

# “Sorrow, Tears, and Blood”: Black Activism, Fractionation, and the Talented Tenth

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“Sorrow, Tears, and Blood”: Black Activism, Fractionation, and the Talented Tenth Joy James January 26, 2015

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Everybody run run run  
Everybody scatter scatter  
Some people lost some bread  
Someone nearly die  
Someone just die  
Police dey come, army dey come  
Confusion everywhere  
Hey yeah!  
Seven minutes later  
All don cool down, brother  
Police don go away  
Army don disappear  
Them leave Sorrow, Tears, and Blood

—Fela Kuti, “Sorrow, Tears and Blood”

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.<sup>1</sup> Rarely viewed as activists, they 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 hapless 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 (federal investigations still pending) for criminal acts by police that incites outrage. That rage was recently expressed in youth, female and queer black leadership followed by tens of thousands of multi-racial, diverse protestors and organizers chanting “Black Lives Matter!”



Black Lives Matter demonstration at the Mall of America.

The protestors and families of those slain have emerged as national spokespersons against torture<sup>2</sup> 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 neoradical<sup>3</sup> leadership, embedded in corporate-state structures resistant to change "from below," too paltry.

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

There is always push back against unauthorized activism. Police spectacles of racist denial challenged demonstrations against police violence: white NYPD 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,” deflecting 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-trained) or pariah (lesser educated) professional leaders.

Leadership has to deliver in order to command loyalty. 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*. 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 federal detective passing by gives the CPR that police are not legally obligated to administer; 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 is indicted on an alleged gun possession charge. John Crawford, toy gun in hand, does pre-Christmas shopping in Walmart, in an aisle where 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 nonblack 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 provide. <sup>4</sup> Policing and incarceration also provide economic growth for investors and professional critics. Interracially and intraracially, violence and economic exploitation are unevenly distributed. Strategies to redress these inequities often seem superficial and underfunded, yet progressives are told to work harder for change. Of course, this state of affairs, a crisis in transformative leadership, did not happen by accident.

## Robber Barons and the Talented Tenth

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During Reconstruction, 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. <sup>5</sup> Robber barons expanded their great wealth (J.P. Morgan had been a war profiteer during the civil war). <sup>6</sup> They took a fraction of that wealth accrued from the postbellum black slavery of 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 (most 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. Their training of the educated class would influence the multiple fractions of leadership that constituted a complex opposition to racism and poverty.

The American Baptist Home Mission Society (ABHMS), funded by corporate magnates, coined the term “talented tenth” in 1896. 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 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. <sup>7</sup>

With the 1903 publication of “The Talented Tenth” in *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) 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 élite and middle class. Outmigration, 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 relation 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 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 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 coopted by formal power. Her fraction of the talented tenth was outside of officialdom. Unauthorized, it was marginalized for an 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.

## On 50th Anniversaries

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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 *Shelby County vs. Holder*.

Over the course of his remaining years, King became more closely aligned with grassroots 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 nonblack) dissipated. Like Ida

B. Wells, King had fractionated the talented tenth with the desires of poor and colonized people. They became his inspiration of a materialized spirituality. Radicalized factions within the talented tenth organized and executed political confrontations that made progress possible. <sup>8</sup>

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 -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. <sup>9</sup>

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 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 Barack 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.

## Infinity in Between the Fractions

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With the chorus “Them regular trademark!,” musician-activist Fela Kuti’s 1977 *Sorrow, Tears, and Blood* chronicles police-army violence against citizen artists and government opposition. Fela was politicized by his mother, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (1900-1978),<sup>10</sup> and his African-American lover Sandra Isadore. As an artist-activist, 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 this 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, *Sorrow, Tears, and Blood*, 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.”<sup>11</sup>

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. 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, 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.<sup>12</sup>

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 exist within the gaps between leaders, 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.

## Afterword: A Response to Viewpoint

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Thank you for your insightful queries; hopefully, the following addresses some concerns.

Yes, the proximity of Wells, Du Bois, MLK, and Malcolm to black poverty and suffering enabled them to “fractionate” the Talented Tenth in different ways. (There is a version of the “talented tenth” in every ethnic/economic group.) Of the leaders cited here, only the middle class ones with Ph.D.’s—Du Bois and King—had to reeducate themselves in order to increase their analysis and agency. For Wells and Malcolm, their personal and familial struggles with dispossession—both were impoverished, self-raised orphaned children—gave them experiential knowledge that expanded their perspective, flexibility, and passion. Unfiltered by family structure, money or caste, the experiences of black life are more traumatic.

Yes, in a consumer society multi-ethnic elites are alienated from traumatic suffering tied to poverty and racism. Reform seems reasonable to some due to their distance from daily denigration and violence. Practical politics and freedom reduced to personal achievement or idealism become attainable goals. “Inequality” thus becomes a euphemism for oppression. Profits from policing, captivity, warfare and military technology go without critique in party-driven politics. Civilian deaths by drones and/or genocides ignored by the United States seem distracting from domestic issues. Yet, when centuries-old phenomena crowd the present moment, suffering can fractionate any organized entity, even those that are “leaderless.”



Fractionation happens 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 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'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 manage Mamie Till's grief and rage for its legislative reform agenda.

Suffering people resist: they write, sleep, watch screens, self-medicate, go to the streets—some do all of the above. Resistance is spontaneous or organized, or alternates between the two. It is never bureaucratic. Bureaucracies do not grieve; they can only offer grief management within the parameters of existing protocol and regulations. Tensions between self-organized, group-centered activism and bureaucratic reforms are inevitable. The spaces between the old and new advocates with public recognition can shrink or expand. Activism also cannot raise the dead. Humbled by this fact, activists may display a discipline and autonomy that goes beyond multicultural "talented tenths," expanding the possibilities for ending violence and neglect.