

THE FOUNDERS OF BLACK LIVES MATTER

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In 2013, George Zimmerman was acquitted of the charge of murdering Trayvon Martin, a black teenager. This was the spark that lit the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM). Three self-described “radical black organizers” responded: Alicia Garza coined the phrase in a “love letter” to black people, Patrisse Cullors turned the phrase into a hashtag, and Opal Tometi started organizing followers online and building BlackLivesMatter.com.

Tometi, the daughter of Nigerian immigrants, was raised in Phoenix, Arizona. She attended the University of Arizona, where she earned her bachelor’s in history and her master’s in communication and advocacy. Before BLM, she served for eight years as executive director at the Black Alliance for Just Immigration.

According to her BlackLivesMatter.com biography, Tometi “is a student of liberation theology and her practice is in the tradition of Ella Baker, informed by Stuart Hall, bell hooks and Black Feminist thinkers.” Furthermore, as a “transnational feminist,” Tometi “supports and helps shape the strategic work of Pan African Network in Defense of Migrant Rights, and the Black Immigration Network.”

Patrisse Cullors is now the executive director of the Black Lives Movement Global Network Foundation. This foundation's financial support initially flowed through a nonprofit co-chaired by Susan Rosenberg, a co-founder of the May 19th Communist Organization, a domestic terrorist group active in the 1980s. In a 2011 memoir, *An American Radical*, Rosenberg stated: “I pursued a path that seemed to me a logical step beyond legal protest: the use of political violence. Did that make me a terrorist? In my mind, then and now, the answer is no.”

Cullors wrote a 2017 memoir that expresses similar sentiments. She titled it *When They Call You a Terrorist*. For its epigraph she chose lines penned by Assata Shakur, another domestic terrorist, that echo Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*: “It is our duty to fight for our freedom. / It is our duty to win. / We must love each other and support each other. / We have nothing to lose but our chains.”

According to *When They Call You a Terrorist*, Cullors was born in Van Nuys, California, and raised in the San Fernando Valley in a mostly Hispanic neighborhood. Her mother became pregnant at 15 and was thrown out of the house by her family, who were Jehovah's Witnesses. Later, she had several more children, including Patrisse. The father, who worked at a GM plant, was able to support them until the plant closed. When Cullors was six, he ceased to live with the family, though he didn't "disappear entirely from our lives." At age 12, Cullors discovered an upsetting truth: "Alton is not your father, [mother] says. He's Paul's and Monte's and Jasmine's. But in between Monte and Jasmine, we broke up and I fell in love with Gabriel and we had you."

In high school, Cullors entered a magnet program with a humanities curriculum "rooted in social justice." In this program, the students studied "apartheid and communism in China. We study Emma Goldman and read bell hooks, Audre Lorde. . . . We are encouraged to challenge racism, sexism, classism and heteronormativity." She began to question "the Jehovah's Witnesses world I had come up in."

"I always knew I wasn't heterosexual," she writes, and describes how she came out in high school. By senior year, she and a friend were "completely on our own, couch surfing" or sleeping in cars. After graduation, an art teacher let the girls live with her. This experience inspired her ideas about "intentional families," she says, as opposed to biological ones.

She earned her bachelor's in religion and philosophy from UCLA and an MFA from USC's Roski School of Art and Design. She and a boyfriend read together: "bell hooks continues to be a North Star but Cornel West's work, as well, takes center stage." They also loved the feminist anarchist Emma Goldman. Cullors especially admired how the Russian émigré was the first American to defend homosexuality publicly, and quotes Goldman's disdain for monogamy. In her memoir, written with Asha Bandele, the acknowledgments praise others on the left:

We do this work today because on another day work was done by Assata Shakur, Angela Davis, Miss Major, the Black Panther Party, the members of the Black Arts Movement, SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee], the RNA [Republic of New Afrika, a violent black separatist group with ties to Rosenberg's May 19th Communist Organization], Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Ella Baker, and so many others.

Cullors asked Angela Davis to write the memoir's foreword, in which Davis scoffs at the fact that "Assata Shakur was designated by the FBI one of the world's ten most dangerous terrorists." Davis applauds the way Black Lives Matter "has encouraged us to question the capacity of logic—Western logic—to undo the forces of history, especially the history of colonialism and slavery." Davis twice ran for vice president on the Communist Party USA ticket during the days when it was controlled by the Soviet Union. Her short book *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, which predates BLM's founding by over a decade, is praised in Cullors's memoir.

In an article for the *Harvard Law Review*, Cullors also praises Franz Fanon, the pan-Africanist who famously advocated violence against colonial rule. Few non-lawyers ever receive space in such elite pages. Her memoir similarly reveals her elite status: It was published because a book editor heard her speak at a panel on Martha's Vineyard with Hollywood stars Danny Glover and Issa Rae. Cullors has also received numerous honors, including a Fulbright Scholarship and an honorary doctorate from Clarkson University. She has been *Glamour's* Woman of the Year and was selected as one of the World's Greatest Leaders by *Fortune*.

There is one more major influence on Cullors worth noting, which began at the "social justice camp" she attended after high school. There, an activist group, Strategy Center, recruited her for a year's training where "I read, I study, adding Mao, Marx and Lenin to my knowledge of hooks, Lorde and [Alice] Walker." The Center's founder, Eric Mann, "takes me under his wing."

You may have heard his name. In the 1960s Mann joined the Weather Underground, whose members included Bill Ayers and Bernadine Dohrn. Arrested for several violent offenses, though often released by authorities, Mann did spend 18 months in prison. His punishment stemmed from a 1969 shooting at a police building, for which he was charged on four counts, including conspiracy to commit murder and assault with intent to commit murder.

Mike Gonzalez of the Heritage Foundation reports that Mann remains a radical who calls America "the most dictatorial country in the world" and describes his work as training "young people who want to be revolutionaries." The sort of revolutionaries he means is clear when he praises the university as "the place where Mao Zedong was radicalized, where Lenin and Fidel were radicalized, where Che was radicalized."

Alicia Garza may be the most radical of the BLM founders. When Verso Books decided to publish a third edition of *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che*, they asked Garza to write the foreword. She read the book “as a young organizer,” she admitted, but couldn’t properly grasp it: “I hadn’t yet studied much of the origins of the Marxist-Leninist tradition that I was loosely trained in.”

SFWeekly reports Garza grew up in San Rafael, California. Her parents later moved the family to “Tiburon, a tiny and tony Marin County town” whose median household income was more than double the state’s average—“one of the whitest places in the Bay Area.” Activism began in middle school, when she protested abstinence-only sex education. According to the Weekly, her parents are “solid liberals” who aren’t especially political, yet her mother inspired this first activist venture.

Like Cullors, Garza identifies as queer and found her way into a “training program for social justice organizers,” entitled SOUL (School of Unity and Liberation). There she went well beyond the academic Marxism of today’s typical undergraduate leftist into authentic Marxism-Leninism. “When I trained in sociology, we would read Marx, and we would read de Tocqueville, and we would read all these economic theorists, but in a void,” she says. “It never got mentioned in those classes that social movements all over the world have used Marx and Lenin as a foundation to interrupt these systems that are really negatively impacting the majority of people.”

Her summer with SOUL in Oakland taught her community organizing and encouraged “analysis around capitalism and imperialism and white supremacy and patriarchy and heteronormativity.” She held organizing jobs at such places as the UC Student Association and POWER (People Organized to Win Employment Rights), and in 2014 joined the National Domestic Workers Alliance, a union front group underwritten by the SEIU (Service Employees International Union) and the Ford, MacArthur, and Open Society foundations. The Alliance sent her to Ferguson after the Michael Brown shooting, which led BLM to “the next step in its transformation from a hashtag to an organization by mobilizing 600 black activists from around the country to embark on ‘freedom rides’ to Ferguson for a weekend of protests,” according to the profile in SFWeekly.

She says she wants to ensure that “Black Lives Matter doesn’t get co-opted by the

Democratic Party or by black activists who want to reform policing but balk at more radical action.” BLM activists disrupted Bernie Sanders on the campaign trail in 2016 because, Garza explains, he is a “social democrat” who offers “not socialism” but only “democratic capitalism.” In other words, he’s too conventional. She wants “more voices saying, ‘This is not actually socialism, and socialism is actually possible in our lifetime.’”

This is the formation of the BLM founders. They envision change far more radical than what their many liberal supporters mean by “racial justice.” Having more African Americans in the professional ranks doesn’t satisfy them, nor does sensitivity training for police officers. They want a transformation of society, including liberal institutions. The stakes are clear for Garza, who has tattooed on her chest six lines from June Jordan’s “Poem about My Rights”:

I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name

My name is my own my own my own

and I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this

but I can tell you that from now on my resistance

my simple and daily and nightly self-determination

may very well cost you your life

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