
The Routledge Companion to Urban Imaginarities

*Edited by
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First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lindner, Christoph, 1971- editor. | Meissner, Miriam, editor.

Title: The Routledge companion to urban imaginaries / edited by Christoph Lindner and Miriam Meissner.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon : New York, NY : Routledge, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018027750 | ISBN 9781138058880 (hbk : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781315163956 (ebk)

Subjects: LCSH: Cities and towns. | Sociology, Urban.

Classification: LCC HT119 .R68 2019 | DDC 307.76—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018027750>

ISBN: 978-1-138-05888-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-16395-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.



Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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Emergent imaginaries

Place, struggle, and survival

Andrea Gibbons

Introduction

In recent decades, a growing convergence around a new vision for the transformation of both space and society seems to be emerging from the subaltern positionality found at the intersection of racial and spatial injustice in the United States. This chapter explores this convergence by undertaking a thematic analysis of the founding documents of three different, but in many ways interlocking, national alliances of grassroots, subaltern organizations undertaking community and labor organizing: the Environmental Justice Movement (EJM), the Right to the City Alliance (RTTC), and the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL). In their shared expressions of both a new ideal and the pathways of struggle to achieve it, the potential outlines of a new urban imaginary can be drawn, rooted in the knowledges of growing subaltern movements that are articulating with critical theory, but refusing to be bound by it.

To meaningfully come together, each of the three national alliances has worked collectively to establish a set of core values and a vision of the world while prioritizing the laying out of principles that encompass the breadth of their work. This process generated and documented collective goals and priorities for social and spatial change, and clearly indicated the process and method by which they believe such change could be achieved. As the M4BL states: “We want this platform to be both a visionary agenda for our people and a resource for us” (M4BL, n.d.). They have emerged over a period of twenty-four years and through multiple connections between individuals and organizations, from the emergence of the first National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991 (which established the Principles of Environmental Justice), the foundation of the Right to the City Alliance in 2007, to the first convening of the Movement for Black Lives in 2015. There is no straightforward developmental trajectory between these movements, rather organizations and community organizers have come together in different ways to respond to changing circumstances and challenges, building on what has come before while incorporating new people and ideas. It does signal, however, a process of ongoing development of spaces and national conversations between subaltern organizations allowing them to more fully develop solidarities, and draw on each other’s experience and long

histories of activism and struggle. In looking at their hard-forged principles, four common fundamental understandings emerge: (1) the need for struggle around not single but interconnected issues, cultural as well as material, at various scales as they are experienced in everyday subaltern life; (2) an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the intersectionality of oppression and unity around the principle that those oppressed must lead the struggle for liberation; (3) a focus on processes of direct democracy and transparency within each organization that facilitate this liberation, as well as demands for a transformation of formal structures of democracy and participation to give people real power over the circumstances and environments which shape their lives; (4) a vision of complete social and political transformation, but one whose momentum is capable of being built via intermediate demands for immediate reform.

If accepted that those most oppressed lead the struggle for liberation, there follows very particular ramifications for critical thought. It demands a “knowing with, understanding, facilitating, sharing, and walking alongside” rather than a “knowing about” and “guiding”, rare in the more vanguard-oriented Western-centric tradition (De Sousa Santos, 2016: ix). A number of academics have been key partners in each of these movements through accepting the role of walking alongside, and in this spirit this chapter is presented primarily as an exercise in listening to what is being said and building an understanding of what is happening on the ground. In this, it references a body of theory already found to resonate with these movements and the questions they are asking, along with the questions raised for critical theory in service to transformative social change toward our rights to the city and creating a better world.

Subaltern space and struggle

While the concept of the subaltern is not particularly common in the context of the United States, this chapter draws on the work of Laura Pulido – who builds on the term’s more traditional use within postcolonial studies of the Indian subcontinent (see Guha, 1988; Pulido, 1996) – while also noting the renewed life of Gramsci’s work in emergent Latin American theorizations of counter-hegemony and struggle (see De Sousa Santos, 2016; Mignolo, 2012; Modonesi, 2010). “Subaltern” is “a name for the general attribute of subordination . . . whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Guha, 1988: 35). It is theoretically useful in the way that it encapsulates the structural positionality that these movements have claimed, and which serves as a basis for unity among a variety of groups connected by one or more such intersectional attributes. Member organizations of the three alliances studied define their membership through diverse intersectional understandings of oppression, each prioritizing the leadership role of their members in struggle. A few examples – the first two from members of the M4BL’s United Front, the second two taken from an RTTC brochure in the year after its founding – illustrate this diversity:

Freedom, Inc. engages low- to no-income communities of color in Dane County, WI. We work to end violence against people of color, women, those that non-traditionally gender identify, youth, and our elders. . .

(Freedom Inc., 2017)

We affirm the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, undocumented folks, folks with records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum.

Our network centers those who have been marginalized within Black liberation movements

(Black Lives Matter, 2017)

CAAAV builds the power of Asian immigrant and refugee communities in NYC . . . guided by a global analysis of migration, labor, and poverty and how these experiences are shaped in the U.S. by nationality, immigration status, gender, race, and class. CAAV, 2017

[The Miami Workers Center] work[s] to achieve this by initiating and supporting grassroots organizations that are led by the people most affected by the major issues of our time: poverty, racism, and gender and sexual oppression.

(A Funder's Guide: Right to the City Alliance, 2008)

Pulido's work on two rural Chicano environmental justice struggles describes how activism emerging from a subaltern positionality differs from mainstream activism, even when organizing around the same issues and sharing a broadly similar politics:

subaltern environmentalism is embedded in material and power struggles, as well as questions of identity and quality of life. Dominated communities engaged in environmental struggles do not disaggregate their various identities and needs. Although they may engage in strategic essentialism, the practice of reifying aspects of one's identity for political purposes, they recognize the multiple identities and the various lines of domination and power that need to be resisted and challenged. They build complex movements which simultaneously address issues of identity as well as a wide range of economic issues (production, distribution, and uneven development), thereby defying the various models and paradigms social scientists have created to impose meaning on collective action, in particular, environmentalism.

(Pulido, 1996: xv)

This is quoted at length, because it reflects fairly comprehensively the three alliances analyzed here and the ways that community organizers themselves think about them, in terms of both philosophy and strategy. For example, Gihan Perera, Executive Director of the Miami Workers Center and one of the founding members of the RTTC, has said:

one of our most basic understandings is that we organize those who are most directly impacted by oppression to directly confront the powers which deny them of their rights. This is not just a reflection of an organizing method but an indication of a political principle. It's a question of leadership of the oppressed, of the working class, and people of color in particular. We're not just all humans. We are people, classes, races, ethnicities, genders with distinct and varied relationships to power. We believe that those whose power and rights are most crushed must be central to leading the fights for their own liberation.

(Perera, 2008: 12)

The category of subaltern encompasses individual positionalities in a flexible, relational way based around a constellation of mediating characteristics. As Pulido writes, "It is important to realize that positionality does not refer to a specific person or group per se

but is rather a position that can be filled by any individual” (1996: 28). What they share is a “counterhegemonic, or subaltern, location – they exist in opposition to prevailing powers” (Pulido, 1996: 4). Explorations of how different characteristics intersect within hierarchies of dominance build on the foundational work on intersectionality by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and of course bell hooks’ theorization of interlocking oppressions and the ways in which the margins can become spaces of possibility and resistance for the oppressed (1984). Hooks (1989; also drawing on Freire, 2000) acknowledges that while positionality opens up possibilities, movement must be founded on a collective decision to name and confront interlocking structures of oppression. It is in this way that the oppressed can free themselves of their oppression, and they are the only ones who can do so. Katherine McKittrick’s work on this theory emerging from Black experience “calls attention to the ways in which the subaltern self attends to and creates workable material and imaginary geographies” (2006, 56), even as she draws on Patricia Hill Collins’ critique of the imagery of marginalization as a concept that can flatten out hierarchies and deterritorialize struggle. A more robust, geographical understanding of the counterhegemonic position is needed. Each of the movements looked at here is rooted in struggle over the physical spaces of both communities and bodies, and it is from precisely this position that they are working to define and confront the sources of their interlocking oppressions.

Thus, in the United States, the subaltern position is at once economic, social, political, and geographic, but always structured through race. Ruth Gilmore calls racism “a death-dealing displacement of difference within hierarchies” (2002: 16), as is evident not only in the spectacular and open violence of slavery, genocide, and police brutality and murder, but also the violences of segregation and structured discrimination deeply rooted in the history of planning, law, regulation, professional practice, and white homeowner organizing. Segregation’s violence is implicit in the vast racialized differences in assets, wealth, health, and life-expectancy stemming from (but not reducible to) the wholesale removal of resources from communities as part of white flight and disinvestment shaping the broader movements of financial capital. The results include a lack of adequate jobs, decent housing, good schooling, adequate infrastructure, supermarkets and quality produce, banks (replaced by check cashers and payday loans), greenspace and parks (yet an overabundance of polluting industry and landfills), and public transportation (Lipsitz, 2011; Sharkey, 2008). While this has perhaps been most visible and most studied in urban areas, the multiple grassroots movements around the siting of toxic factories, nuclear waste, and landfills have shown similar dynamics – the preservation of the best land for whites while dumping unsightly and unhealthy industries in communities of color – operating in rural areas and on reservations (Cole and Foster, 2000). These historic patterns, and the ways that white supremacy has been built into definitions of property value, continue to structure the wider movement of capital and financialization, driving continued disinvestment in some communities and the mass displacement of working class and people of color from others as capital returns to develop city centers (Gibbons, 2014).

Segregation also works to spatially preserve white privilege through safeguarding amenities for specific communities, while removing from sight and mind the poverty and despair of asset-stripped communities of color. The resulting ignorance serves to absolve whites of racism as defined by individual acts of violence and aggression, allowing them to benefit from a racist system without necessarily ever confronting that fact (Pulido, 2000). It also limits the power of analysis emerging from outside these spaces, that at best continues to liberally treat such communities as problems to be solved. At worst it allows the blame for poverty, discrimination, and death at the hands of the police to be shifted

onto the very people upon whom these violences are inflicted (Pulido, 2000, 2002; Taylor, 2016). The argument here is that these communities are in fact the sources of the liberatory praxis necessary to transform our cities and our world.

This category of subaltern refines, and challenges, some of the theorizing around urban struggle and the right to the city in particular. Harvey (2012), highlights the work of both Lefebvre and Castells in broadening the Left's understanding of revolutionary agency from a strict class definition of the proletariat to the urban dweller (see also Marcuse, 2009). What these alliances highlight – particularly the M4BL's push back against the seemingly endless murderous violence against Black men and women that proceeds with impunity – is that this is not enough. The virulent racism and violence that has emerged from the shadows since Trump's election to the presidency only underscores the importance of a deeper understanding of the fractured identities encompassed by "urban dweller", and the necessity of actively privileging collective subaltern leadership with support from allies in the struggle for liberation.

This chapter uses the words of the movements themselves to explore what *would* be enough. It highlights the vibrancy of strategic thought and power of today's subaltern struggles that must be made central to the broader fight for liberation. It begins with a brief history of each of the three alliances, before looking at their convergence around the interconnected issues they each prioritize, the necessary centrality of subaltern positionality and intersectionality to struggle, their focus on democracy and horizontal organizing, and their drive toward a new transformative politics.

The environmental justice (EJ) movement

The oldest and most complex of these groups, the EJ Movement differs from the others in that it does not have a formal mechanism or process for "joining" or membership, although an index of people of color environmental organizations was developed. It emerged, according to Cole and Foster, "organically out of dozens, even hundreds, of local struggles and events and out of a variety of other social movements" (2000: 19). They name the civil rights movement, the anti-toxics movement, Native American struggles, the labor movement, the involvement of academics, and to a much smaller degree the traditional environmental movement, as part of its genesis, while situating this moment of movement within a history of action around environmental justice dating to the landing of Columbus. These broad roots, along with the breadth of its guiding principles, have inspired a wealth of literature struggling with its definitions and working toward clarity around what is and is not "Environmental Justice" (Agyeman, 2005). Key moments are recognized however, such as the 1982 fight in Warren County against PCB-contaminated dirt, the 1987 report "Toxic Wastes and Race In the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites", and the first National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held in Washington, DC in 1991, which brought hundreds of people and many different strands of the movement together over two days. The preamble to its principles states:

WE, THE PEOPLE OF COLOR, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the

sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to ensure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives, which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt these Principles of Environmental Justice.

(Alston, 1991)

The seventeen principles of the EJM formulated during the summit are explored below, as well as the broad range of issues they encompass.

Cole and Foster believe that three things further unite EJM activists together as a movement: motives, background, and perspective. Most grassroots activists are motivated by the need to fight for both their health and homes – an “immediate” and “personal stake” in the outcome of struggle absent from those with more privilege (2001: 33) – and they “are largely, though not entirely, poor or working-class people. Many are people of color that come from communities that are disenfranchised from most major societal institutions” (2001: 33). Both motives and background here could serve as a fair description of the subaltern, particularly in the way that these drive their third characteristic: radical tactics and strategy toward a structural transformation of society as the only possible long-term solution to the many problems their communities face.

The right to the city alliance (RTTC)

The Right to the City Alliance in the U.S. emerged from conversations between the heads of three social and economic justice organizations: Miami Workers’ Center, Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE, Los Angeles) and Tenants and Workers United (Alexandria, VA). An initial conference hosted in LA in 2007 (which I attended as an organizer and researcher with SAJE) brought together over twenty groups engaged in grassroots community organizing, along with a handful of academics and allies. As the website states:

Right To The City Alliance (RTC) emerged in 2007 as a unified response to gentrification and a call to halt the displacement of low-income people, people of color, marginalized LGBTQ communities, and youths of color from their historic urban neighborhoods. We are a national alliance of racial, economic and environmental justice organizations.

(Right to the City Alliance, n.d.)

The Right to the City, is, of course, a broader idea put forward by Lefebvre in 1968 as “a cry and a demand” for a just city shaped to the needs and desires of *all* of its residents by these residents themselves (Lefebvre, 1996). While the slogan of a Right to the City has been taken up in multiple ways across the world, it resonated strongly with the founding organizations, who used it as a starting point for twelve principles that could unify their vision (Goldberg, 2010). At present, the RTTC involves thirty-three organizations in sixteen cities – this number has fluctuated over the years, with the number of cities represented expanding while the number of organizations themselves has dropped from a 2009 high of over forty in nine major cities (Perera, 2008; Right to the City Alliance, n.d.). While each

organization continues to undertake community organizing at the local level, the alliance has succeeded in coordinating a number of actions at the national level and continues to develop (Fisher et al., 2013; Right to the City Alliance, n.d.).

The movement for black lives (M4BL)

Resistance to multiple violences has always been present in African American communities. As the webpage for the Movement for Black Lives states:

Our resistance and rebellion are not new, but like other times in history have come to a critical mass, and the bravery of those in Ferguson and across the country captured the attention of the world.

(M4BL, n.d.)

What is new, then, is the recent explosion of community organizing, unlike the problems that it seeks to address located in centuries of discrimination, segregation, and oppression. The M4BL has sought to focus this vast energy into a platform similar in form and content to both the EJM and RTTC but much greater in scale: a national convening of over 2000 people in multiple organizations created a broad platform and plan for action beginning in 2015. However, the M4BL emerges from an even broader national outpouring of anger and action, in some places galvanized and almost everywhere focused by the #BlackLivesMatter tag.

Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza founded #BlackLivesMatter after the murder of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of George Zimmerman in 2012, and it now forms the basis of a national network of chapters. For them, #blm is “a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement” (Black Lives Matter, 2017). In his depiction of the movement from its explosion after the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Wesley Lowery writes:

Black Lives Matter is best thought of as an ideology. Its tenets have matured and expanded over time, and not all of its adherents subscribe to them in exactly the same manner – much the way an Episcopalian and a Baptist . . . could both be described as a Christian.

(Lowery, 2017: 87)

Garza also talks about the very different ways that the hashtag has been taken up, too often discounting the labor, creativity, and love of queer Black women (Black Lives Matter, 2017). The M4BL sought to honor these origins and intersectional identities while bringing together the wide diversity of groups, organizations, and networks to begin the process of creating a national platform and the policy priorities for action (M4BL, n.d.). Endorsing organizations that are also founding members of the RTTC include FIERCE, FUREE, and Causa Justa/Just Cause. Right to the City itself as a broader alliance has also signed on to the M4BL platform.

In looking thematically across these three movements, four main areas serve as the basis for exploring a potential convergence toward a liberatory imaginary: the interconnectedness of the issues faced; the necessity of subaltern leadership; the centrality of collective analysis and theory along with direct democracy in struggle; and the underlying transformational vision emerging out of this subaltern positionality.

Interconnectedness of issues and scales

Breadth of issues: three rallying calls to national alliances

Despite the difference in central focus, each of the three movements shares a concern with the principle issues articulated by the others, along with many of the same particular demands. Each has also attempted, through the formation of a platform, to proactively define their struggle. In the words of Gihan Perera:

Those of us most affected by this have been trying to fight back as best as we can – by fighting against developments, by trying to hold onto the neighborhoods. But we end up taking on fights on multiple fronts: around housing, around education, around transportation. And all of those fights become separate and often reactive.

The Right to the City Alliance and frame is an attempt to say, “Can we determine our own agenda?”

(Heller and Perera, 2007: 8)

The understanding of the interconnectedness of the issues faced is even more explicit in the description of the founding summit of the Environment Justice Movement by one of its conveners, Dana Alston:

For people of color, the environment is woven into an overall framework and understanding of social, racial, and economic justice. The definitions that emerge from the environmental justice movement led by people of color are deeply rooted in culture and spirituality, and encompass all aspects of daily life – where we live, work, and play. This broad understanding of the environment is a context within which to address a variety of questions about militarism and defense, religious freedom and cultural survival, energy and sustainable development, transportation and housing, land and sovereignty rights, self-determination, and employment.

(Alston, 1991)

Within this self-defined context, the first principle of the EJM proclaims “the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction”, while the remaining sixteen principles demand democracy, sustainability, and give detailed actions required around specific environmental dangers (*The Principles of Environmental Justice, 1991*).

The struggle for environmental justice has been incorporated into both the RTTC and the M4BL in very similar ways. Both use a framework of rights but define these very broadly outside of a narrowly legal framework. For the RTTC, it is encompassed as one of their principles:

Environmental Justice: The right to sustainable and healthy neighborhoods and workplaces, healing, quality health care, and reparations for the legacy of toxic abuses such as brownfields, cancer clusters, and superfund sites.

The M4BL incorporates it within economic justice, speaking in even broader terms of

A right to restored land, clean air, clean water and housing and an end to the exploitative privatization of natural resources – including land and water. We seek democratic control over how resources are preserved, used and distributed and do so while honoring and respecting the rights of our Indigenous family.

(M4BL, n.d.)

The M4BL also incorporates demands for reparations to undo the multiple kinds of environmental damage already inflicted, their use of the term “environmental racism” consciously invokes the centrality of white supremacy in patterns of environmental degradation and control over land and resources.

Reparations for the wealth extracted from our communities through environmental racism, slavery, food apartheid, housing discrimination and racialized capitalism in the form of corporate and government reparations focused on healing ongoing physical and mental trauma, and ensuring our access and control of food sources, housing and land.

(M4BL, n.d.)

Both alliances also honor the particular struggle of Indigenous peoples in the U.S. For the RTTC, this is expressed in a specific principal of “Indigenous Justice”, which also highlights the often urban nature of native struggles:

The right of First Nation indigenous people to their ancestral lands that have historical or spiritual significance, regardless of state borders and urban or rural settings.

Member organizations of the two alliances encompass these broad definitions of environmental justice as it also articulates with economic and social justice:

...[to] build broad movements for social, economic and restorative environmental change.

(Highlander Center, M4BL)

...believe in the inherent right of all peoples to clean air, water, land and other resources necessary to meet their basic needs and live with dignity;

(Environmental Justice Advocates of Minnesota, M4BL)

ACE builds the power of communities of color and lower income communities in New England to eradicate environmental racism and classism and achieve environmental justice.

(ACE, RTTC)

The second rallying call is around ownership and control over land, and the right of communities to the city. It is the primary focus of the RTTC, made explicit in their first two principles of unity:

Land for People vs. Land for Speculation: The right to land and housing that is free from market speculation and that serves the interests of community building, sustainable economies, and cultural and political space.

Land Ownership: The right to permanent public ownership of urban territories for public use.

(Perera, 2008)

A demand is also included around full investment in communities, particularly in infrastructure, a growing concern among environmental justice organizations and activists (Agyeman, 2005):

Services and Community Institutions: The right of working class communities of color to transportation, infrastructure, and services that reflect and support their cultural and social integrity.

(Perera, 2008)

This is also a clear call within the other two movements in claims around land ownership, control and investment. This thread runs throughout the various principles of the Environmental Justice movement, beginning with the preamble: "...to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities". In many ways, the EJM principles go the furthest, seeking to radically reframe the nature of the human relationship with the planet and the other organisms with whom human beings share it:

1. Environmental Justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction.

(Alston, 1991)

It is from that basis that it incorporates a discourse of ethical land use and sustainability.

3. Environmental Justice mandates the right to ethical, balanced and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a sustainable planet for humans and other living things.

(Alston, 1991)

The M4BL's demand for "A right to restored land, clean air, clean water and housing", seems to echo this broader framework. Their platform incorporates struggles around land and development under the rubric of economic justice:

We demand economic justice for all and a reconstruction of the economy to ensure Black communities have collective ownership, not merely access.

(M4BL, n.d.)

The M4BL also explicitly acknowledges the long history of disinvestment in Black communities, and explores the need to address this under the platform principles of both *economic justice*, which includes restructuring of taxes for "a radical and sustainable redistribution of wealth", and *invest-divest*, which demands investment in the improvement of communities through the divestment in oppressive systems of incarceration and control.

Among member organizations' mission statements, this is expressed in various ways that all acknowledge the centrality of struggle over land rights in their work, while connecting that to broader economic and social struggles in different ways:

... engaging in broad based coalition organizing for black food and land, increasing visibility of Black led narratives and work, advancing Black led visions for just and sustainable communities, and building capacity for self-determination.

(National Black Food and Justice Alliance, M4BL)

ONA helps neighbors connect day-to-day crises like skyrocketing property taxes and immigration raids with broader causes, including gentrification and the criminalization of entire peoples ...

(Olneyville Neighborhood Association, RTTC)

... organizing Oakland residents to advocate for housing and jobs as human rights ...

(Just Cause Oakland, RTTC & M4BL)

The final call for alliance is the focus of the Movement for Black Lives:

We demand an **end to the war against Black people**. Since this country's inception there have been named and unnamed wars on our communities. We demand an end to the criminalization, incarceration, and killing of our people.

(M4BL, n.d.)

This encompasses a multitude of demands: “[a]n immediate end to the criminalization and dehumanization of Black youth across all areas of society”, an end to capital punishment and money bail; the repeal of crime and immigration bills targeting Black immigrants; an end to violence against and active support for the right of Black trans, queer, and gender nonconforming people; an end to mass surveillance of Black communities; a demilitarization of law enforcement; an end to the privatization of police, prisons and all criminal justice related services; an end to jails, detention centers, youth facilities and prisons among others (M4BL, n.d.).

Police brutality and state violence have long been part of the struggle highlighted within the other two national alliances, while also central to the work of a number of their member organizations. This is described in its broadest possible terms within the original principles of the EJM, perhaps not expressing clearly the connections between police brutality and occupation within the U.S. and military occupations and U.S. imperialism of other nations, but still unequivocal in its denunciations:

15. Environmental Justice opposes military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, peoples and cultures, and other life forms.

(Alston, 1991)

For the RTTC, this is expressed slightly more specifically in two principles:

Freedom from Police and State Harassment: The right to safe neighborhoods and protection from police, immigration, and vigilante repression.

Immigrant Justice: The right of equal access to housing, employment, and public services regardless of race, ethnicity, and immigration status and without threat of deportation by Immigration and Customs Enforcement or employers.

Unsurprisingly given the historic and continuous nature of police brutality against communities of color, this is also central to many member organizations.

Originally named “Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence”, CAAAV was . . . one of the first groups in the U.S. to mobilize Asian communities to fight police brutality and other forms of racially motivated violence. . .

(CAAV, RTTC)

Safe Streets defines its constituency as communities most impacted by violence, police harassment and incarceration.

(Safe Streets, RTTC)

Dignity and Power Now (DPN) . . . fights for the dignity and power of incarcerated people, their families, and communities. In doing so DPN wages a fight for everyone because the prison industrial complex forms an imaginative limit on everyone’s capacity to envision freedom and liberation.

(DPN, M4BL)

In terms of additional concrete demands, reparations, jobs and education also form part of each alliance’s work. The RTTC demands reparations both for toxic abuses as above, as well as principle 10: “**Reparations:** The right of working-class communities of color to economic reciprocity and restoration from all local, national, and transnational institutions that have exploited or displaced the local economy” (Perera, 2008). For EJM, it is described in principle 9 as “the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages as well as quality health care” (The Principles of Environmental Justice (EJ), 1991). The idea of reparations is explored much more deeply by the M4BL as a key platform demand, expanded to address past and current inequities through full and free access to education at all levels, guaranteed minimum income, school curricula that explore colonialism and slavery while celebrating the struggle of Black communities, and the “immediate passage of H.R.40, the ‘Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act’” (M4BL, n.d.). In its struggle around work:

8. Environmental Justice affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment. It also affirms the right of those who work at home to be free from environmental hazards

(M4BL, n.d.)

M4BL demands the right for workers to organize, a renegotiation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and other free trade agreements to prioritize rights of workers and communities, development of cooperatives and “social economy networks”, job programs that “provide a living wage and encourage support for local workers centers, unions”, and protections for workers in industries not currently “appropriately regulated including domestic workers, farm workers, and tipped workers, and for workers” (M4BL, n.d.) . In terms of education, both EJM and M4BL demand free access to an education that both celebrates the diversity of culture, heritage and struggle within communities in the U.S.,

while also recognizing the murderous history of colonialism, slavery, appropriation and discrimination.

Breadth of scale: organizing at the local, regional, national and international level

In coming together, all three of the alliances connect local community organizing and activism to larger scales. As described above, the EJM reframes everything in terms of the “the sacredness of Mother Earth”, and the ecological understanding of the interconnectedness of all things. They also explicitly acknowledge the connections between city and country:

12. Environmental Justice affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honoring the cultural integrity of all our communities, and provided fair access for all to the full range of resources.

(Alston, 1991)

This is echoed with the principles of the RTTC

Rural Justice: The right of rural people to economically healthy and stable communities that are protected from environmental degradation and economic pressures that force migration to urban areas.

(Right to the City Alliance, n.d.)

Both the EJM and M4BL have member organizations working in rural areas and small towns, while the RTTC is urban-centered but organized into regional groupings that recognize rural-urban connections (Right to the City Alliance, n.d.). The RTTC’s focus on the city drives the form of its own international outlook:

Internationalism: The right to support and build solidarity between cities across national boundaries, without state intervention.

The M4BL also acknowledges its U.S.-centric focus, while acknowledging how the issues it confronts are much larger in scope.

While this platform is focused on domestic policies, we know that patriarchy, exploitative capitalism, militarism, and white supremacy know no borders. We stand in solidarity with our international family against the ravages of global capitalism and anti-Black racism, human-made climate change, war, and exploitation.

(M4BL, n.d.)

It also contains specific references to international policies

An end to the Trans-Pacific Partnership and a renegotiation of all trade agreements to prioritize the interests of workers and communities.

(M4BL, n.d.)

Just as the EJM references specific corporate forms:

13. Environmental Justice opposes the destructive operations of multinational corporations.

(Alston, 1991)

Subaltern communities freeing themselves (and by extension everyone else)

In each of the discourses of these three movements, the priority is placed on self-liberation. While this is not set forth clearly within the Principles of Environmental Justice themselves, it is implicit in the preamble (as quoted above), which contains a clear understanding of a continued colonial and oppressive relationship between people of color and a white establishment responsible not just for environmental destruction, but for an unjust share of that burden (poisoning, destroying) falling on communities of color. Just as clear is the recognition that this destruction has been hitherto unrecognized and unacknowledged by the larger (white) environmental movement, that communities of color have a central role in rebuilding and reimagining a better way of life, and that the struggle needs to be conducted on economic, political, and cultural fronts. The idea that communities should speak for themselves remains central to EJM as a whole, and the movement brings together poetry, interviews, roundtables, and storytelling with academic articles as equal formats for building theory and movement (Adamson, Evans & Stein, 2002; Agyeman, 2005; Cole and Foster, 2000; Pulido, 1996).

The RTTC picks up on some of these threads in the preamble to their principles:

Right to the City was born out of desire and need by organizers and allies around the country to have a stronger movement for urban justice. But it was also born out of the power of an idea of a new kind of urban politics that asserts that everyone, particularly the disenfranchised, not only has a right to the city, but as inhabitants, have a right to shape it, design it, and operationalize an urban human rights agenda. Right to the City Alliance, n.d..

Again, it is the subaltern demanding the right to live in and shape the city, taking power through collective organization. One academic present at the founding convening, Harmony Goldberg, compares the RTTC to the National Domestic Workers Alliance:

these organizations have decided to take on the task of re-building the organized power of the people who are the front-lines of neoliberalism. This is based on the belief that oppressed people have the most interest in changing the system and – if organized – the most power to actually win change. These organizations' commitment to the methodology of grassroots organizing is also based on a commitment to the self-determination of oppressed people ... building the collective power and leadership of working class people and people of color to win real changes in the daily lives of their communities.

(Goldberg, 2010: 103–104)

The M4BL makes the leadership of their coalition even more explicit, writing:

We believe in elevating the experiences and leadership of the most marginalized Black people, including but not limited to those who are women, queer, trans, femmes, gender nonconforming, Muslim, formerly and currently incarcerated, cash poor and working class, disabled, undocumented, and immigrant. We are intentional about amplifying the particular experience of state and gendered violence that Black queer, trans, gender nonconforming, women and intersex people face. There can be no liberation for all Black people if we do not center and fight for those who have been marginalized.

(M4BL, n.d.)

All three recognize the intersectionalities of oppression while prioritizing subaltern voices. This does not diminish the need for broad alliances but broadcasts a clear message around the different roles for allies in these growing movements. Jelani Cobb's article on the rise of Black Lives Matter contains an eloquent quote from Alicia Garza: "San Francisco broke my heart over and over. White progressives would actually argue with us about their right to determine what was best for communities they never had to live in" (Cobb, 2016). All sixty-three of the RTTCs core members and the M4BL's united front declare their commitment to such bottom-up change through grassroots organizing, and a commitment to being driven by their members. For the M4BL there is a vital and clear understanding that it is not just Black voices that must be elevated, but those Black voices that are most marginalized.

This marks another type of change from past histories of struggle. A great deal has been written, particularly in relation to the civil rights movement, about the prioritizing of causes and cases that highlight and battle one aspect of oppression while presenting an individual in all other ways identical (or superior in the ways that Rosa Parks was superior) to a mainstream norm. Michelle Alexander is eloquent about the ways that this has undercut resistance to what she calls the New Jim Crow, while it is also described by Aldon Morris, Barbara Ransby and others (Alexander, 2011; Morris, 1984; Ransby, 2005). In response to criticism from Reverend Al Sharpton among others, a press release from Ferguson Action, stated

We are decentralized, but coordinated. Most importantly, we are organized. Yet we are likely not respectable negroes. We stand beside each other, not in front of one another. We do not cast any one of ours to the side in order to gain proximity to perceived power. Because this is the only way we will win. We can't breathe. And we won't stop until Freedom.

(*About this Movement*, 15 December 2014, quoted in Taylor, 2016)

This jettisoning of the hierarchies of respectability and formal leadership, often found within oppressed communities, usefully complicates the idea of the subaltern as it links to understandings of intersectionality and works to dismantle various hierarchies of power. This highlights a need for individual activists to be flexible – sometimes in the forefront, sometimes working as allies – given the complex nature of identity and the various shifting patterns of privilege and discrimination as they relate to class, race, gender, sexuality, age, and disability. Within this, there is also a commitment to a horizontal alliance of groups accountable to their grassroots bases and positionality in each of these national groupings. As Barbara Ransby highlights, this is an emerging model for social movement and organizing very different from the hierarchies and charismatic leadership visible in earlier generations (Ransby, 2017).

Direct democracy

This horizontal structure of organizing mirrors demands around the democracy as both process and outcome of struggle central to all three alliances. For the EJM:

7. Environmental Justice demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making, including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation.

The Principles of Environmental Justice (1991)

Environmental Justice affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples.

(Alston, 1991)

For the RTTC:

Democracy and Participation: The right of community control and decision making over the planning and governance of the cities where we live and work, with full transparency and accountability, including the right to public information without interrogation.

Right to the City Alliance (n.d.)

And for the M4BL:

We demand a world where those most impacted in our **communities control the laws, institutions, and policies that are meant to serve us** – from our schools to our local budgets, economies, police departments, and our land – while recognizing that the rights and histories of our Indigenous family must also be respected.

M4BL, n.d.

We demand **independent Black political power and Black self-determination** in all areas of society. We envision a remaking of the current U.S. political system in order to create a real democracy where Black people and all marginalized people can effectively exercise full political power.

(M4BL, n.d.)

In this way, all three movements claim the necessity of a radical transformation.

Transformation and reform

None of these organizations has a party line or dogma, yet each contains a stringent analysis of capitalism, and each challenges different aspects of its fundamental nature in placing profit over other human values. In combining such critique with community-organizing methods that have traditionally eschewed ideological framings, these subaltern grassroots organizations represent something (relatively) new (Goldberg, 2010; Sen, 2003). For the EJM, critique focuses on a understanding of the sacredness of earth, the interdependence of all species, and above all in a new frame demanding that we “make the conscious decision to challenge and reprioritize our lifestyles to ensure the health of the natural world for present

and future generations” (The Principles of Environmental Justice, 1991). This is echoed by the RTTC’s first principle, “Land for People vs. Land for Speculation”. In reorganizing life and economy around the acceptance of such principles, it is questionable how much would be left that is recognizably capitalist. The M4BL (n.d.) states:

We reject false solutions and believe we can achieve a complete transformation of the current systems, which place profit over people and make it impossible for many of us to breathe.

(M4BL, n.d.)

These demands are not couched in the traditional language of the intellectual Left, but chosen to resonate with the grassroots bases of these subaltern organizations. The M4BL marks the difference between stopping immediate harm and greater transformation, but notes how one can lead to the other:

This document articulates our vision of a fundamentally different world. However, we recognize the need to include policies that address the immediate suffering of Black people. These policies, while less transformational, are necessary to address the current material conditions of our people and will better equip us to win the world we demand and deserve.

(M4BL, n.d.)

The need for a larger vision continues to be a priority however. As Patrisse Cullors (one of the founders of #BlackLivesMatter) says

When our political activism isn’t rooted in a theory about transforming the world, it becomes narrow; when it is focused only on individual actions instead of larger systemic problems, it becomes short-sighted.

(quoted in Heatherton and Camp, 2016: 37)

The question, thus, becomes how to develop theory through praxis that helps achieve full transformation. Each of the three platforms presented here, if pursued to their full and complete realization, would have a revolutionary effect on the world as we know it, while each also presents more incremental steps toward this kind of transformational change. Harmony Goldberg describes the importance of this:

these organizations make a distinction between “fighting for reforms” and “reformism”, that is, the belief that reforms can meet the fundamental needs of oppressed people. The fight for reforms can be a part of the process of building power for a longer-term transformative struggle.

(Goldberg, 2010: 106)

Conclusion

This chapter looks at the imaginaries of radical hope and struggle emerging from subaltern communities of color; an antidote to the imaginaries of despair so typically projected onto to them, whether they be inner city neighborhoods or reservations. It is of

necessity an all-too-brief exploration of the theoretical potential of the subaltern in the U.S. context, and what implications this might have for critical theorizations of agency and movement building. It outlines (also all too briefly) a growing convergence around a liberatory subaltern imaginary able to encompass complex constellations of issues and scales, prioritize intersectional understandings in demanding the leadership of subaltern communities in their own liberation, develop direct democracy and horizontal organizing, and provide transformative visions of social change along with a roadmap of intermediate steps in building power to achieve it.

What is the urban imaginary here, then, what is to be won? A transformed body of urban residents secure in their homes and in their collective power over land and resources, with an ability to transform space to support a fullness of life not profit. A shared humility about humanity's place on the planet. An understanding of how cities connect to regional, national and international scales, with the needs of future generations put first in every personal, political and economic decision. Cities where all are free from violence and oppression. A government of the people that not only provides for its people, but that prioritizes the work and reparations necessary to undo the multiple injustices of the past and involves everyone in the creation of a better future. Beginning to summarize such a list already fails to do justice to the praxis of the three movements discussed here. Yet it also begins to show how their vision points to a world as far beyond capitalism as it is a world necessary to build if we wish to survive past the point of destruction to which capitalism has brought us. Above all, it is a vision of a city and a world to be won collectively through a movement for liberation already in motion, led by subaltern communities in the fight to preserve life itself. It is time to join in making the road by walking, to seek out the cracks in the oppressive edifice, to help open up the way forward and keep it open.

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