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Commitment and Danger, Black Life and Black Love
Toward Radical Possibilities

Valerie Kinloch

In her provocatively moving and powerful TED talk titled, “2053,” Jamila Lyiscott (2017)[1] envisions a future in which her then grandkids will pointedly ask, “Were you there during the Divided States of America?/My history teacher says that the social climate was lethal/That the country bled/In a curious shade of red/Under the principle of prophet before people.” For Lyiscott and other critically and socially conscious people, “there” is the year 2017, a time when this free, democratic, multiracial, multiethnic, and multilingual country elected, yet again, another white male president who publicly and unapologetically spews classist, fascist, racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and xenophobic comments. “There” is also the year 2016 when Terence Crutcher, whose car had stalled in the middle of the road and who was walking with arms held up in the air, was killed by police officers in Tulsa, Oklahoma. “There” is also when, in 2016, Tanisha Anderson was experiencing a mental health episode before being murdered by police officers in Cleveland, Ohio. Lest we forget, “there” is also the year 2015 when Sandra Bland, who was stopped for a minor traffic violation, was killed, found dead in a jail cell in Waller County, Texas, and Freddie Gray died of a spinal cord injury that he sustained while in police custody in Baltimore, Maryland. “There” also signifies the year 2014 when Walter Scott was shot in the back and killed by a police officer in North Charleston, South Carolina, and Eric Garner was placed in a deadly chokehold on Staten Island, New York after pleading with officers, “I can’t breathe.”

“There” is also the year 2013, when Miriam Carey was killed by U.S. Secret Service and Capitol Police officers in Washington, D.C, and when Kimani Gray was killed by plainclothes police officers in Brooklyn, New York, as he stood with a group of friends. The year 2012, representing another “there,” is when Trayvon

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Benjamin Martin was fatally shot by a white man in Sanford, Florida, and when Rekia Boyd was shot in the back of her head by a police detective in Chicago, Illinois. "There," which has a long history of systemic violence, state sanctioned physical, sexual, and verbal forms of dehumanization, institutional racism, socio-emotional neglect, mental abuse, bullying, economic oppression, community destruction, structural inequality, educational inequity, and mass incarceration, to name just a few, never seems to end for Black people. In fact, "there" continuously makes us feel as if we are "trapped in a bad storyline like a cinematic sequel," to use Lyiscott's words, given "that deepening social siloes sustained hate, division, and misogyny, that social safety was severed by a stratified economy…[and] hyper-racial hatred hacked away at the hope of the people."

Undoubtedly, "there" is painful, destructive, hateful, and harm-ridden. It's both a place and a time, undefined by boundaries and exceeding any limitation. "There," unfortunately, is also a discourse and a system, heavily imbued with patriarchal, white supremacist, hetero-normative dispositions, behaviors, and economies that seek and often result in the perpetual oppression and, hence, the violent deaths of Black people. Without question, this type of "there" is difficult and dangerous, devastating and deadly, particularly for Black people. And, yet, it is this "there" that requires us to stand in solidarity, walk with purpose, and rely on revolutionary, humanizing, critical, and community-centric methods by which to seek and sustain our freedom. As Black people who have always lived under this guise, this "peculiar sensation…this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (DuBois, 1965, p. 45), we must engage in radical possibilities, transformative practices. We have no other choice but to act because, as Audre Lorde (1984) reminds us, our lives, all of our lives, depend on us taking and engaging in action, now. We. Have. No. Choice.

Choosing Commitment and Danger

It is this same type of acting/action, being/becoming, and life/living, according to James Baldwin (1962), that requires us "to be committed," even when "to be committed is to be in danger" (p. 9). And being in constant danger, under surveillance, always being watched and followed, stopped and frisked are not new phenomena for Black people. These painful, debilitating, and often deadly experiences—while visibly a part of our current discussions about racism and violence—have always been a part of the historical fabric of this country. Take, for example, the 1942 lynching of Cleo Wright, a Black man in Sikeston, Missouri. After being accused of assaulting a white woman, Wright was arrested, multiply shot by a city marshal, refused admittance into a hospital for his injuries, returned home to die, removed from his home and placed, again, in jail. Nearly unconscious, he was then abducted from jail by a mob of white men who dragged his half-conscious body through the

city's Black neighborhood. Unsurprisingly, his murderers were neither indicted nor convicted. Hence, in the United States, being Black, as seen through the lens of many white people and through a criminal injustice system that vilifies Blackness, has been horrifically constructed to signify a permanent mark of danger that some want to erase by the most violent, vicious, and cruel forms of death. The commitment that we must embody against this type of danger requires that we remember the life of Cleo Wright, speak against the lynching of Black people, enact strategies that reject white consumption and appropriation of Blackness, and stand, as a united community, in opposition to the system of white supremacy.

A more recent example of the danger that has been imposed on Black people is the 2014 shooting death of 18-year-old Black and unarmed Michael Brown by a white police officer in the northern St. Louis suburb of Ferguson, Missouri. Accused of robbing a convenience store, "Brown's killing," as reported in the *New York Times* (11/27/2014), "laid bare myriad issues of racial inequality. And when the St. Louis County prosecutor announced that a grand jury had not indicted Officer Wilson [the white man who killed Brown], many saw it as another injustice for blacks." Yet again, another white officer was exonerated of any criminal wrongdoing in the death of a Black person, further heightening tensions among law enforcement officers and their practices, the criminal justice system, and Black lives and safety in the context of the United States. In an attempt to control Black rage and Black anger, the Justice Department highlighted multiple constitutional violations in Ferguson and required the community to overhaul its criminal injustice system. Nevertheless, Michael Brown is still dead, killed by a white police officer, and Black America, again, remains "in danger" (Baldwin, 1962, p. 9). We must resist this type of danger by demonstrating a commitment to Black life and by valuing calls from national and global communities to organize, protest, and disrupt all forms of systemic racism.

Baldwin's (1962) sentiment about the connection between commitment and danger surfaces, yet again, when one thinks about the systemic, legal attempts to deny education to Black people in this country. One needs only turn to the year 1957 when Governor Orval Faubus of Arkansas deployed the Arkansas National Guard to block nine Black students from integrating Central High School in Little Rock. Not until President Dwight Eisenhower ordered troops to escort the students (who came to be known as the Little Rock Nine) into the school, were they allowed entrance. Or, one can turn to the year 1955 when Black parents in New Orleans, Louisiana sued the Orleans Parish School Board for failing to comply with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to desegregate schools. Five years later, in 1960, Ruby Bridges entered the all-white William Frantz Elementary School as a first grader, and was escorted into the school building by federal marshals at the greeting of a disorderly, angry, riotous mob of white people.

At the collegiate level, we have a plethora of historical examples of commitment and danger. One particular example is from the year 1956 when Autherine Lucy

from Shiloh, Alabama, became the first Black student to enroll at the University of Alabama in the presence of threats and mob protests. Before attending, Lucy and Pollie Ann Myers, another Black woman, initially applied and were accepted to the university in 1952, but were prevented from enrolling when university officials realized that they were Black. It was not until after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and with the support of attorneys Thurgood Marshall and Arthur Shores that Lucy was "allowed" admittance. Another example is from the year 1961 when Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes became the first Black students to register at and attend the University of Georgia, to the overt disgust of protesting white students, white residents, and robed Klansmen. Hunter and Holmes' presence on campus infuriated people to the point that they were escorted away from campus by state troopers after deciding to withdraw from the university. However, Hunter and Holmes returned to the university and, in 1963, became the first Black students to graduate from the University of Georgia.

This seemingly normalized, yet overtly state-sanctioned violence against Black people, however, is not the shameful remnant of a distant past. Unfortunately, racist incidences remain—yes, still today—regular phenomena on many public and private college campuses in this country, including at: American University (signs with the confederate flag and cotton were posted on campus), Boston University (posters of Uncle Sam and a logo of white supremacy were found on campus), Claremont McKenna College (students wearing racist Halloween costumes), Ithaca College (a Black woman being referred to as "the savage"), Kansas State University (graffiti and racial slurs painted on a car), Princeton University (anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, and racist fliers found on campus), The Ohio State University (tweets about lynching and phots of students in blackface), Towson University (hate speech directed at Black students), University of Pittsburgh (racist social media posts of children eating cotton candy), University of Louisville (photo of the president and staff members in sombreros, ponchos and fake mustaches), and, among many others on a constantly growing list, the University of Missouri (racial slurs directed at Black students). To deny that "racist and abusive histories and the discourses of white supremacy" have not continued to collude in maintaining Black oppression and preventing the dismantling of "systemic oppression, educational inequity, and racial violence" is dangerous, to say the least (Kinloch, 2016), and highlights the importance of choosing commitment and danger in the fight against oppression, hate, and unnecessary and violent forms of Black death.

One needs only turn to recent racially motivated and visibly public events at the University of Missouri. In one instance, a white man who interrupted a rehearsal for an upcoming performance sponsored by the university's Legion of Black Collegians verbally threw racial insults at Black students. He commented, "These niggers are getting aggressive with me." In another incident, members of the Legion of Black Collegians issued a statement that opens, "At approximately 11:50PM on Tuesday September 27th, 2016, two Black students were verbally assaulted in an obscene

manner with regards to their racial identity; again, two more Black students were called "Niggers" on the University of Missouri's campus." It continues, "As a group of six to seven white male and female students passed the members of the Legion of Black Collegians Activities Committee, one of the white female students from the group shouted, 'look at those niggers looking at us.'" Members of the Legion of Black Collegians were outraged, and their words encapsulate how I feel and how I hope we all feel: "Quite frankly, WE. ARE. SICK. OF. THIS!" (Twitter). These are but a few of the many racist events that have recently occurred and that continue to occur on university campuses across the nation.

It is quite clear that there are many institutions of higher education—particularly those that are predominately white institutions (PWIs)—that refuse to "acknowledge the injustices that have been taking place throughout the country and the lack of judicial accountability" (The Black Student Forum Open Letter, 2014). This was the case at Boston College when, in 2014, the college's Black Student Forum wrote an open letter to senior administration about its silence with regard to national and global forms of injustices experienced by Black people. Situating the letter in the Black Lives Matter movement, members of the Black Student Forum declared: "We interpret the administration's silence as a sign of neutrality and, as Desmond Tutu states, 'If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality'" (The Black Student Forum Open Letter; see also Penn, Kinloch, & Burkhard, 2016). Education systems, such as our own, that avoid discussions on and make invisible the devastation of racism, brutality, systemic oppression, and myriad other forms of injustices undermine the work of commitment. It is this commitment that must serve as a response to imposed forms of danger that get directed at Black people. These forms of danger also prevent the occurrence of any serious attempts to engage in radical possibilities for the sustainability of Black life and Black love.

There are many more examples, both historical and contemporary, of the interconnection between Black people's commitment and Black people's endangerment. This interconnection becomes even more evident in the ongoing fights, protests, and demonstrations against the criminalization, racial oppression, racial profiling, mass killings, and other sanctioned forms of violence directed at Black people in this country, let alone across the world. In fact, it is this interconnection that is viewed as a threat to whiteness and white privilege, and that calls out the nonsense of white fragility and the privileged level of ridiculousness of white tears (DiAngelo, 2011; Matias, 2013). Let's continue with the process of calling these things out, and as we do, let's move toward a humanizing, radical form of transformation that rejects Black hate and honors Black lives.

The Threat of Identity Loss

In light of our ongoing individual and collective attempts to be Black, to live Black, to love Black, there is undeniably a perpetual rejection, or abnegation, of the value, purpose, and dignity of Black life and Black bodies in this country. This is possibly the case because of the perceived magnitude of our commitment against danger. Or, to borrow the words of Baldwin (1962), "the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity" (p. 9). Thus, the relics of slavery and the Jim Crow era, which are still alive and real, and now the danger of the Trump administration—these things all seek to produce and re-produce a narrative of and about Black people. It is a narrative that wants to negatively shape our consciousness, excuse our murders, and erase our history of innovation and ingenuity. It is a narrative steeped in a patriarchy so deep that it enabled a presidential candidate to tweet, "26,000 unreported sexual assults in the military-only 238 convictions. What did these geniuses expect when they put men & women together?" (May 7, 2013). Or, to tweet: "If Hillary Clinton can't satisy her husband what makes her think she can satisy America?" (original misspelling, April 16, 2015). It is also a narrative that shuns any movements toward Black life, Black love, and Black justice. This is a narrative that allows people like Rudy Giuliani to describe the Black Lives Matter movement as

> …inherently racist because, number one, it divides us...All lives matter: White lives, black lives, all lives and number two: Black Lives Matter never protests when every 14 hours somebody is killed in Chicago, probably 70-80% of the time (by) a black person…Where are they when a young black child is killed? (qtd. in Lim, 2016)

What Giuliani and other critics of Black resisters and Black resistance refuse to recognize is that in this country, Black lives have not mattered, Black lives still do not matter, and Black lives remain, perpetually, under daily surveillance and constant attack. The enslavement and brutality of Black people, hence, white American history, teaches us that. Thus, an overarching goal of both grassroots activism and civil rights movements in this country was, in part, to end racial segregation and violence against Black people, and to stop voter suppression and the unconstitutional treatment of Black people in all walks of life (Armstrong, 2015; Lawson, 1991). In many ways, this goal materialized in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Fair Housing Act of 1968, and the Black Power Movement of the late 1960s to the mid 1970s. I believe that this goal connects to, even as it differs from, the goal of today's Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which is to "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" (https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/). In fact, BLM "centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements" (https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/) because BLM

> … is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression." (https://blacklibesmatter.com/about/herstory/)

Black Lives Matter—the movement, the organization, the hashtag, and the reality—all intersect in their rejection of the silencing and killing of Black people, on the one hand, and in their pursuit of freedom and justice for Black people, on the other hand. It is, individually and collectively, a movement, an organization, a hashtag, and a reality *for* and *of* social justice, social restoration, diversity, globalization, and the dismantling of cis-gender privilege. It is, in essence, a movement *of* action and *for* justice for Black communities, for Black lives, and for Black love.

Founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, Black Lives Matter is for Tanisha Anderson, Sandra Bland, Rekia Boyd, Michael Brown, Miriam Carey, and William Chapman. Black Lives Matter is for Jamar Clark, John Crawford III, Terence Crutcher, Samuel DuBose, and Ezell Ford. It is for Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Kimani Gray, Akai Gurly, Dontre Hamilton, and Eric Harris. Black Lives Matter is for Anthony Hill, Meagan Hockaday, Corey Jones, Charley Leundeu Keunang, and Renisha McBride. It is for Jeremy McDole, Laquan McDonald, Antonio Martin, Trayvon Benjamin Martin, Jerame Reid, Tamir Rice, Tony Robinson, Jonathan Sanders, and Walter Scott. Among many, many others, Black Lives Matter is also for The Charleston Nine.

Black. Lives. Matter.

So, when critics of BLM and other social justice movements (e.g., #NoDAPL, #FlintWaterCrisis, #EqualPay for Women, Occupy Movement, Chicago Teachers' Strike) refuse to understand their significance, they are clearly reiterating what Baldwin (1962) observed—that some white people believe that their identities, properties, and privileges will be endangered in the presence and sustainability (even in the talk) of Black freedom and liberation. This refusal to understand strengthens the production of the negative, racist narrative about Black people, which ignores the promise, from the *Declaration of Independence* (1776), of "unalienable rights" and of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of justice" for all human beings. It is a narrative that we must resist and reject, and one way to do so is through commitment and danger, which requires us to engage in radical possibilities, knowing that there are others out there who see this engagement not *as* love and not *of* love, but as a threat to their identities and privileges.

Toward Radical Possibilities for Black Life and Black Love

The opening stanza of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," written by James Weldon Johnson (1899), beckons us to sing "Till earth and heaven ring,/Ring with the harmonies of Liberty." It encourages us to "Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us," and to "march on till victory is won." However, victory will

not be won until all Black people are free. Victory will not be won until all Black people have, undeniably, a right to life and liberty, a right to education and housing, a right to full participation in all aspects of society. Victory will not be won until all Black people are free from the fear of violence, from the fear of being killed for being Black, from the fear of being watched and harassed in a clothing store or choked to death on a street corner. Victory will not be won until all Black people are free from the fear of being killed for walking in a neighborhood where their fathers or mothers or brothers or sisters or aunts or uncles or cousins or friends or their children live. Victory will not be won until all Black people are free from the fear of being thrown racial slurs, from the fear of being traumatized by institutionalized forms of racism. Victory is yet to be won and, thus, victory gets wrapped tightly in the reality of "there," to return to Jamila Lyiscott's (2017) "2053."

It is "there" that would intentionally "snatch the breath from the lungs of an innocent Black body on a Tuesday and shrug it off as historical retribution." It is this same "there" that would make "healthcare…a game of Russian roulette-style execution" and that would "attempt to build a wall" (Lyiscott, 2017). Because of the danger and pain of "there," and the paralysis that "there" causes, I think it is important for us to heed Lyiscott's advice. We must stand "at the precipice of pandemonium," fight "for a palpable peace," and create "together a quilt of hope out of every fiber of our being."

To stand "at the precipice of pandemonium"—to stand, tall and bravely, in the face and at the edge of chaos, disruption, harm. To stand for justice for Black people and other people of color who have been murdered by police officers. To stand against the criminalization and high rates of mass incarceration of Black and Brown people in this country. To stand in rejection of the ongoing hate crimes against Muslims and their Mosques across the world, and especially under the administration of the 45th president of the United States. To interrogate whiteness as well as the norms and expectations of monolingualism and monoculturalism. That is, to stand "at the precipice of pandemonium."

To fight "for a palpable peace"—to contest the rhetoric of, and the actions directed toward, strategic, sanctioned forms of deadly discord. To stand against the mass shooting of more than 50 LGBTQ people at a nightclub in Orlando, Florida. To stand against the killing of nine Black church members in Charleston, South Carolina. To stand against the victimization of women whose perpetuators go unpunished or are minimally sentenced. To stand and fight for peace and against the threat of the building of a wall between the United States and Mexico. To fight, that is, "for a palpable peace."

To create "together a quilt of hope out of every fiber of our being"—to collaborate and connect, to form a collective, to build, one with another, against policies that allow stop and frisk, stand your ground, zero tolerance, and racial profiling practices. To stand with Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's refusal of the Dakota Access pipeline by standing for Indigenous lands, human life, and the sacredness of water.

To create movements against hateful anti-race, anti-LGBTQ, and anti-immigration legislation. To create programs grounded in justice and equity, and dedicated to social, civil, and educational rights. To create a revolutionary agenda for human life and human survival that is predicated upon anti-racist, non-deficit research, outreach, and advocacy efforts within community contexts and institutional infrastructures. To create "together a quilt of hope out of every fiber of our being."

If we can engage in these actions, then we can begin to "lift every voice and sing" as an act of healing, organizing, resisting, and resistance. That is, we can seriously create and participate in social movements and protests that have as primary goals the overhaul of inequitable education and economic systems, the rejection of deficit, racist, and bigoted narratives about Black people and other marginalized peoples, and the creation and sustainability of spaces and places that are and must remain sanctuaries against potential harm and the threat to Black love and Black life.

This is my commitment against danger, and my unwavering obligation to Black life and Black love. This is how I work toward radical possibilities. Will you join me?

Note

[1] Used with permission obtained from Jamila Lyiscott on January 27, 2017.

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