

Lessons From The Past: Black Activism In The Revolutionary Era

MAY 10, 2019

[JOY JAMES \(HTTPS://THENORTHSTAR.COM/AUTHOR/JJAMES\)](https://thenorthstar.com/author/jjames)



Protesters march against police shootings and racism during a rally in Washington, DC on December 13, 2014 (Rena Schild, Shutterstock.com).

Democracies of catastrophes emerge from exploitation, expropriation, and extraction of Black and indigenous lands, lives, and labor. The United States accumulates wealth through racial capitalism, militarism, law, and policing. Supreme Court decrees transformed the 14th Amendment from granting personhood for emancipated enslaved people into protections and political personhood for corporations. Aspirational democracies' symbiotic redemptions — the political imagination to desire egalitarian freedom and the revolutionary will to fight for it — evolved in movements for voting rights, labor protections, civil/human rights, and anti-racist/queer feminisms. Indigenous, African, Latinx, Asian, Muslim, queer/trans, women, children, poor, elderly, differently abled, nature and other animal species — all were mirrored in courageous activism that contested repression, war, and empire.

This year, the 400th anniversary of racial captivity, finds strangers in a strange land reduced to commodity and detritus. Lacking the panic rooms of the wealthy, resisting illusions of safety embedded in celebrity politics, analyzing historical revolutionary struggles allows us to decipher present crises.

The Revolutionary Era, 1967-1972, began when 159 American cities burned despite recently passed legislation (Civil Rights Act of 1964; Voting Rights Act of 1965) and with the June 1967 appointment of Black liberal Thurgood Marshall to the Supreme Court. In 1967, pacifist **Martin Luther King Jr.**

(<https://thenorthstar.com/articles/continuing-martin-luther-kings-struggle-for-justice>)

denounced the war in Vietnam, and Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) co-founder Huey P. Newton — who was wounded in a shooting that left one white policeman wounded and the other deceased — was imprisoned. The Era ended with the June 1972 acquittal of Angela Y. Davis (imprisoned not for political acts but for political friendships with Jonathan and George Jackson) and the November re-election of Richard Nixon as the 37th president with 60.7 percent of the vote. These events brought a dramatic close to an era, and reinforced the concept of US democracy as guided by law and impartiality. However, **the decades-long entombment** (<https://thenorthstar.com/articles/mumia-abu-jamal-can-appeal-murder-charge-philly-judge-says>) of other political prisoners, and Nixon's demonizing of dissidents and Black people as the source of a drug scourge, suggest otherwise.

Counter-revolutionary movements were shaped by cops, judges, attorneys, consumerism, reformers, and opportunists who sought to erase or co-opt radical desires fought for in the streets, courts, and on campuses. Alongside violent domestic policies of police, FBI, CIA, and US foreign policies of terrorism and genocidal war, Nixon destabilized revolutionary struggles at home with “Black power-as-Black capitalism.”

The 2013 acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killer — and the deaths of other Black people through **police and vigilante homicides** (<https://thenorthstar.com/podcasts/episode-22-the-911-call-after-the-murder-of-botham-jean>) — mocked the symbolic promises of 1972, which suggested that America could embrace both the left (embodied in Davis's acquittal) and the right (cemented in Nixon's victory). In fact, the left was drifting right. By 2016, the Democratic National Committee had mainstreamed the Mothers of the Movement, whose Black children had been killed by police violence, as Hilary Clinton surrogates. Erica Garner campaigned largely without the support of Black elites against police violence with a brilliant campaign ad she engineered for Bernie Sanders. Her militancy left her a political pariah among the middle class and liberals

until December 30, 2017, when politicians praised and academics studied or memorialized her in death after having ignored her in life. By the end of 2016, political struggles against racial capitalism were clouded by acquiescence to capital funding movements and elections.

Donald Trump (<https://thenorthstar.com/articles/donald-trump-and-the-rise-of-global-white-supremacy>) lost the popular vote by nearly 3 million and won the presidency. Democracy's dysfunctions were embarrassingly evident. Official leaders had derided or dismissed the Revolutionary Era as an anachronism. Now, it was a rebel archive.

PRAGMATIC PANTHER ANALYSES

In the Revolutionary Era, only the Black Panther Party (BPP) became the primary target for unsanctioned lethal police violence. The state violence arrayed to destroy the party as an ideological threat to racial capital seems incongruous for such a small, young organization. Yet, that party inspired (inter)national communities to resist and attempt to dismantle predatory structures. At its best, the BPP deterred urban police violence **by monitoring police actions (<https://thenorthstar.com/podcasts/tennessee-v-garner-police-brutality-is-legal-3>)** and labored to meet communal needs for food, clothing, shelter, medicine, and education. Criminalizing radical Blackness and communal socialism, police decimated an organization whose membership — several hundred max — was generally 25 or younger.

The first woman to sit on the BPP Central Committee, former SNCC organizer Kathleen Cleaver, shaped its international messaging (and created separation from the Oakland BPP's increasingly crime-prone elites). An analyst of everyday and underground politics, Cleaver critiques anti-revolutionary animus among Black Americans. In her 1997 Spring PBS *Frontline* **interview (<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/race/interviews/kcleaver.html>)** with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Cleaver described how revolutionary struggle rose, faltered, and fell. Class and ideological divisions among Black Americans, she maintains, shaped Black middle class disparagements of radical or revolutionary struggle. Affluent Blacks held complicated relationships with Black poor and working-class communities and waged ideological combat with Black radicals and revolutionaries. For Cleaver, the romantic search for "Black unity" required ignoring class divisions — and the superficiality of rhetoric — and agreements that publicly presented a Black united front. Radical activism disproportionately benefited those best positioned for personal gains, Kathleen Cleaver informs us: "many of the goals of the Civil Rights Movement were essentially goals for easier assimilation for middle class people. . . working class people and poor people weren't going to get too much out of [the movement]." Studying Malcolm X, Kwame Nkrumah, and Frantz Fanon to forge a (neo-)Marxist party, the Panthers, she asserts, differed from civil rights organizations that "succumbed to red-baiting."

The theorist maintains that half a century ago, revolutionaries believed that if "Third World" international movements challenged global capital and empire, they could prevail as an "international revolutionary vanguard that would have restructured the economy, restructured the educational system, taken the United

States out of the role of world policeman, and made it the American people's revolutionary United States." The success of global "liberation" movements required more than that they "seize power," according to Cleaver, who argues that conventional "independence" left the IMF, World Bank, and colonizing corporate capital in control of national resources in Africa and in South America.

"Fifty years ago, revolutionaries presciently organized against extreme concentrations of wealth and poverty and counter-revolutionary violence. Thirty years later, Cleaver reminded us on public television that "government-by-corporation would be dominated by those who controlled resources and "15- and 20-year plans."

Black Panther Party intellectual-architects waged a rebellion against a predatory governing corporate-state partnership with "billions and billions of dollars to get rid of us."

Cleaver's Panthers were imperfect visionaries in struggle who left a model without anticipating material wins in their lifetime: "[W]e had ideals, and we had commitment, and we had this glorious belief that the spirit of the people was greater than man's technology."

The reactionary eclipse was global and evidential. Ideological fissures shaped by capitalism denuded white nationalism *and* anti-racism of class analysis. Cleaver notes:

"In colonial development, the colonial power creates a middle class, usually to control the colony for itself. So when you have the creation in black American communities of a class of physicians and managers and lawyers and judges, their education takes them away from the communities that created these people. These are not like my parents' generation, people who are trained in the black schools and whose talents are confined to the black community through a regime of segregation. These are people who are trained in the major institutions and are able to use their talents in the corporate and business structures of the larger society. Therefore they're not available to the poorer black communities."

Those with "billions and billions" restrict democratic and progressive self-governance. Billionaires deflect us at work and school from ideological and economic analyses. Media spectacles and celebrity politics distract and redefine the meanings of anti-racism, feminism, and abolitionism. Both reactionary and progressive politics veil class and accumulation in order to focus on rescue and management protocols for desperate people. Redirected into redemptive services, "activism" would naturally be delivered on stage.

POLITICAL PERFORMANCES

At **the State of the Union Address (<https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/05/politics/donald-trump-state-of-the-union-2019-transcript/index.html>)** (SOTU) on February 4, 2019, President Donald Trump acknowledged formerly incarcerated Black Americans as the face of crime and recipients of white largess. Matthew Charles and Alice Johnson both had received draconian sentences for drug trafficking and were granted early release. Johnson served 20 years of a life sentence for a first-time, nonviolent offense (she publicly accepts responsibility for her crime and shares that her loss of a child, lack of funds to care for surviving children, and pending home foreclosure led to poor judgment). After learning about Johnson’s case on Twitter, Kim Kardashian West called presidential advisor Ivanka Trump to arrange a meeting at the White House with the president. One week after Kardashian West lobbied Trump in the Oval Office, she called Alice Johnson at her Tennessee prison and told her that she could go home. Both women refer to Trump as “compassionate,” despite his calls for the death penalty for drug traffickers and the exonerated Central Park Five. Despite his anti-Black animus and xenophobic racism, they assert that Trump is not racist. Black pundits celebrate him as an “abolitionist” and “Uniter-in-Chief” concerning prison reform. Contemplating clemency for political prisoners who had fought systemic injustices seemed unthinkable for most and a source of derision and rage for others.

Safeguarding lax policing of white collar crime, Trump, Jared Kushner, and the Koch Brothers support prison reform without public atonement for their alleged crimes or malfeasance (racist housing rental policies, tax avoidance, labor exploitation, environmental destruction). The 180,000 federal prisoners (of over 2 million incarcerated) can benefit from the FIRST Steps bi-partisan legislation signed into law by Trump: drug sentencing disparities reductions made retroactive; mandatory sentencing revision enacted; time credit and work programs implemented. The degree to which governance would enforce that law while permitting prison torture and rape, as well as racist policing, is unknown because power — despite performances otherwise — never shifted to communities plagued by policing.

**In the absence of a Revolutionary Era, the power to perform as
“anti-racist” has shifted towards predatory elites, along with
definitions of “(anti-)racism.”**

Weeks after the SOTU, the Congressional House Oversight Committee heard testimony on February 27 from Trump’s former attorney and “fixer” Michael Cohen, who castigated his former boss as: “racist. . . . conman. . . . cheat.” Mark Meadows (R-N.C.), a promoter of birther charges against Obama during the 2012 campaign, challenged Cohen by pointing to a Black Department of Housing and Urban Development official, former Trump family wedding planner Lynn Patton, who stood mute as Meadows gestured and described her as a

granddaughter of Birmingham who would never work for a racist. Palestinian-American Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.) denounced as racist Meadows' use of a Black woman as a "prop." Meadows called upon African American Chair Elijah Cummings (D-Md.) to defend him. Cummings chastised Tlaib by saying that he felt Patton's "pain" at being *described* (but not *used*) as a prop and closed the hearing by offering Cohen empathy, forgiveness, and an admonition: "We have got to get back to normal. The greatest gift we can give to our children is a democracy that is intact."

The greatest gift might be the capacity to analyze, including recognition of the duplicity of our elite communities and the limitations of our impoverished and captive communities that have never experienced the "normal" of an "intact" democracy.

THE REVOLUTIONARY STAR

Derrick Bell's "interest convergence" theory predicts that elite desires will shape the outcomes of coalitions and reforms. The documentary *King in the Wilderness* (released on the 50th anniversary of the April 1968 assassination) dispels sentimental rationalizations of Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy as the state and mainstream society abandoned King as he labored for the Poor Peoples' Campaign and to end the war in Vietnam, because those goals did not align with capital, foundation funding, and key leadership in the Black bourgeoisie.

Radicalism met with isolation and abandonment is discernible. Former Panther and political prisoner **Jalil Muntaqim** (<https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/the-eleventh-parole-hearing-of-jalil-abdul-muntaqim>), acknowledging errors made in movements, advocated for critical self-examination. "We can never be afraid of critiquing our struggle"; for in the absence of self-critique, "corralled within borders of state goals and objectives," our faith and funds will fail to support "institutional organizations that benefit the most deprived." (April 14, 2019, interview, Sullivan Correctional Facility, Fallsburgh, NY). Redirecting speaker/publication revenues towards organizations supporting activists curbs the commodification of Black radicalism (this article's proceeds go to the Alliance for Global Justice/Jericho). Activist communities and kin require emotional, legal, and material support, as they grapple with often unacknowledged loss and trauma (such as the homicides/suicide of Black activists **in Ferguson and St. Louis** (<https://www.theroot.com/ferguson-activists-are-dying-and-it-s-time-to-ask-quest-1794955900>)).

Celebrity culture, consumerism, careerism — all eviscerate pragmatic revolutionary struggles against catastrophic democracies. The era that follows the Revolutionary Era eclipse will not mimic its predecessor. Creating new movements with the Polaris of collective labor, love, and sacrifice, it will offer its own radiant of resolve.

About the Author

Joy James is F. C. Oakley Professor at Williams College. She is the editor of several anthologies on politics and incarceration, including ***The New Abolitionists*** (<http://www.sunypress.edu/p-4133-the-new-abolitionists.aspx>) and ***Imprisoned Intellectuals*** (<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780742520264/Imprisoned-Intellectuals-America's-Political-Prisoners-Write-on-Life-Liberation-and-Rebellion>). Her most recent book is ***Seeking the Beloved Community*** (<http://www.sunypress.edu/p-5659-seeking-the-beloved-community.aspx>).
