and the white elite and middle class. Out-migration, desegregation, and affirmative action liberated it and likely diluted its historical mandate as recognized “race leadership.” Filtered increasingly through mainstream colleges and universities, the mandate of service trumped activism, particularly radical activism, which seemed unscholarly and “biased.”

Many conveniently forget that Du Bois later dismissed the talented tenth as opportunistic and self-serving, and why he recanted. With Fisk degrees and a Harvard Ph.D., Du Bois had an inside track on the talented tenth. Lesser-educated blacks might idealize this formation as a set of important celebrities (albeit minor ones in comparison to artists, entertainers, and sports heroes). Liberal whites and the tenth themselves might view them, as Du Bois once did, as a “credit to their race,” working in the interests of progress. But elites are human; they work within political economies. They have desires and needs; and they want to be paid.

In some ways, Du Bois committed caste suicide as an academic, and as a mainstream progressive intellectual. Notwithstanding his judgmental study on impoverished blacks in Philadelphia, as he stood closer in solidarity to mass black suffering, he developed a critical understanding of the (self)conceit of fractionated leadership, seeing the tenth as a byproduct of racial capitalism and consumerism. His memoirs note that when the U.S. government targeted him for his communism and internationalism, the black middle class strayed from him while black trade

unionists stayed with him. He reflects upon his ouster from the NAACP, due to his advocacy for economic justice, lamenting the absence of radical peers.

This is sadly ironic, given his marginalization years earlier of anti-lynching crusader and investigative journalist Ida B. Wells from the founding of the NAACP. Wells’s affinity for, and proximity to, black suffering was embedded in an incendiary pen and voice. She once disguised herself as a laborer to enter prisons to take the testimonies of black males awaiting legal lynching. Wells had fractionated the talented tenth by being an immensely talented, largely self-taught intellectual, traumatized by family loss into a confrontational radicalism at odds with more affluent and assimilated blacks. She was neither corrupted nor co-opted by formal power. Her fraction of the talented tenth was outside of officialdom. Unauthorized, it was marginalized for its affinity to the needs of the most vulnerable, poorer blacks for whom Wells had great demands, but also much respect, too much to try to manage them. Ida B. Wells’s resistance became an art form, an impressive shield against state-sanctioned violence impeding grassroots struggles.

Concerning Ida B. Wells, Du Bois, Martin Luther, Jr. and Malcolm X, their proximity to black poverty and suffering enabled them to “fractionate” the talented tenth in different ways. Only the black radicals from the middle class, those with Ph.D.’s –Du Bois and King– reeducated themselves into greater analysis and agency. Those struggling with poverty and dispossession –Wells and Malcolm were impoverished, self-raised orphaned children– had experiential knowledge that expanded their perspective, flexibility, and passion. Unfiltered by family structure, money or caste, the experience of black life is more traumatic. In our reflection on the history of the civil rights movement, we can distinguish between radical and non-radical activists, and differentiate even within the ranks of those who remained or evolved into radicals.

In 1965, Martin Luther King, Jr. and President Lyndon Johnson represented an interdependent relation between the government and the civil rights movement that led to the signing of the 1965 voter rights act, recently weakened by the 2013 Supreme Court decision *Shelby County vs. Holder*.¹³ Over the course of his remaining years, King became more closely aligned with grass roots activists and publicly rejected capitalism and the imperialist U.S. war in Vietnam (55 thousand Americans and 2 million Vietnamese died as the war drained public coffers of funding for the “Great Society” programs). Consequently, King’s political and economic support from government, corporate funders, and the middle class (black and non-black) dissipated. Like Ida B. Wells, King had fractionated the talented tenth with the desires of poor and colonized people. They became

¹¹ The 14th amendment, designed for emancipated blacks, granted political personhood to corporations; thus the U.S. Supreme Court, and also local, state and federal courts, protected corporate interests and the exploitation of labor.

¹² W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, McClurg, Chicago, 1903.

¹³ See John Schwartz, “Between the Lines of the Voting Rights Act Opinion”, *The New York Times*, June 25, 2013.

his inspiration of a materialized spirituality. Radicalized factions within the talented tenth organized and executed political confrontations that made progress possible.¹⁴

Diversity and integration became the official prize for those struggles. Diversity offers stability for a social order riddled by racism; it does not necessarily offer solidarity with the poor. Part of the mandate of talented tenths (in their multi-racial, cross-class and cross-sexuality pluralities) is that they epitomize responsible change: nothing to the “left,” or independent of their extension of officialdom, should accrue political value. King began to condemn capitalism and imperialism, and as had Du Bois, saw civil rights bridges to the mainstream being burned by liberals. (They would be rebuilt after his death, and his voice of reason and passion extending civil rights into human rights and domestic into foreign policies was largely silenced.)

In 1963, Malcolm X publicly criticized an assassinated president who was cautiously moving towards civil rights. Malcolm outraged whites and alienated blacks in mourning when he referred to John F. Kennedy’s death as “chickens coming home to roost.” That utterance alluded to alleged CIA involvement in the coup assassination of African independence leader Patrice Lumumba, who briefly served as the first Prime Minister of the Republic of Congo. Reserving his grief for the black lives that mattered most to him, Malcolm’s leadership was splintered off from the Nation of Islam. That painful event allowed Malcolm X to grow into Malik El-Shabazz. Malcolm was the master of traumatic reinvention. Before assassination, he had survived parental loss, dismemberment of family, foster care, criminality and pimping, incarceration, demagoguery, sexism, chauvinism. Even as a child, Malcolm seems to have been an old spirit, familiar with sorrow, tears, and blood. Like the other male leaders who fractionated the talented tenth, he was not a saint, but his risk-taking love for people transformed and inspired lives.¹⁵

The mystique of the Kennedy administration began after the 1963 assassination, and continued as Kennedy was culturally enshrined as a hero of civil rights. President Lyndon Johnson had Martin Luther King, Jr. as teacher and co-architect of passage of the 1965 voting rights act. King was a public critic of Johnson’s domestic and foreign policies. Their relationship went beyond political theatre. Mass movements kept it honest; suffering and morality demanded more. King’s assassination in 1968 horrified a nation in which most elites had faded as he marched with sanitation workers and poor people. No counterparts to Martin and Malcolm exist today. That was then; this is now. Yet, domestic and international human rights continue to demand opposition to police violence, drone killings

of civilians, torture, the funding of genocidal occupations while opposing Palestine’s entry into the UN International Criminal Court.

The space between Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, whose initially divergent politics converged to inspire freedom movements half a century after their assassinations, cannot be measured. There is a wealth of possibility in their distance from each other and the bridges that can be built between these two icons. To a significant degree, these heroic insiders who became larger than life outsiders are in constant conversation. Which is a relief: it removes the burdensome fixation on the space between President Obama and Reverend Al Sharpton, whose convergent politics privilege the movements they can manage. Such movements do not possess the capacity for an expansive concept for change.

Conclusion: Dolor, Lagrimas y Sangre

Todos Run Run Run

Todo el mundo dispersión de dispersión

Algunas personas pierden un poco de pan

Alguien cerca de morir

Alguien acaba de morir

Que vienen Policía, ejército vienen

Confusión en todas partes

Siete minutos más tarde,

Todos no se enfríe, el hermano

La policía no desaparece

Ejército no desaparece

Ellos dejan dolor, lágrimas y sangre

In the music video for *Dolor, Lagrimas y Sangre*, there is a sign that reads “V.I.P.” in which “Very Important Person” is crossed out and replaced with the words: “Vagabonds in Power.” With the chorus “Them regular trademark!” musician-activist Fela Kuti’s 1977 “*Dolor, Lágrimas y Sangre*” chronicles police-army violence

¹⁴ Breaking Jim Crow, civil disobedience determined the success of the civil rights movements. Activists understood that the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court ruling to desegregate public schools presupposed a movement led by black children and their families, as did the 1957 Little Rock, Arkansas, integration of public schools.

¹⁵ Decades ago as a seminarian on a class trip to Puerto Rico, I met a senator, blond, blue-eyed, seemingly “white,” a Puerto Rican who spoke about how proud he, as a student, felt as a black man when Malcolm X debated at Harvard University, militantly denouncing white supremacy.

against citizen artists and government opposition. Fela Kuti was politicized by his mother, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (1900-1978)¹⁶ and his lover African-American artist-activist Sandra Isadore. Isadore introduced him to the writings of Malcolm X. With lyrics that describe how oppressed people focus on personal achievements –babies, parties, new homes, wealth– Fela argues that such a focus diverts from or masks fears of fighting for justice and freedom-as-happiness; these fears are rooted in the potential loss of access, affluence, and safety stemming from resistance. Fela’s video montage,¹⁷ “Dolor, Lágrimas y Sangre”, opens with a golden portrait of the saxophone player standing under the banner “Black President,” an unofficial executive presiding over an embattled people. It ends with his assertion: “Music is the weapon of the future”.¹⁸

A talented musician, Fela achieved celebrity status independent of political leadership roles, he merged art with politics. When Fela fractionates the African and Nigerian talented tenths, as a radical member, he replaces missionary origins with Orisha, Afrobeat, and guerrilla theatre. With no public image or ratings to maintain, he and his collaborators pursue convictions outside of conventional

society, creating “The Movement of the People.” Their failings, imperfections, contradictions, like those of W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, have been and will be subject to critique. It is important to note that given that they did not seek governmental powers, none of these leaders had to develop a plan for liberalism in an apartheid state –as did Nelson Mandela, whose last prison, a spacious home with a swimming pool and white servants (and guards), held regular meetings with Afrikaner leaders and capitalists that shaped the trajectory of poverty for black South Africa–. Fela, as an unofficial president, belonged to the aberrational talented tenth, that fraction of elites that accepted political tutelage from “below,” and was transformed into creativity.

Leadership is fractionated by proximity to suffering. Departing from the chorus in harmony with liberal corporate-state sponsors, hearing the critiques of radical counterparts, refusing the disciplinary function of role models, allows a mass leadership of people struggling in crossfires (misogyny, homophobia, colorism, and classism) to resist conflating respectability politics with freedom, and resist appending the title of “best and the brightest” to those most disciplined and incentivized to conform to institutional instruction. Collectivism celebrates the brilliance of the wild card. The gifts of the “rabble” can fractionate elitism and flood the market with talents that cannot be easily sold.

Whatever factions or fractions we belong to, we can develop a keener understanding that, despite individual personal character, as a group, elite leadership by itself lacks political will to self-divest of its economic and existential interests, cultivated by the barons and plutocrats. The talented tenths are not designed to change, and so by themselves are incapable of altering, the trajectory of a national economy based in concentrated capital, a proclivity for war for capital accumulation, and a rewriting of historical struggles of democracy that make elites the “natural” leaders of progress. Talented tenths need to be fractionated by collectivities that understand that the call for “jobs,” if severed from radical economic justice, will mean more jobs guarding prisoners and borders, militarizing police, deploying troops. Without radical agency, employment remains linked to captivity and violence. Street rebellions cause us to pause and reflect; but in the absence of experiential knowledge about organizing they may become texts for leadership studies that reify or obscure radicalism.¹⁹

Fractionation comes because black people are taxed in their desires to love their children and their selves. Reform policies do not bring back dead babies, at home or abroad. So the void between loss and justice is not spanned. Legislative regulations, or judicial interpretation, police enforcement, and managerial alleviation of some forms of

¹⁶ An “aristocrat” by birth, Ransome-Kuti led reform movements in education, anti-poverty initiatives, women’s rights; before her son became internationally known, she embraced Yoruba and was marginalized from the politically assimilated, yet inspired Fela’s music or art as the weapon of the future.

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tj1wpNuQRaM>

¹⁸ Arrested and beaten scores of times, Fela Kuti (1938-1997) lost his mother, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, months after army troops beat and threw her out of a window during a raid on his compound. The Nigerian government violently repressed Fela, his family, and loved ones, along with other political victims. Still Fela’s cultural and political movements against (neo)colonialism and state corruption were influential. Qualifying as an international member of the “talented tenth,” with prestigious family, a London Trinity College education, he left himself vulnerable through radical advocacy.

¹⁹ In academia, politics may be overly textual. A faculty member can assign *Assata, An Autobiography*, London, Zed Books (1987), by the former Black Panther leader Assata Shakur, a fugitive in Cuba who escaped from a U.S. prison in the late 1970s and maintains that she was falsely accused of killing a trooper, and a target of the FBI’s murderous COINTELPRO policing. At the same time, that faculty member might hesitate to organize a teach-in about the significance of the FBI terror list — a drone target list — which places Shakur alongside members of Al-Qaeda. Thousands of civilians in the Middle East have been killed by U.S. drones, more than the number of those who died on 9/11. See Spencer Ackerman “41 Men Targeted but 1,147 People Killed: US Drone Strikes – The Facts on the Ground”, *The Guardian*, 24 November 2014.

stress while instituting forms of dependency and dishonor mean that black families suffer for their children's futures and battle as they bury them. History is always instructive. Ida B. Wells pioneered an anti-lynching movement in 1892 only after the father of her two-year old goddaughter was lynched. Professional, funded civil-rights leadership found Wells too difficult to deal with in combatting lynching although they needed her militancy in order to be effective. Mamie Till defied law and respectability by having an open casket funeral for a mutilated teen murdered by self-deputized whites. Mass attendance at Emmett Till's Chicago funeral in 1955 is now credited, coming months before Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her segregated seat,

as a catalyst for the modern civil rights movement. The NAACP tried and failed to harness Mamie Till's grief and rage to its legislative reform agenda.

There are endless possibilities within and between the talents of leaders who emerge, one after another, in our collective treks towards freedom. Some say that there are two types of infinity, a lesser and a greater one. The lesser is the sequential march of leaders. The greater infinity exists within the expanse between leaders. Those infinite spaces for freedom within leadership gaps exist beyond the control of funders or the corporate state. That is where radicals work, fractionating the talented tenths, exploring the void, and fabricating armor for the future.

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