



Remaking Black Political Spaces for Black Liberation

Akira Drake Rodriguez

What are the political implications of the redistribution of the Black population in the US? Akira Drake Rodriguez looks back at the long-running strategies of Black political mobilization and the political economic contexts that have hindered them. She calls for moving beyond place-based electoral strategies with a full embrace of the Movement for Black Lives policy platform.

Following a politically volatile and racially charged election, this moment marks a particularly precarious state for Black urban politics. Over the last half-century, Black political mobilizing focused almost singularly on electoral and voting-rights issues with the aim of electing Blacks to office and enhancing the Black electorate. Yet while this electoral strategy did politically and economically strengthen the Black middle class through Black patronage in public-sector jobs and contracts, Black inequality is deepening as the Black poverty rate remains twice as high as the overall poverty rate¹ (Dawson and Ming Francis 2016; Preuhs 2006; Reed 1999; Spence 2015). While it is important to see “Black faces in high places,” Black voters hoped descriptive representation would increase Black engagement, empowerment, and political efficacy (Bowen and Clark 2014; Gay 2007; Gleason and Stout 2014). Yet in the 10 cities with the longest tenure of Black mayors (all having had Black mayors for more than 20 years since 1970), the Black population has declined in eight, and white mayors currently run four of them. The loss of Black residential spaces translates not only to the loss of Black wealth, home ownership, and community belonging, but also to the loss of political clout and access to local public goods.

In short, we are in a new era of Black urban dislocation. Black urban populations are gradually being severed from the revitalized political, social, and economic institutions and spaces of the city. This has farther removed and further marginalized Black spaces, whether in public housing, labor unions, transit, education, or health and social services (Hackworth 2007; Owens *et al.* 2014; Weaver 2015; Shabazz 2015). Further, more affluent Black households and Black retirees are voluntarily leaving Northeastern and Midwestern cities for the perceived economic growth and political empowerment of the New South. It calls for moving beyond place-based electoral strategies and adopting more comprehensive approaches. The Movement for Black Lives (MFBL) policy platform,² a multi-strategy approach to widen a multiscalar space of political engagement and education, supported by over 50 Black-liberation organizations, is emblematic of what will be required in the current era. New movements like MFBL show these disinvested and marginalized spaces in Black communities not only have resources, but can readily mobilize to advance the communities’ political interests. Of import here is the ability to mobilize both members and nonmembers of the place-based community in solidarity as a new interest-based Black community. As of November 17, 2016, there have been at least 1,602 Black Lives Matter³ protests, die-ins, sit-ins, roadblocks, and teach-ins since July 19, 2014 (two days after the state-sanctioned murder of

¹ See: www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2012/07/11/poverty-in-the-50-years-since-the-other-america-in-five-charts/?utm_term=.a2e026c14490.

² Website: <http://policy.m4bl.org/platform>.

³ See: <http://elephrame.com/textbook/BLM>.

Eric Garner⁴). The Movement for Black Lives does the work of naming Black lives as something worth saving, as something that can be centered in the fight for Black political empowerment.

The MFBL platform does not require residency (membership) in a particular place in order to benefit Black lives. In a rejection of the place-based electoral politics that monopolized Black political mobilizations over the past half-century, the MFBL builds visibility and solidarity with other social movements resisting the vulgarities of urban policies. During this period of Black population instability, the Vision for Black Lives (VFBL) provides a space of engagement and education, accessible at the local level via partner organizations, and action plans for local, state, and federal governments. Covering six distinct political grievances, the VFBL directly addresses the consequences of a long history of disastrous urban policies—the process of Black urban dislocation that disempowered Black urban spaces. In a nod to the past, the VFBL becomes something that never materialized from the 1968 National Committee of Inquiry (NCI), an informal predecessor to the 1972 Black Political Convention where the electoral strategy was formally articulated.⁵ This committee of over 300 Black business, political, and civic leaders strove to create:

“[...] a permanent instrument for practical politics, e.g. the selection of candidates, the support of candidates and legislation, the review and criticism of political acts by executives and administrative bodies. It should publicly establish its intention to operate local, state, national, and international issues which touch and concern the political interest of Black people. It should make its highest priority the support of Black candidates for both elective and appointed positions on every level of government [...] It should operate without prior commitments to any political party or individual, Black or white. It should make common warfare on the exploitative and self-serving breed of Black political puppets as well as their white string masters” (National Committee of Inquiry 1968).

The push for a sustained Black electoral political strategy was not only a viable course of action but also a preference of several Black leaders. However, the increasing cost and effort of maintaining Black urban leadership has dominated the political resources of Black communities. Devolution, disinvestment, and deindustrialization have burdened local governments with increasing social costs and responsibilities that are frequently contracted out to Black political resource mobilizers such as the Black church and Black community-based organizations (Owens 2007). Many of these organizations have had to divert resources from their political mobilization and organizing activities into providing the most basic social services for their constituents (Newman and Lake 2006). Yet these shifts in the old spaces of Black liberation are not only the result of Black political puppets colluding with white string masters, but also the outcome of the sustained exclusion and exploitation of the majority-Black urban core.

The politics of making Black space

Space and politics intersect in the making of places, communities, and neighborhoods. This process also influences the political education and identity formation of residents. Historically, public and private actors and institutions have collaborated in the construction of (Black) spaces in the city. The histories of residential redlining and gerrymandering in Black neighborhoods are the most tangible examples of this spatio-political construction. The Great Migration from the rural South into cities, coupled with the gradual mobilization of the Black American as a voting interest, evoked reactions seeking to constrain and minimize the Black community (Hirsch 1988; Marable 1983). Economically, the real-estate industry penalized Black communities with blockbusting, redlining and racial steering (Harris 1993), while politically further marginalizing these communities. The Black urban revolts may be interpreted as politically aware challenges to these

⁴ See: www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/Grand-Jury-Decision-Eric-Garner-Staten-Island-Chokehold-Death-NYPD-284595921.html.

⁵ See: www.blackpast.org/primary/gary-declaration-national-black-political-convention-1972.

patterns, with demonstrators demanding that politicians acknowledge their communities' grievances and political interests.

Since the end of the Great Migration in 1970, Black urban populations have utilized their enfranchisement to take political power in many major cities, electing over 10,000 Black public officials into office (Brown-Dean *et al.* 2015). Scholars of Black politics have documented how leaders of the mid-20th-century Black social movements (ranging from the Black nationalists to the Black integrationists) capitalized on growing Black urban populations to help elect Black municipal officials to institutionalize the gains and political power accrued during the long Civil-Rights Movement (CRM) (Johnson 2007; Reed 1999; Woodard 1999). Black political representatives sought to institutionalize new political opportunity structures to finally allow Black populations to benefit from the victories of the CRM—the legal end of more than 200 years of oppression, exclusion, and political marginalization.

This Black electoral empowerment often took the form, however, of an urban political machine, where Black politicians doled out patronage jobs and contracts via a network of Black institutions (e.g. churches, schools, community-based organizations). As Philadelphia mayor John Street said (and later apologized for) during a 2002 NAACP conference, “The brothers and sisters are running the city.”⁶ These Black-led cities were, as James and Grace Lee Boggs predicted, the “Black Man’s Land,”⁷ and indeed served as spaces of Black political advancement. Boggs envisioned “self-government of the major cities by the Black majority, mobilized behind leaders and organizations of its own creation and prepared to reorganize the structure of city government and city life from top to bottom.” Unfortunately, urban decline and disinvestment prior to (and during) Black leadership created pressures on them to adopt policies that devalued and condemned Black places in the city. Emblematic events like the conversion of a (majority-Black) public school district into a Recovery School District,⁸ the demolition of (majority-Black) public housing to construct market-rate and subsidized homes,⁹ and the demolition¹⁰ and sale¹¹ of historic Black churches all happened under Black mayors. To make the Black Man’s Land more economically and politically viable, Black mayors’ attempts to revalorize these communities often came at the expense of its Black residents. However, Thompson’s (2006) work in New York City on the Dinkins administration and other Black-led cities, shows that cities with “strong community–church–labor coalitions” are able to sustain Black empowerment for marginalized Black interests using “deep pluralism” to hold these administrations accountable, in spite of the pressures of organized money interests (p. 23).

Other components of the new Black dislocation have been the ongoing criminalization of poverty and rising incarceration. The creation and maintenance, for example, of “million-dollar blocks”¹² through the disproportionate incarceration of Black men and women has depopulated entire census tracts and relocated them from the urban core to a (typically) rural prison. This relocation not only removes representational power from the community, but permanently disenfranchises the residents of that space should they return (Weaver *et al.* 2010). The rise in poverty penalties,¹³ the marginal political capital of the working class, and the minimal resources in place to resist these trends have

⁶ See: <http://6abc.com/archive/5865676>.

⁷ See: <http://conversationthatyouwillneverfinish.wordpress.com/2016/01/30/the-city-is-the-black-mans-land-by-james-boggs-2>.

⁸ See: www.nola.com/education/index.ssf/2016/04/new_orleans_charter_salaries.html.

⁹ See: www.citylab.com/housing/2014/05/2011-atlanta-had-demolished-all-its-public-housing-projects-where-did-all-those-people-go/9044.

¹⁰ See: www.afro.com/gentrification-pushing-black-churches-out-of-d-c.

¹¹ See: <http://philadelphia.cbslocal.com/2016/03/15/why-are-some-of-the-citys-most-historic-black-churches-being-sold>.

¹² See: www.spatialinformationdesignlab.org/projects.php%3Fid%3D16.

¹³ See: www.economist.com/news/united-states/21663262-why-low-income-americans-often-have-pay-more-its-expensive-be-poor.

served to effectively dislocate these “disposable” populations from revitalized urban spaces (Biondi 2013).

The politics of Black urban dislocation

In a reversal of the Great Migration of Black Americans from the rural Southeast to the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West, Black populations are now moving from these inner urban areas to the inner suburban areas of the South.¹⁴ The loss of Black population density and space in Northern urban areas, together with the increasingly austere and growth-centric policies of Black political leaders, and the disenfranchising effects of the criminal-justice system, have led to this period of Black (urban) dislocation. Much like the dislocation that preceded the Great Migration, the reasons are largely economic, social, and political. However, unlike the Great Migration, which yielded the formation of a Black electorate and Black descriptive representation in Northern cities, this new period of dislocation disperses Black populations—and thus Black interests—across the politically fragmented metropolitan areas of the South (Johnson 2014). While much of this dislocation stems from push factors such as the effects of a Black corporate urban regime and an expanding carceral state, there are pull factors that bring Black households away from the Northern cities. For the more socioeconomically mobile Black household, the promise of a robust economy, cheaper housing prices and lower residential segregation pulls Black households away from the Northern urban city.

Prior to this period of heightened Black political instability and dislocation, the state of Black urban politics was dysfunctional at best. In addition to the effects of globalized capitalism, which increased racial disparities, and the regressive, nepotistic patronage by Black elites, Black-led cities engaged in policymaking that privileged Black elite interests at the expense of the poor and the working class (Spence 2015; Taylor 2016). Maintaining the Black urban regime required a top-down, corporate regime that disproportionately marginalized the interests of its own electorate (Reed 1999; Whelan *et al.* 1994).

The rolling-back of the Black-liberation project is recurrent in our nation’s history and it reemerged in the years following Barack Obama’s 2008 election. It was a significant factor in the election of Donald J. Trump to the presidency (Anderson 2016). This rolling-back was evident in the early voting returns of North Carolina, where racially motivated changes in state electoral processes weakened early Black turnout, following the Supreme Court striking down preclearance measures mandated by the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In post-racial America, protected Black political spaces are viewed as a relic of our racist past, no longer necessary with a Black president in power. Graffiti in Durham, North Carolina, following the election on November 8¹⁵ made this point (Figure 1).

¹⁴ See: www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/02/02/census-great-migration-reversal/21818127.

¹⁵ See: <http://wncn.com/2016/11/09/downtown-durham-graffiti-takes-aim-at-black-voters>.

Figure 1. Graffiti in Durham, North Carolina



Source: <http://interactives.wncn.com/photomojo/gallery/42814/722515/durham-graffiti/durham-graffiti>.

Movement for Black Lives: the creation of multiscalar Black political spaces

The VFBL demands the collective community control that was sought through the election of thousands of Black officials, but never fully realized as mayors of the entrepreneurial city of the 1990s—Black and white alike—competed with urban policies that drove social spending down while subsidizing corporate relocations and operations. By not prioritizing, and even degrading, the very communities that supported their electoral successes, urban leaders decimated both the physical and political space of Black urban places. The common entrepreneurial policy of the tax abatement, for example, artificially maintains property taxes at the value of the property prior to redevelopment as a means to attract new investment into the city—an action with the consequence, whether intentional or not, of short-changing public school revenues and thus Black students.¹⁶ With their growth-centric urban policies that privileged land redevelopment at the expense of community well-being, urban leadership in majority-Black cities subsidized the political demobilization of its communities.

The VFBL upends the tradition of Black electoral politics by leveraging Black population advantages. Through the movement, activists and organizations that support Black-liberation interests coalesce in the metaphorical spaces of the MFBL. VFBL educates them on the local policies that can best address disempowered and dislocated Black urban spaces. It outlines grievances and policy solutions raised up through extensive discussions with locally based and staffed organizations, not selected and administered by a committee of Black elites. This diffuse method of collecting and documenting localized grievances on a nationwide platform seeks to forge a new Black political space for political awareness, education, and interest formation. As Deborah Cowen and Nemoy Lewis write:

“Building on long histories of anti-imperial struggle and translocal solidarity, Black Lives Matter is undertaking a kind of cartographic practice which connects Black struggles within the US to those of other oppressed peoples at home and abroad, and which implicitly maps the entanglements of repression and dispossession in and through urban space. Frequent blockades

¹⁶ See: <http://wearepcaps.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/pcaps-paper-abatementsfinal.pdf>.

of highways reference the history of federal urban-renewal programs that fractured Black neighborhoods with such persistence that James Baldwin rebranded ‘urban renewal’ as ‘negro removal.’ This mapping is also evident in BLM’s transnational coalition building” (Cowen and Lewis 2016).

And this mapping extends to the VFBL platform, which creates a means for an a-spatial political movement that foments change through highly visible social movements that are deployed into place-based politics. MFBL’s virtual policy table coordinates and uplifts successful local policies for Black liberation while simultaneously contributing to national policy. The movement’s methods for leadership accountability are an ongoing project of visible protests through extended political campaigns. MFBL does partner and support movements with similar ideologies that replicate the “deep pluralism” required for government accountability in Thompson’s place-based analysis. An example of this ideological mobilization is the consistent support of the Fight for \$15 movement by local Black Lives Matter chapters and other Black-liberation organizations. This ideology-based organizing differs from previous Black-liberation political strategies by focusing resources on sustained mobilization and government accountability, instead of the electoral strategy which concentrated Black-liberation resources into the Black administrations of Black-majority cities. With new tools on social media and new platforms such as *ColorOfChange.org*, the reach and depth of this mobilization extends far beyond what was possible with a place-based electoral strategy.

What this movement does lack, however, are candidates that have the expanded political imagination that can include policies for Black liberation in their platform, such as police abolition and community-controlled schools. Without candidates that actively support reinvestment into Black political spaces in the city, the MFBL will have a difficult time implementing and sustaining its radical platform. The push to be released from the grip of white supremacist ownership and governing logics is only ever politically feasible when these communities are healthy, functioning spaces. In light of this new presidential administration, the preservation and expansion of these spaces are more vital than ever. Black lives are literally depending on it.

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Akira Drake Rodriguez is a Postdoctoral Fellow for Academic Diversity at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Design, where she lectures on race and place. She is currently working on a manuscript, *Deviants in Divergent Spaces: The Radical Politics of Atlanta's Public Housing*, under contract with the University of Georgia Press.

Her website: <http://akirarodriguez.com>.

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