



IN DEFIANCE OF HIDDEN DEATHS: BLACK LIVES MATTER AS A LIVING PHILOSOPHY

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Noted political philosopher Charles Mills argues, in order to understand the current state of race relations, one must first accept the following premise: White Supremacy is one of the most consequential ideologies in human history and the modern world is a direct consequence of it.¹ It belongs in the pantheon of ideologies that changed how humans frame their very existence and has claimed the lives of untold millions. This premise is not an indictment of individuals or their morality; but rather it reflects world history and how we arrived at the current status quo, which can be accurately described as what Mills calls “the racial contract”: a racial, caste system in the United States

where people of color are scheduled castes and denied a life free from the machinations of racists.² In this context, Black Lives Matter has emerged as not only a political movement, but also as a living philosophy dedicated to nonviolence that seeks to emancipate human bodies—of all races—from the racial contract.

In its intersectional form and as a living philosophy, Black Lives Matter is the current incarnation of the centuries-long Black resistance against White Supremacy across multiple fronts. As a movement, it was catalyzed and given form as a response to the extrajudicial murders of Black men like Michael Brown, Walter Scott, and Alton Sterling; Black women like Sandra

Bland, Islan Nettles, and Tanisha Anderson; and Black children like Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and Aiyana Jones. Black Lives Matter is continuing the work of the Maroon communities, Tubman, Douglass, Wells, Randolph, Rustin, and King; it is the intellectual and spiritual successor of all of the men and women who struggled so that their children would not have to know what oppression looked like, smelled like, or felt like.

As a political movement, most recently enunciated in the platform of the Movement for Black Lives, Black Lives Matter is dedicated to emancipatory transformation and has given rise to a number of organizations. Black Lives Matter’s holding of politicians,

presidential candidates, and the various police departments around the nation accountable for the murders of Black men, women, and children is an echo of the early twentieth century NAACP's anti-lynching efforts. They force Americans to see what is happening around them, which makes many people, of all races, uncomfortable. This is intentional and rooted in the Black prophetic tradition and politic which holds that change only happens with tension and the only way to achieve tension is through peaceful agitation.

In response to Black Lives Matter, a counter movement has emerged—"all lives matter." For those who are dedicated to social justice, "all lives matter" may very well be shorthand for a radical commitment to combat injustice everywhere, no matter who is the victim, and a recognition of collective responsibility. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops affirmed this position in 1968,

To varying degrees, we all share in the guilt. We must recognize the fact that racist attitudes and consequent discrimination exist, not only in the hearts of men but in the fabric of their institutions.³

The opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement, however, has appropriated this terminology as a tactic to marginalize Black Lives Matter in the public discourse through a straw man argument that asserts that the Black Lives Matter movement must hold all other lives as inferior by virtue of affirming that Black lives matter.

Broadly speaking, "all lives matter" is an expression of White resistance, which is fed by an anxiety regarding the cultural implications of the impending shift from a majority White to a majority-minority population. Noted ethics scholar Rev. Bryan Massingale succinctly asserts that "we are no longer a White Christian

nation, and many White Christians are anxious."⁴ Where the Civil Rights movement desegregated public spaces, Black Lives Matter seeks to desegregate the institutions of power which perpetuate racism on the macro level. Institutional racism is infringement on the dignity of human beings. Moral theologian Thomas Massaro, S.J., asserts about institutional racism,

A key example of such an evil social structure is racial discrimination—blatant unfairness towards minority groups and their members. Although we are free as individuals to reject this temptation, the accumulated weight of racial bias exerts an indisputable influence on our cultural environment.⁵

Black Lives Matter, as a living philosophy, asserts that, while being a necessary step in the commitment to social justice, it is not enough to reject interpersonal racism without confronting and defeating institutional racism. To create a more just society, the institutions that perpetuate racism must be replaced.

Opponents of Black Lives Matter never hesitate to cite the Black on Black murder rate as a means to undermine the movement. It must be noted that murder is largely intraracial with Whites following similar patterns. According to the FBI 2014 statistics,⁶ where the race of the offender is known, of the 3,021 Whites murdered, 2,488 were murdered by other Whites. Of the 2,451 Blacks murdered, 2,205 were murdered by other Blacks. What is being implied with the omnipresent citation of the Black on Black murder rate? Is the intended implication that African Americans are inherently more violent than other groups and must be kept in line through terror brought on by unwarranted murders in the most public of settings? This tactic has a name: Lynching.

To be frank, the state of Black people in America is a dire one. Underfunded and crumbling schools and creeping poverty eroding economic opportunities are problems that all Americans face. However, the pauperization of Black people through Supreme Court-backed Jim Crow laws, red lining, and the school-to-prison pipeline have been official policies of the United States for most of its history that have only been addressed in the last 50 years; and those gains are not immune to the less overt forms of institutional racism or the mass incarceration of adults and juveniles. All of this is compounded by the grotesque spectacle of Black extra-judicial killings by vigilantes and the police.

The Black struggle is both external and internal. Externally, Black people resist oppression. Internally, Black people battle nihilism. That's what oppression does eventually—it turns one into a nihilist. "Black Lives Matter" is a revolutionary statement that echoes throughout Black history and that always starts with who we see in the mirror. Black Lives Matter is the philosophical cure to the spiritual damage of centuries of oppression. They are right to stand before the world and say, "Our lives matter. Black lives matter." They refuse to die hidden deaths anymore.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 17.
- 2 *Ibid*, p. 28.
- 3 National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Statement on National Race Crisis*, April 25, 1968.
- 4 Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, (Ossining, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2014), p. 10.
- 5 Thomas Massaro, *Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), p. 150.
- 6 See: 2014 Crime in the United States Expanded Homicide Data Table 6 courtesy of https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2014/crime-in-the-u.s.-2014/tables/expanded-homicide-data/expanded-homicide-data-table_6_murder_race_and_sex_of_victim_by_race_and_sex_of_offender_2014.xls