Black lives rising: Black Lives Matter symposium

Black people can eat at most lunch counters and travel across state lines without being consigned to the back of the bus. But the fundamental right to life continues to be haunted by white supremacy.

by Eboni Marshall Turman

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The Black Lives Matter movement that has unfolded in cities and on campuses across the nation is writing a new chapter in black people's struggle for liberation. We asked writers to reflect on what the movement has accomplished, where its energies should be focused, and what implications it has for churches. (Read all responses.)

Black Lives Matter is the Jesus event of the 21st century. The social and moral crucifixion of black life in the United States instigated the millennial imaginations of Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi to make the bold proclamation that now reverberates throughout the nation and world: Black Lives Matter. Responding to the incoherence of the criminal justice system and its July 2013 acquittal of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin's assassin, these three black queer women found their voice and launched a resistance movement through social media.

While transcending the boundaries of religious orthodoxies as a transtheistic and sometimes nontheistic humanist movement, a womanist theo-ethical appraisal understands Black Lives Matter to have christological significance. It is precisely its afro-annunciation of the simultaneity of a "this day" reality that is "not yet" that is at the heart of its kerygma. Black Lives Matter reveals that though black lives (the temple) will be destroyed, they will also raise up (John 2:19).

The visible resurrection of black love, hope, empowerment, and self-determination has astounded many, especially in a nation where amnesia is intensified by the persistence of the integration illusion. The integration illusion is the misconception that desegregation automatically engenders equity and reconciliation. Its veiled innocence pits the insidious question of “why” against black rage in ways that demonize, for instance, freedom fighters who take to the streets chanting, as in Ferguson, “we’re young; we’re strong; we’re marching all night long!”

The heightened visibility of the everydayness of state-sanctioned black death and bodily dispossession that is fielded by an ethics of surveillance which compels the criminalization of all black bodies demonstrates that although black people in America can eat at most lunch counters and travel across state lines without being consigned to the back of the bus—let’s not even talk about the right to the franchise, a right for which black and poor people are still fighting in states like North Carolina—black people’s fundamental right to life (forget about liberty and the pursuit of happiness) continues to be haunted by the ever-present terroristic threat of white supremacy.

This reality makes sense of the primacy of redemptive self-love in Black Lives Matter. BLM functions as its own virtue ethic, one that first exhorts black people to love themselves, a moral positioning that has consistently been disputed by pseudoscientific racist theological and biased ethical claims that relegate blackness to postures of dishonorability, enslavability, criminality, and bestialization. It is such redemptive self-love that offers evidence of the moral continuity between this contemporary movement for black lives and the civil rights and black power activism of the generation before.

The black community is not homogenous. To suggest otherwise is to further dehumanize a human community. It has always been the case that the black zeitgeist has been interpreted differently based on perspective. Womanist biblical scholar Renita J. Weems points to this reality when she cites Dickens’s classic formula, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” in narrating the distinctions between generations in the black community.

But tarrying amid generational distinctions within the black community draws attention away from what subjects all black life to the consequences of antiblack state-sanctioned violence. A more thoughtful conversation instead turns toward how gender, class, and sexuality nuance black racial subjugation and the deployment of

violence against black lives.

Black youth and young adults, like Tamir Rice and Sandra Bland, who are disproportionately targeted have mothers and fathers who are left behind. Black elders like Barbara Dawson and Eric Garner have children and other loved ones who are left behind. Methodological disagreement according to generational idealism is a secondary issue that merely deflects from the primary concern: that black lives matter. The black community and the black church must act in ways that are consistent with this truth; otherwise the fact remains that black lives really don’t matter and our faith is in vain (1 Cor. 15:17).