

2. #BLACKLIVESMATTER AND GLOBAL VISIONS OF ABOLITION: AN INTERVIEW WITH PATRISSE CULLORS

Christina Heatherton

Patrisse Cullors is the co-founder and co-visionary, along with Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi, of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Together these three queer Black women, veterans of labor, immigrants' rights, and other social justice organizing, have created the "infrastructure" for a movement that has spread internationally. Cullors is also the founder of Dignity and Power Now!—a Los Angeles-based organization that fights for the rights of incarcerated people and their communities—and is currently the director of the Truth and Reinvestment Campaign for the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights.

Heatherton: How is the principle of abolition central to your organizing work?

Cullors: Oftentimes, in our anti-state violence work or anti-police brutality work, we don't actually have a conversation about abolition. In the current #BlackLivesMatter movement, we are seeing some of the most vibrant, creative responses to state violence. We're also hearing some of the oldest arguments, like the call for special prosecutors or indictments. All of these things actually reify the state rather than insisting that the state should not be a part of this process. There's a much larger conversation to be had, which is ultimately about abolishing the police. Therein lies the necessary intervention. I'm not sure #BlackLivesMatter has made that intervention successfully. We need a discourse that gives our communities clear alternatives and new visions, new imaginings of our public safety.

Heatherton: *Why do you think that the current discourse is divorced from abolition? Why do you think this is a difficult barrier to overcome?*

Collors: A number of reasons. We live in a police state, in which the police have become judge, juror, and executioner. They've become the social worker. They've become the mental health clinician. They've become anything and everything that has to do with the everyday life of mostly Black and Brown poor people. They've become the through line. They've become the expectation. Instead of a mass movement saying "No, we don't want them," the mass movement is saying, "How do we reform them? How do we hold a couple of them accountable?" The conversation should be: "Why are they even here?"

There are obviously many of us who have had that conversation, but it hasn't been the popular dialogue. Why do the police even exist? What are their origins? Many of us understand that their original task was to patrol slaves. Many of us understand that the first sheriff's departments patrolled the US-Mexico border. That's not the public discourse. This has everything to do with the position that they've played in the last thirty years. It's also deeply rooted in anti-Black racism. The idea of not having police scares people. People say, "What are we going to do with criminals?" by which they mean "What are we going to do with Black people?"

Heatherton: *How do you answer those questions?*

Collors: I believe we should abolish the police. I think they are extremely dangerous and will continue to be. That doesn't mean I don't believe in police reform. There's an amazing campaign happening in New York that is calling on our movement to reclaim the idea of public safety as access to jobs, healthy food, and shelter—in other words, having a framework that is about the community's response to social ills instead of a police response to social ills.

Heatherton: *How do you envision a movement against police violence also acting as a movement for jobs, housing, and healthy food?*

Collors: Let's look at where our money has been invested over the last thirty years, where we've seen the rise of policing, incarceration, and surveillance—what Angela Davis called the "prison industrial complex," an idea popularized by Critical Resistance.¹ I think we need to have a movement around divestment—to divest from police and prisons and surveillance and to use that money to reinvest in the communities that are most directly impacted by poverty and the violence of poverty.

Heatherton: *What does it mean to organize in a police state, as you described it?*

Collors: When our political activism isn't rooted in a theory about transforming the world, it becomes narrow; when it is focused only on individual actors instead of larger systemic problems, it becomes short-sighted. We do have to deal with the current crisis in the short term. That's important. We have to have solutions for people's real-life problems, and we have to allow people to decide what those solutions are. We also have to create a vision that's much bigger than the one we have right now.

I was talking to one of the organizers in Ferguson. I said to her, this work is bigger than us. It's bigger than Black people. It's bigger than humans. This is a planetary crisis. If we don't solve it or at least set up a system that can help solve it, I don't think we'll survive. It's very primal. Sure, we want to change conditions and make people's lives better. But also, in 200 years, I want to know that humans survived and are living in much healthier and more holistic ways.

Heatherton: *The mass media has depicted #BlackLivesMatter as a "leader-less" movement. You have called the movement "leader-full." Can you explain?*

¹ Critical Resistance is a national organization dedicated to opposing the expansion of the prison industrial complex.

Cullors: Our organizing is decentralized, with many leaders. It's an organizing that is rooted in healing justice and in principles of abolition. It's an organizing that rejects respectability politics and reinforces the fight for all Black lives. It's an organizing that is deeply rooted in what our long-term vision can be as Black people and their allies.

Heatherton: You now work for the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. In her famous article "More than a Hamburger," Baker reflected on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, writing, "This feeling that they have a destined date with freedom was not limited to a drive for personal freedom ... The movement was concerned with the moral implications of racial discrimination for the 'world.'" You've seen #BlackLivesMatter spread internationally. Can you comment on the international implications of anti-racist struggle here in the United States?

Cullors: Anti-Black racism has global consequences. It is completely and absolutely necessary that, as Black people in the United States, we do not center the struggle around a domestic fight for our "civil rights." Rather, this is a broader fight for the Black diaspora, both on the continent and across the globe. It's essential that we center this conversation and also our practice in an international frame. If we don't have those critical dialogues, if we don't have that praxis around internationalism, we won't have a movement that is about all Black lives. The reality is that there are Black undocumented folks, Black migrants, here in the States. The conversation about their Black lives is crucial to this broader conversation about forming an international perspective and practice.

I don't actually think we're fully integrated around this. The focus on the US is so intense and hyper-vigilant. It doesn't allow for Black Americans to see ourselves as part of a global movement. We have a #BlackLivesMatter chapter in Toronto. They see themselves as part of the movement in ways that I don't think we see them as part of the movement. I think we need a shift. We need to have a much more integrated theory but also practice around all Black lives globally.

Heatherton: How does #BlackLivesMatter Toronto's vision of the movement differ?

Cullors: I'm talking to my #BlackLivesMatter Toronto chapter, witnessing their rallies, and I'm like, "Wow, y'all ride hard for us." They have signs for the Black folks who have died here, yet we have no idea what Black folks have died in Toronto from state violence. Why? Why are we so focused on only *our* Black lives? Why aren't we thinking of the Black lives across the globe? We know that our folks are suffering. I think that has to do with the US being so US-centered. We're going to have to work actively to push ourselves out of that narrative. That work has been done historically. The [Black] Panther Party did amazing work internationally. I think we're in that place right now.

Heatherton: Earlier this year you joined the Dream Defenders on a delegation to Palestine. How did #BlackLivesMatter resonate there?

How did the trip shape your organizing here?

Cullors: It was probably the most profound trip of my life. It was really intense, walking through the streets of East Jerusalem, Ramallah, and throughout the West Bank. I remember walking with a Palestinian woman who asked me, "How are you feeling?" I said to her, essentially, "I've only felt this way when I visited a prison." I think it was important for us to let Palestinian people know, just like Malcolm did, and like the Panthers did, that we are in solidarity with their struggle against occupation and also that the #BlackLivesMatter movement is most definitely not going to align itself with the stare of Israel. It was important to show that.

It's also extremely important that we build Black communities in deep solidarity with Indigenous people, given how much Black people have been displaced and given that we end up occupying other people's land. Conversations about Palestine have been very binary, about Palestinians and Israelis. We haven't actually had a conversation about all the Black people that are there, and the plight that Black folks face, and the potential coalition that could be built between Black folks and Palestinians to fight against occupation.

Heatherton: In a movement led by queer Black women, how are queer, gender-nonconforming, and trans people placed at the center of the movement? How do these processes help people reimagine freedom?

Cullors: When those who are most marginal are centered in practice and theory, we gain the ability to save all Black lives. When the poorest are cared for, so is everybody else. We are dispelling the myth that women have never been involved in the movement. In fact, women have been architects of the movement; they've just been erased. We've decided, collectively, that that's not what's going down this generation. We aren't going to give up parts of our community in an effort to save some of our community. It's either all of us, or it's none of us. That's been the reason, coming specifically from #BlackLivesMatter and its co-founders, for why we ride and fight so hard for Black trans women. Over and over again they have been iced out of our communities. It is our duty to ensure that we understand, as cis people in particular, that our liberation is only going to happen if Black trans women, and Black trans people in particular, are liberated.

Heatherton: Your vision adheres very closely to Angela Y. Davis's definition of abolition democracy, which draws on W. E. B. Du Bois in arguing that no one can be free in a society premised on exclusion. What does an abolitionist society look like to you?

Cullors: An abolitionist society is not based on capital. I don't think that you can have a capitalist system and also have an abolitionist system. I think an abolitionist society is rooted in the needs of the community first. It's rooted in providing for and supporting the self-determination of communities. It's a society that has no borders, literally. It's a society that's based on interdependence and the connection of all living beings. It's a society that is determined to facilitate a life that is full of respect, a life that is full of honoring and praising those most impacted by oppression. I think an abolitionist society is deeply spiritual.

3. BROKEN WINDOWS AT BLUE'S: A QUEER HISTORY OF GENTRIFICATION AND POLICING

Christina B. Hanhardt

On September 29, 1982, over thirty New York City police officers raided Blue's, a bar in Manhattan's Times Square. The following year, activist James Credle testified at congressional hearings on police misconduct, describing the brutal beatings of the Black and Latino gay men, and trans people who made up the bar's main clientele.¹ The event galvanized lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activists for whom police violence was a primary concern. Although one mention of a rally made it into the *New York Times*, Credle noted in his testimony that the incident itself had been ignored by major media outlets, an insult certainly made worse by the fact that the bar sat across the street from the *Times's* own headquarters.²

Gay activist and journalist Arthur Bell wrote a front-page story about the raid for the alternative weekly the *Village Voice*. In it, he quoted Inspector John J. Martin, commanding officer of the Midtown South Precinct, who described Blue's as "a very troublesome bar" with "a lot

1 James Credle, "November 28, 1983: Police Brutality: The Continual Erosion of Our Most Basic Rights," in *Speaking for Our Lives: Historical Speeches and Rhetoric for Gay and Lesbian Rights*, ed. Robert Ridinger (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Press, 2004).

2 "Marchers Protest Raid on 43rd Street Bar," *New York Times*, October 16, 1982. Eric Lerner also noted the lack of major media coverage for the raid in "Militant Blues Rally Draws 1,100," *New York Native*, November 8–21, 1982, as did Sarah Schulman and Peg Byron in "Who Wants to Drive Blues Out of Business?" *WomansNews*, November 1982, reprinted in Sarah Schulman, *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life During the Reagan Years* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 54–6.