

“If There Is Common Rough Work to Be Done, Call on Me:” Tracing the Legacy of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper in the Black Lives Matter Era

By

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Abstract

In this article, I explore the critical link between Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s work and that of contemporary Black women activists on the front lines of the Black Lives Matter Movement. In the decades since Harper’s death, the “common rough work” of pressing for political, economic, and social change has not only been sustained by a robust tradition of resistance among Black women activists, but it has expanded to reflect the development of a cogent, evolving critique of our democratic system that recognizes its possibilities and limitations. I argue that the “common rough work” of defending and preserving the lives of Black women and men, reconstructing Black womanhood, and laboring to bring about a just and equitable society can be linked to the contemporary resistance against the annihilation of Black lives that is at the core of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Harper’s legacy resonates with the constant struggle of Black women activists to save Black lives figuratively in the American psyche and literally in the streets. If we look closely, we can find evidence of Harper’s influence on the struggles waged by Black women defending the rights and lives of Black people even as they expose the contradictions and denounce the hypocrisy of a nation that has professed to be democratic though all of its citizens are not physically, politically, or materially free.

When I talk about Black liberation, I'm talking about what is considered to be the bottom of the bottom. And when you are able to change how that – which has been defined as the least and evil – if that can be transformed and set free, then all other things beyond that can follow. —Brittini Gray

My deepest desire is that we can all do the work with more grace, more love, more honesty, and more compassion with each other so that we can not only change the world bit by bit — but that we can collectively transform it into the world we want it to be. —Charlene A. Carruthers

As a writer, educator, and leading social reformer of her time, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) was deeply invested in addressing the sociopolitical challenges confronting African Americans in the United States in the latter half of the 19th century.¹ In the same vein as abolitionists in the annals of American history, Harper anticipated and performed the “common rough work”—the essential labor that was—as is now—at the heart of Black women’s self-advocacy and, by extension, political agency. Often shared, and more frequently rendered invisible, this work is racialized and gendered. As so many others during her lifetime, Harper persevered in the struggle for freedom, which would become her life’s work, believing that eventually it would lead to the full liberation of Black women and men throughout the nation.

The significance of the social justice work that Harper performed in the late 19th century remains instructive.² The racial animus of the present moment—exacerbated by the policies and politics of the current president and members of his administration—coupled with widening economic divides that persist resemble the not too distant past wherein the notion of White supremacy and the belief in Black inferiority prevailed, limiting the access that Black people and other marginalized group identities had to the public and private sector, namely, the educational system, labor market, healthcare, and social services that represented the “milk and honey” of the nation. Brittini Gray, In Power Institute’s Healing Justice Fellow and Artist-in-Residence, contextualizes White supremacy in this way, “The foundation of our country, which impacts the world because of globalization, is based around this Black/White dichotomy. It’s not to erase other people of color and other oppressions, but it’s to say that the roots of where we are come out of that. When you think about it as the foundation, then Whiteness and White culture have traditionally been painted and continue to operate as the norm and representation of what is right, and Blackness has been opposite of all that.”³ When compared to the American lore about the nation as the “land of the free and the home of the brave,” collectively, the status of African American women and men leaves a good deal to be reimagined.

An Integral Link

Using Harper’s letters and speeches as a lens, I explore the integral link between Harper’s work and that of Black women activists in the 21st century pressing for social change in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. Since Harper’s death, the “common rough work” in which she was involved has not ceased. More fundamentally, this work has been assumed and sustained by Black women and broadened to reflect the development of a cogent, evolving critique of our democratic system articulated by Black women activists that recognizes its inherent limitations and possibilities.⁴

I argue the “common rough work” of defending and preserving the lives of Black women and men, reconstructing Black womanhood, and laboring to bring about a more just and equitable society in which Harper participated can be linked to the ongoing resistance among Black women to the constraints placed on Black liberty and the assault on and annihilation of Black bodies in

the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement. If we look closely, we can trace Harper's legacy in the struggles waged by contemporary Black women activists, including Cat Brooks, Charlene Carruthers, Brittini Gray, and Ashley Yates, to defend the rights and lives of Black people even as they expose the contradictions and denounce the hypocrisy of a nation that professes to be democratic though all of its citizens are not entirely physically, politically, or materially free.

Defining "Common Rough" Work

The "common rough work" which Harper performed was multidimensional; thus, it not only refers to labor that is literal or physical but labor that is distinctly psychological. While Harper's tangible work of speaking truth to power (social protest) and putting her physical body on the line (civil disobedience) reflects integral aspects of this work, it is nuanced. In "The Quiet Casualties of the Movement for Black Lives," John Eligon notes the "quieter reality of activism" that is, "the mental and emotional hardship of the work, and the resulting stress and depression that sometimes make it difficult to even get out of bed." This dimension of the "common rough work" is often rendered invisible.

Given Black women's positionality relative to others, the concept of "common rough work" refers to a kind of cognitive labor that required Harper to maintain her sense of humanity and worth in a culture where she and her kind were regarded as less than a person as per the Three-Fifths Compromise. While Black humanity is no longer measured in this way, African Americans are routinely depicted as subhuman or lower than animals as evidenced by media coverage of unarmed Black children, women, and men being killed without provocation or legal consequence in the form of indictments and convictions. Ashley Yates, co-founder of the Ferguson-based, grassroots organization Millennial Activists United (MAU) explains, "Ferguson resonated with so many people because Ferguson really is everywhere. The economic assault via government schemes, police brutality and culpable leadership are dynamics that play out across the globe."⁵ Thus, an abiding sense of responsibility to advocate for legislation and policing reform in the movement remains.

Unlike physical labor, it is difficult to measure work necessitated by the continued political, intellectual, social, and economic repression of African Americans in a nation that believes itself to be wholly democratic.⁶ In an interview with Tarana Burke, founder of the Me Too campaign and nonprofit Just Be, Inc., Patrisse Cullors, co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement and founder of Dignity and Power Now admits, "Most of us start this work because we're angry. We're angry about what's been done to us. We're angry about what we've witnessed. We're angry about what we continue to witness, what hasn't been intervened on." Burke clarifies, "Anger is probably a small part of the arsenal.... [...] Anger can't drive you. [...] There's also an undergirding of joy. [...] We want to be seen as robust, full human beings that have anger and have joy. And we want to be able to just freely have that joy...."⁷ Often, the conditions of Black women's lives have required actions that foster solidarity. Charlene Carruthers, national director of the Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100), confesses, "I wasn't born a leader; I was agitated into choosing leadership by growing up on the South Side of Chicago. I didn't wake up at 18 understanding what white supremacy, patriarchy, anti-blackness, and capitalism meant. Self-study, comrades, elders, and people I met in the streets taught me how to understand the world and gave me the room to imagine a radically different future."⁸ Marked by the tireless struggles waged by those who had preceded

Harper and sustained by those who would follow, this “common rough work” materialized in different ways, most saliently through a stringent critique of the paradoxical nature of democratic practice in a country that excluded Black women and men despite undeniable proof of their humanity and their moral fortitude to defend their lives as they pursued equitable citizenship.

The reality that these struggles against White supremacy are constant demonstrates the relevance and necessity of the transformative work in which Black Lives Matter activists are engaged and reflects the overall stability and resilience of not merely the Black protest tradition, but more particularly and acutely a Black women’s tradition of resistance that continues to transform itself to address the changing realities of people of African descent living in the United States. In the final analysis, it provides a better sense of the work that remains to be done and the way in which Black women activists, through their diligence, affirm the sense of personal responsibility exemplified by Harper’s declaration, “If there is common rough work to be done, call on me.”

If the past is prologue, as has often been observed, we can expect that these efforts to bring about radical social change will not end, particularly in terms of how the actual (rather than imagined) presence and literal bodies of Black people are regarded. As the fluidity and metamorphosis of the #BLM platform has shown, until the work of redefining democracy erases what Eddie Glaude has termed the “precarity of blackness,” the movement will only be reconstituted and renewed. Cat Brooks, founder of the Anti-Police Terror Project, notes, “We can see that what is happening in Oakland, is happening in New York, is happening in Los Angeles. And if we are to win, it has to be a national mass movement where there is pressure everywhere all the time.”⁹

When considered closely, Harper’s letters and speeches reveal insights about her commitment to reimagining a more inclusive brand of democracy in the United States by advocating for the rights of Black people and safeguarding their lives.¹⁰ This connects explicitly to the vision of some Black Lives Matter activists. Brooks explains, “I think that people ... call it the Trump Effect. People like me say, ‘What is happening to our country? What has happened to our communities?’ and are ready to imagine a new way of governing and a new way of living.”¹¹ These insights provide a better understanding of what C.C. O’Brien describes as Harper’s “distinct vision of political activism” that reflects an incisive critique in which she acknowledges the limitations and possibilities of democracy in the United States (605).

In addition, this article underscores the salience and resilience of Black women’s personal agency; their collective stake in, and contributions to, the nation building narrative historically and presently; and the evolution of Black freedom struggles in the United States. In examining Harper’s political ethos as represented in her writings, the way in which she attempted to foster a more just and equitable society by championing the humanity of Black people becomes clearer. What is less certain, however, are the ways in which this legacy has influenced Black women activists in the current social climate, characterized by the renewed declaration that the very lives Harper defended without reservation in her lifetime continue to matter.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's Activism

Although Harper's political vision lends itself to more than one interpretation, it broadly reveals her pursuit of a more egalitarian society marked by self-determination, political autonomy, racial equality, gender parity, and economic freedom. In some of her speeches and letters, she theorizes the problems besetting the nation and posits changes in societal norms that would likely lead to reform. For example, in "The Great Problem to Be Solved" (1875), Harper grapples with the paradoxical nature of American society by addressing the dilemma polarizing the nation. In this influential lecture delivered in Philadelphia during the Centennial Anniversary of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, Harper underscores the contradiction between the nation as it stands and the nation as it aspires to be. Harper describes the instability plaguing those "but lately translated from the old oligarchy of slavery" and questions whether the nation will dutifully incorporate these "lately translated" citizens into the new republic. The problem Harper identifies is the exclusion of Blacks throughout the nation; the solution remains the extension of citizenship rights to Black men and women. In her writings and throughout her life, Harper championed a more democratic society, evidenced by her determination to press for the extension of equal rights to the marginalized and disfranchised, who were disproportionately Black and female.

At the crux of Harper's mission as an activist was an unwavering commitment to realizing a fuller vision of American democracy in which Black citizenship was uncontested. According to Terry Novak, "A critical part of this personal mission of Harper's revolved around her belief that poverty and disadvantage among African Americans could and must be relieved in order for the race to find and sustain true independence and freedom. Harper preached and worked on this mission through her actions, through her speeches, and through her writing, especially focusing on her belief that poverty relief among African Americans should be a primary duty of other, more financially secure and better educated African Americans" (Foster 215). While Harper recognized the way in which the perceptions of Blacks as inferior and Whites as superior threatened the manifestation of democracy in the United States, she was equally cognizant of the part that Blacks who were committed to the struggle would have to assume in order to disrupt the racial and gender status quo.

In the historical sketches about her life, Harper's social reform work as a defender of citizenship rights for Blacks and a tireless crusader for gender equality has been duly noted. Many biographical accounts of Harper's life and a significant amount of the scholarship about her literary works highlight her contributions to the antislavery movement and women's suffrage during the 19th century; they situate Harper squarely within Black women's radical tradition of resistance against racial discrimination, gender bias, economic marginalization, and other forms of inequality in the United States. Maryemma Graham observes that Harper wrote continuously between 1854 and 1901 "while she was in the forefront of radical black and women's movements as a lecturer and public spokesperson" (xxxv). Seamlessly, she integrated her activism into her writing.

Decrying the conditions that undercut a democratic system, Harper dwells on the way in which Black disfranchisement functions as the lynchpin of White (male) supremacy. In "To the Colored People in America" (1857), Harper criticizes the status conferred on Black people at birth due to their race. She maintains Blacks are "born to an inheritance of misery, nurtured in degradation, and cradled in oppression, with the scorn of the white man upon their souls, his fetters

upon their limbs, his scourge upon their flesh” (Foster 99). Moreover, if the “inheritance” meted out to Blacks is devoid of anything positive or rewarding, it stands to reason that the inheritance given to Whites would necessarily be the opposite, at least if White supremacist thinking is to be believed. Harper questions, “What can be expected from their offspring, but a mournful reaction of that cursed system which spreads its baneful influence over body and soul; which dwarfs the intellect, stunts its development, debases the spirit, and degrades the soul?” (Foster 99). The “cursed system” to which Harper refers is slavery. She acknowledges the consequences of this system and its harmful “influence” as far reaching. The “mournful reaction” Harper mentions is not simply a literal cry of defeat. Although the corruptness of the “system” was often lamented, the acts of resistance waged by Black women and men determined to transform an undemocratic system hints at a more powerful insurgency. While many Black women and men lamented the oppressive system of slavery, these lamentations were usually the prelude to action.

Black women activists in the BLM movement deal with the continued devaluation of Black bodies. Cat Brooks maintains, “We’re fighting for our liberation so all tactics and strategies matter as long as they’re born with the goal of liberation. [...] This system was born out of the blood and rape and sweat and torture and torment of indigenous people and Africans. Period. End of discussion. If you’re not about dismantling this beast, then you’re not about liberation.”¹²

Writing as Resistance

Reiterating her opposition to slavery in a letter penned in 1859 titled “I Have a Right to Do My Share,” Harper writes in a manner that clearly expresses her sentiments about slavery and, perhaps more importantly, her belief that it can be overcome. She insists, “This is a common cause; and if there is any burden to be borne in the Anti-Slavery cause—anything to be done to weaken our hateful chains or assert our manhood and womanhood, I have a right to do my share of the work” (Foster 47). By framing the struggle against slavery as a “common cause,” Harper suggests the struggle is universal; thus, it belongs to all Americans. Therefore, its abolition is the responsibility of all—those who benefit from the maintenance of this “peculiar institution” and those who suffer from it.

As a corollary, what Harper describes as a “common cause” hearkens to the notion of “we, the people,” which in the *Constitution* signals a unified, collective body. In the same way this language concealed the reality of a racially polarized society at the nation’s founding, Harper’s view of antislavery as a shared responsibility that all Americans should assume is rejected as divisions surrounding slavery continue to fracture the body politic in irreparable ways. Harper continues, “The humblest and feeblest of us can do something; and though I may be deficient in many of the conventionalisms of city life, and be considered as a person of good impulses, but unfinished, yet if there is common rough work to be done, call on me” (Foster 47). In the final analysis, Harper regards herself as a worker and has no aversion to the “common rough work” that is crucial to the abolitionist movement and broader struggles for social change, neither is she constrained by cultural dictates or socially prescribed gender norms. Although Harper believes she possesses some limitations due to the “deficien[cy] in many of the conventionalisms of city life,” the limitations never materialize in ways that make her unsuited for the work she is committed to doing.

Uplifting the race in a way that rejected the status quo was an integral part of Harper's political agenda given the negative constructions of blackness and femaleness that dogged Black women and their efforts to live with integrity, purpose, and meaning. O'Brien observes, "As an activist who had seen conditions in the South and who recognized both the danger of persistent sexual stereotypes and the integral role that black women had to play ^[SEP]in order to rebuild the South, she doubted white woman suffragists' strategies for attaining equality" (607), perhaps paralleling the way in which many Black women doubted the intentions of White women and their agendas to adequately represent their issues at the Women's March on Washington in 2016.

Although Black and White women had to contend with the hardships of living in a patriarchal society in which they were considered inferior because of their gender, from her dealings with White feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and others in the American Equal Rights Association, Harper knew the struggle for equal rights for Black women was more complex. To be effective, it would have to be waged with several realities in mind, namely, an awareness of the ways White supremacist ideology and, by extension, the privileges inherent in whiteness would have to be dismantled by the White women who often fancied themselves working alongside Black women on equitable terms as sisters in struggle, despite subconsciously embracing or holding fast to philosophies and norms that evinced racist thinking.

Today, implicit or unconscious racial bias is the term that represents this tendency. Brittini Gray, a Ferguson BLM activist, describes some of the deleterious effects of implicit bias. She explains, "There continues to be...a real difficulty in being able to talk about how race operates and plays out in systems that it hinders the work. [...] For this work to be important, all players have to at least come to the table with honesty, and we continue to struggle with that. It's not a comfortable conversation. It's a conversation that people were tired of and are already tired of again, but it's part of the reality."¹³ Although Harper avidly supported interracial cooperation, she recognized the way forward, if Black and Whites worked collaboratively, would have to be paved with more than good intentions; substantial progress would result only from exposing the racial status quo in a way that made its contradictions in a purportedly egalitarian society visible and fundamentally objectionable in principle among Whites. Her public persona and work in the spotlight transgressed mainstream notions of "place" vis-à-vis Blacks occupying public spaces and troubled the paternalistic belief that a woman's place and by extension her work, particularly if she was of a certain racial and class status, was in the home rather than in the public sphere.

The tendency to function as a transgressive would not go unnoticed by Harper's contemporaries or unremarked by many scholars examining her contributions to American life. Those who have studied Harper's life and writings tend to tout the significance of her activism and influence as a leading thinker in early human rights discourse and trailblazer in early liberation struggles. Illustrating the breadth of her reach and the span of her influence, Harper's life has been considered routinely within the framework of progressive movements designed to bring social reform; her literary writings have been contextualized within more than one literary tradition. Graham maintains that Harper "belongs not to one, but to three traditions—genteel, black liberation, and prefeminist" (xlvi). All these traditions reflect longstanding contestations over the rights of people of African descent and women and signify the contested terrain in which the works that embody a Black protest tradition exist.

Harper managed to exercise an audible voice and striking presence in the abolitionist movement, but her identity as a Black woman made her the exception rather than the rule in some organizations in which she was affiliated. In *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel V. Carby asserts, “In order to gain a public voice as orators or published writers, black women had to confront the dominant domestic ideologies and literary conventions of womanhood which excluded them from the definition woman” (6). Black women activists then—as now—confronted these ideologies and redefined the concept of womanhood in liberating ways. When the agendas posited by interracial, women-centered organizations were too narrow or proved exclusive, Black women activists troubled the waters by expressing broader concerns and creating organizations of their own.

While Harper condemns the institution of slavery, she also indicts the Supreme Court, a cornerstone of American democracy, for its feigned impotence. Capitalism in the United States has not strayed far from its roots. According to Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, “African Americans have always felt the most punishing aspects of life under American capitalism acutely” (186). For Cat Brooks, capitalism is a system that “pits police against black people and black people against one another.”¹⁴

The Past as Prologue

Harper’s work suggests that she participated in a counter discourse by positing a more inclusive brand of democracy. Melba Joyce Boyd suggests that Harper’s politics were informed by American culture, mainly the predominance of race, gender, and class disparities. Boyd observes, “Harper’s insight, developed during an era rife with violent enforcement of racism, sexism, and classism, constitutes a viable ideological framework for contemporary radical thought” (11). The realities Harper endured made her sensitive to the double bind of race and gender oppression, laying the groundwork for an intersectional analysis of institutional racism, which Taylor defines as “the policies, programs, and practices of public and private institutions that result in greater rates of poverty, dispossession, criminalization, illness, and ultimately mortality of African Americans” (8).

Together, these contemporary activists reject the demonization and subjugation of blackness and the patent unfairness of a justice system that routinely fails to protect Black people in the courts and streets. Scholar-activists like Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, and Michelle Alexander have advocated in their literary, political, and legal spheres, respectively, for radical democratic reform. The “common rough work” of redeeming and preserving the lives of Black women and men, defending Black womanhood, and working diligently to bring about a better society can and should be located within the longstanding tradition of Black women’s resistance to the dehumanization of Black lives and intricately connected to contemporary struggles for social change. If we examine these struggles without considering the earlier political stances that influenced them, we risk perpetuating a narrow view of the past.

In an era that some mistakenly assume to be post racial, an era in which race no longer matters or is considered of little consequence, many democratic ideals Harper defended historically are under siege.¹⁵ Strangely or perhaps intentionally, it seems the more things change, the more they remain the same. Despite the legislative gains that have been made on behalf of racial progress, as Ibram Kendi notes, “To deny the forward march of racism is to deny the successes of American racists. [...] Racial disparities in everything from wealth to health have persisted in the

United States because racist policies have persisted, and oftentimes progressed” (SR4). When we examine the current political milieu, racial disparities in the educational system often exacerbated by class remain widespread. With the recent appointment of Elisabeth DeVos as the Secretary of Education, there is evidence this tradition will continue. The relationship between White feminists and feminists of color, particularly Black women, remains visibly strained and fraught with distrust and disloyalty. If the Women’s March on Washington in 2016 the day after the inauguration of the 45th president of the United States revealed anything, it demonstrated that a chasm persists between progressive White and Black women.

Judging from the state sanctioned violence against Black bodies by law enforcement that necessitated The Movement for Black Lives founded by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors and the mass incarceration of Black men and women as a form of social control, or what Michelle Alexander has labeled the “new” Jim Crow, Black men and women continue to be denied equal protection under the law or the benefits of an unbiased criminal justice system.¹⁶ Simply put, the playing field remains deliberately uneven, and the system that was built broken remains unchanged and, to some extent, unexamined. The vehement denial of White privilege within some sectors of the body politic reflects a perverse refusal within mainstream American society to acknowledge the ways in which Whites have systematically received benefits solely on the basis of their skin color in the past. There is a refusal to grant racial and ethnic minorities—particularly people of African descent— and women—particularly Black women—equal access to the full (citizenship) rights and responsibilities supposed to be part and parcel of American democracy.

In the wake of legislation designed to foster a more equitable society, such as the Civil Rights Act (1964), the Voting Rights Act (1965), and the Fair Housing Act (1968), virulent White supremacist ideology; discrimination on the basis of class, gender, sexuality, and ability; the marginalization of ethnic and racial minorities; and the exploitation of what should be shared national resources persist. In her day, Harper defended racial equality, gender parity, and economic franchisement. Theoretically, these are fundamental ideals that most Americans, regardless of their identities, associate with democracy. Testifying of all that she valued writ large, collectively, these ideals provide a lens for contemplating and theorizing what can only be described as a widening breach in the democratic system between those who benefit from the current brand of democracy and those who have been excluded from its benefits or been given them piecemeal. The democratic ideals that Harper pursued nearly a century ago are evident in the hearts and minds of Black women activists today and represent important themes in their social justice work. These egalitarian ideals are still being pursued within a social climate rife with racial animas, bigotry, intolerance, and the unwarranted fear and rejection of anything that exists outside the established racial, gender, and class norms.

The impacts of Harper’s activism were far reaching. The oppressive conditions Blacks were subjected to before Reconstruction and after what some historians have deemed its failure hint at why, at every turn, Harper appeared willing to confront injustice and inhumanity and challenge the racial and gender status quo. Something in her lived experiences spurred her lifelong commitment to radical social change. Perhaps it was the fundamental belief among Black women activists that Black lives mattered—politically, ideologically, culturally, physically, intellectually, and creatively. As a Black woman, Harper was subject to discrimination on at least two fronts. In addition to the restrictions imposed on Blacks and women, constraints were associated with her

class status as she struggled for social equality and to affirm the humanity of Black women and men. Beverly Guy-Sheftall describes the predicament of affluent women relegated to the private sphere: “During the nineteenth century the appropriate sphere of activity for women (of a certain class) was considered to be the home, while the public sphere was considered to be the appropriate domain for men” (11). In spite of circumstances that, for some, might have proven debilitating, Harper used her marginalized identities as a basis for promoting social reform and advocating for the humanity of Black women and men. In her assessment of the condition of Black people, Harper questioned the legitimacy of the “inheritance” that had been bequeathed to Blacks in her speech “The Colored People of America.”

Conclusion

Harper’s body of work, particularly her nonfictional writings, along with her life served to continually reject the legitimacy and viability of a society in which Blacks, particularly women, were rendered second-class citizens and regarded as what Patricia Hill Collins has labeled “outsiders-within.” In her analyses of the plight of Blacks, Harper stresses the ways in which racial identity serves as the basis of unequal and unfair treatment and works to expose and subvert a system that mandates and perpetuates the exclusion of Blacks—bodies considered worth little intellectually and spiritually and deserving of even less socially, politically, and materially. In this racially polarized milieu, Black men and women along with their progeny are bound by an unjust social system designed to last into eternity. The work of liberating Black women and men is a constant struggle that requires not only physical bodies but willing hearts and minds. Charlene Carruthers, reminds us, “Liberation work is a protracted struggle in which people sacrifice time, relationships, and mental wellness and far too few of us are prepared for the long haul. A not-so-little secret key to this work is accepting that we are all human and many of us are doing this work for the first time.”¹⁷

Harper’s awareness of the plight of Blacks and women, particularly Black women, made it necessary to confront the incongruities that marred the nation and seek redress by insisting upon the rights of Black men and women. In her letters and speeches, Harper expressed a commitment to defending the rights of those suffering along the margin. In her desire to foster a more democratic society, Harper advocated for social reforms that recognized Blacks and women as first-class citizens. Her life and activism remain germane in the 21st century. As Harper presciently observed, “Slavery is dead, but the spirit which animated it still lives.” In other words, while Blacks are no longer in physical bondage (though the rate at which they are incarcerated may make this claim less tenable at some point), they face the remnants of slavery in the form of racial disparities often exacerbated by gender and class bias in nearly every aspect of American life. Fortunately, Black agency has never been in short supply. Brittini Gray observes, “What’s difficult about organizing is waiting for institutional and systemic change to actually happen. [...] And I believe that most of our public systems are inherently flawed and subsequently broken. So, because our focus is around things like policy and institutional change, you have to be able to want to push for accountability and changes around those things, but you also have to be aware that stuff is just not going to move at the speed you want it to.”¹⁸

NOTES

¹According to Gladys L. Knight, “Although the 1890s marked the beginning of a period of great achievement for most of white America, it also witnessed the birth of Jim Crow laws and customs for blacks. Jim Crow put legally binding restrictions on nearly every aspect of black life” (523).

²Louise, Vanessa. “An Interview with Cat Brooks of the Anti-Police Terror Project for Evaluate What You Will Tolerate.” *Medium*. November 5, 2017, medium.com/@vbombboom/an-interview-with-cat-brooks-of-the-anti-police-terror-project-for-evaluate-what-you-tolerate-1bc5bc0e6370. Accessed 4 Jan. 2018.

³Gray, Brittini. “Forward through Ferguson, Brittini Gray.” forwardthroughferguson.org/stories/brittini/ Accessed 6 June 2018.

⁴To be sure, Fannie Lou Hamer’s work to secure voting rights for Blacks and poor Whites would serve as a testimony of the political significance of Black lives. Angela Davis continues to work unflinching for the preservation of ideological freedom within the academy and beyond. Bernice Johnson Reagon has championed the significance of cultural workers. Ida B. Wells Barnett maintained the sanctity of Black bodies in her anti-lynching campaigns. Maria W. Stewart epitomizes the Black intellectual tradition. And Toni Morrison would argue that Black lives matter creatively; her literary works, which keep the Black experience at the center of the narrative, demonstrate this.

⁵Yates, Ashley. “Black Lives Will Matter When Our Tragedies Turn to Triumph: Let Ferguson Be a Start” *Huffington Post*. March 2, 2015. www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-lives-will-matter-w_b_6787266.html. Accessed 4 Jan. 2018.

⁶ In much the same vein that Ta-Nehisi Coates describes “those who believe themselves to be white” in *Between the World and Me*.

⁷ “Patrisse Cullors and Tarana Burke: Anger, Activism, and Action.” *Elle*. March 13, 2018. www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/a19180106/patrisse-cullors-tarana-burke-black-lives-matter-metoo-activism/ Accessed 6 June 2018.

⁸ Carruthers, Charlene. “What BYP 100 Director Charlene Carruthers Wishes She Knew About Community Organizing.” *Teen Vogue*. March 24, 2018. www.teenvogue.com/story/charlene-carruthers-what-i-wish-i-knew-about-community-organizing. Accessed 6 June 2018.

⁹ Artz, Matthew. “Black Lives Matter Leader Cat Brooks Playing the Role of Her Life” *Times Standard News*. July 7, 2015. www.times-standard.com/article/ZZ/20150707/NEWS/150707009. Accessed 4 Jan. 2018.

¹⁰ In the context of this article, I consider one of Harper’s letters titled “I Have a Right to Do My Share” and two of her speeches titled “To the Colored People in America” and “The Great Problem to Be Solved.”

¹¹ Jaffe, Sarah. “Healing a City Afflicted with Police Brutality: A Conversation with Oakland Activist Cat Brooks.” Truthout.org May 9, 2018. truthout.org/audio/healing-a-city-afflicted-with-police-brutality-activist-cat-brooks-on-organizing-to-run-for-mayor-of-oakland/ Accessed 6 June 2018.

¹² Louise, Vanessa. “An Interview with Cat Brooks of the Anti-Police Terror Project for Evaluate What You Will Tolerate.” *Medium*. November 5, 2017. medium.com/@vbombboom/an-interview-with-cat-brooks-of-the-anti-police-terror-project-for-evaluate-what-you-tolerate-1bc5bc0e6370. Accessed 4 Jan. 2018.

¹³ Gray, Brittini. "Forward through Ferguson, Brittini Gray." forwardthroughferguson.org/stories/brittini/ Accessed 6 June 2018.

¹⁴ Artz, Matthew. "Black Lives Matter Leader Cat Brooks Playing the Role of Her Life" *Times Standard News*. July 7, 2015. www.times-standard.com/article/ZZ/20150707/NEWS/150707009. Accessed 4 Jan. 2018.

¹⁵ According to Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Colorblindness and 'postracial' politics are vested in false ideas that the United States is a meritocratic society where hard work makes the difference between those who are successful and those who are not" (72).

¹⁷ Carruthers, Charlene. "What BYP 100 Director Charlene Carruthers Wishes She Knew About Community Organizing." *Teen Vogue*. March 24, 2018. www.teenvogue.com/story/charlene-carruthers-what-i-wish-i-knew-about-community-organizing. Accessed 6 June 2018.

¹⁸ Gray, Brittini. "Forward through Ferguson, Brittini Gray." forwardthroughferguson.org/stories/brittini/ Accessed 6 June 2018.

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