

An interview with the founders of Black Lives Matter | Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi

****Mia Birdsong:**** Why is Black Lives Matter important for the US right now and in the world?

****Patrisse Cullors:**** Black Lives Matter is our call to action. It is a tool to reimagine a world where black people are free to exist, free to live. It is a tool for our allies to show up differently for us. I grew up in a neighborhood that was heavily policed. I witnessed my brothers and my siblings continuously stopped and frisked by law enforcement. I remember my home being raided. And one of my questions as a child was, why? Why us? Black Lives Matter offers answers to the why. It offers a new vision for young black girls around the world that we deserve to be fought for, that we deserve to call on local governments to show up for us.

****Opal Tometi:**** And antiblack racism -- (Applause) And antiblack racism is not only happening in the United States. It's actually happening all across the globe. And what we need now more than ever is a human rights movement that challenges systemic racism in every single context. (Applause) We need this because the global reality is that black people are subject to all sorts of disparities in most of our most challenging issues of our day. I think about issues like climate change, and how six of the 10 worst impacted nations by climate change are actually on the continent of Africa. People are reeling from all sorts of unnatural disasters, displacing them from their ancestral homes and leaving them without a chance at making a decent living. We also see disasters like Hurricane Matthew, which recently wreaked havoc in many different nations but caused the most damage to Haiti. Haiti is the poorest country in this hemisphere, and its inhabitants are black people. And what we're seeing in Haiti is that they were actually facing a number of challenges that even preceded this hurricane. They were reeling from the earthquake; they were reeling from cholera that was brought in by UN peacekeepers and still hasn't been eradicated. This is unconscionable. And this would not happen if this nation didn't have a population that was black, and we have to be real about that. But what's most heartening right now is that despite these challenges, what we're seeing is that there's a network of Africans all across the continent who are rising up and fighting back and demanding climate justice. (Applause)

****Mia Birdsong:**** So Alicia, you've said that when black people are free, everyone is free. Can you talk about what that means?

****Alicia Garza:**** Sure. So I think race and racism is probably the most studied social, economic, and political phenomenon in this country, but it's also the least understood. The reality is that race in the United States operates on a spectrum from black to white. Doesn't mean that people who are in between don't experience racism, but it means that the closer you are to white on

that spectrum, the better off you are. And the closer to black that you are on that spectrum, the worse off you are. When we think about how we address problems in this country, we often start from a place of trickle-down justice. So using white folks as the control we say, well, if we make things better for white folks then everybody else is going to get free. But actually, it doesn't work that way. We have to address problems at the root, and when you deal with what's happening in black communities, it creates an effervescence, right? So a bubble up rather than a trickle down. Let me give an example. When we talk about the wage gap, we often say women make 78 cents to every dollar that a man makes. You all have heard that before. But those are the statistics for white women and white men. The reality is that black women make something like 64 cents to every 78 cents that white women make. When we talk about Latinas, it goes down to about 58 cents. If we were to talk about indigenous women, if we were to talk about trans women, it would even go further down. So again, if you deal with those who are the most impacted, everybody has an opportunity to benefit from that, rather than dealing with the folks who are not as impacted and expecting it to trickle down.

****Mia Birdsong:**** I love the effervescence, bubbling up.

****Alicia Garza:**** Effervescence -- like champagne. (Laughter)

****Mia Birdsong:**** Who doesn't love a glass of champagne, right? Champagne and freedom, right? (Laughter) What more could we want, y'all? So you all have been doing this for a minute, and the last few years have been -- well, I can't even imagine, but I'm sure very transformative. And I know that you all have learned a lot about leadership. What do you want to share with these people about what you've learned about leadership? Patrisse, let's start with you.

****Patrisse Cullors:**** Yeah, we have to invest in black leadership. That's what I've learned the most in the last few years. (Applause) What we've seen is thousands of black people showing up for our lives with very little infrastructure and very little support. I think our work as movement leaders isn't just about our own visibility but rather how do we make the whole visible. How do we not just fight for our individual selves but fight for everybody? And I also think leadership looks like everybody in this audience showing up for black lives. It's not just about coming and watching people on a stage, right? It's about how do you become that leader -- whether it's in your workplace, whether it's in your home -- and believe that the movement for black lives isn't just for us, but it's for everybody. (Applause)

****Mia Birdsong:**** What about you, Opal?

****Opal Tometi:**** So I've been learning a great deal about interdependence. I've been learning about how to trust your team. I've come up with this new mantra after coming back from a three-month sabbatical, which is rare for black women to take who are in leadership, but I felt it was really important for my leadership and for my team to also practice stepping back as well as also sometimes stepping in. And what I learned in this process was that we need to acknowledge that different people contribute different strengths, and that in order for our entire team to flourish, we have to allow them to share and allow them to shine. And so during my

sabbatical with the organization that I also work with, I saw our team rise up in my absence. They were able to launch new programs, fundraise. And when I came back, I had to give them a lot of gratitude and praise because they showed me that they truly had my back and that they truly had their own backs. You know, in this process of my sabbatical, I was really reminded of this Southern African philosophy of Ubuntu. I am because you are; you are because I am. And I realized that my own leadership and the contributions that I'm able to make is in large part due to the contributions that they make, right? And I have to acknowledge that, and I have to see that, and so my new mantra is

, "Keep calm and trust the team." And also, "Keep calm and thank the team."

****Mia Birdsong:**** You know, one of the things I feel like I've heard in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement more than anywhere else is about being a leaderful movement, and that's such a beautiful concept, and I think that something that women often bring to the conversation about leadership is really the collective piece. What about you, Alicia?

****Alicia Garza:**** Yeah ... How many of you heard that saying that leadership is lonely? I think that there is an element where leadership is lonely, but I also believe that it doesn't have to be like that. And in order for us to get to that point, I think there's a few things that we need to be doing. So one is we have to stop treating leaders like superheroes. We are ordinary people attempting to do extraordinary things, and so we need to be supported in that way. The other thing that I've learned about leadership is that there's a difference between leadership and celebrities, right? And there's a way in which we've been kind of transformed into celebrities rather than people who are trying to solve a problem. And the way that we treat celebrities is very fickle, right? We like them one day, we don't like what they're wearing the next day, and all of a sudden we have issues, right? So we need to stop deifying leaders so that more people will step into leadership. Lots of people are terrified to step into leadership because of how much scrutiny they receive and how brutal we are with leaders. And then the last thing that I've learned about leadership is that it's really easy to be a leader when everybody likes you. But it's hard to be a leader when you have to make hard choices and when you have to do what's right, even though people are not going to like you for it. And so in that way, I think another way that we can support leaders is to struggle with us, but struggle with us politically, not personally. We can have disagreements without being disagreeable, but it's important for us to sharpen each other, so that we all can rise.

****Mia Birdsong:**** That's beautiful, thank you. (Applause) So you all are doing work that forces you to face some brutal, painful realities on a daily basis. What gives you hope and inspires you in that context?

****Patrisse Cullors:**** I am hopeful for black futures. And I say that because we live in a society that's so obsessed with black death. We have images of our death on the TV screen, on our Twitter timelines, on our Facebook timelines, but what if instead we imagine black life? We imagine black people living and thriving. And that -- that inspires me.

****Opal Tometi:**** What inspires me these days are immigrants. Immigrants all over the world who are doing the best that they can to make a living, to survive and also to thrive. Right now there are over 244 million people who aren't living in their country of origin. This is a 40 percent increase since the year 2000. So what this tells me is that the disparities across the globe are only getting worse. Yet there are people who are finding the strength and wherewithal to travel, to move, to eke out a better living for themselves and to provide for their families and their loved ones. And some of these people who are immigrants are also undocumented. They're unauthorized. And they inspire me even more because although our society is telling them, you're not wanted, you're not needed here, and they're highly vulnerable and subject to abuse, to wage theft, to exploitation and xenophobic attacks, many of them are also beginning to organize in their communities. And what I'm seeing is that there's also an emerging network of black, undocumented people who are resisting the framework, and resisting the criminalization of their existence. And that to me is incredibly powerful and inspires me every single day.

****Mia Birdsong:**** Thank you. Alicia?

****Alicia Garza:**** So we know that young people are the present and the future, but what inspires me are older people who are becoming transformed in the service of this movement. We all know that as you get older, you get a little more entrenched in your ways. It's happening to me, I know that's right. But I'm so inspired when I see people who have a way that they do things, have a way that they think about the world, and they're courageous enough to be open to listening to what the experiences are of so many of us who want to live in a world that's just and want to live in a world that's equitable. And I'm also inspired by the actions that I'm seeing older people taking in service of this movement. I'm inspired by seeing older people step into their own power and leadership and say, "I'm not passing a torch, I'm helping you light the fire." (Applause)

****Mia Birdsong:**** I love that -- yes. So, in terms of action, I think it's awesome to sit here and be able to listen to you all, and to have our minds open and shift, but that's not going to get black people free. If you had one thing you would like this audience and the folks who are watching around the world to actually do, what would that be?

****Alicia Garza:**** OK, two quick ones. One, call the White House. The water protectors are being forcibly removed from the camp that they have set up to defend what keeps us alive. And that is intricately related to black lives. So definitely call the White House and demand that they stop doing that. There are tanks and police officers arresting every single person there as we speak. (Applause)

****Alicia Garza:**** The second thing that you can do is to join something. Be a part of something. There are groups, collectives—doesn't have to be a non-profit, you know what I mean? But there are groups that are doing work in our communities right now to make sure that black lives matter so all lives matter. Get involved; don't sit on your couch and tell people what you think they should be doing. Go do it with us.

****Mia Birdsong:****Do you guys want to add anything? That's good? All right. So, and I think that joining something, like if you feel like there's not something where you are, start it.

****Alicia Garza:****Start it.

****Mia Birdsong:****These conversations that we're having, have those conversations with somebody else. And then instead of just letting it be a talk that you had, actually decide to start something.

****Opal Tometi:****That's right.

****Mia Birdsong:****I mean, that's what you all did. You started something, and look what's happened. Thank you all so much for being here with us today.

****Opal Tometi:****Thank you. (Applause)

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