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Liberation Chronicles: Reformulating Black Liberation in the Face of Persistent Oppression

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Liberation Chronicles: Reformulating Black Liberation in the Face of Persistent Oppression

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Philosophy & Religious Studies

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Under the mentorship of Dr. Jasmine Wallace

Abstract

Liberation movements for Black people have been prominent throughout American history. Chattel slavery and Jim Crow laws caused centuries of anti-black oppression. They continuously evolved into other anti-black structures – mass incarceration, predatory loan companies, and healthcare inequalities, to name a few – that require us to address these issues still today. The most recent Black liberation movement, Black Lives Matter, experienced a brief uptick in support after George Floyd's murder but, overall, failed to address these issues. This thesis outlines three approaches to Black liberation in the U.S. to determine the most effective. First, drawing on Frederick Douglass' autobiographies, I argue that liberation from chattel slavery emphasized the importance of education so that Black people could meaningfully participate in social and political life. Second, I argue that Martin Luther King Jr. espoused civil disobedience as the only viable path for Black liberation because it demonstrated Black people's ability to engage in political resistance without threatening the foundations of liberalism on which this country was built. Moreover, turning to the Black Panther Party (BPP), I argue that Black liberation remains incomplete so long as it does not also combat capitalism. This thesis examines how the different contexts and periods required different strategies for resistance, which reveals to us the differing visions of Black liberation itself. Ultimately, I will argue that liberation is more effective than liberation in order to eradicate white supremacy once and for all.

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Introduction: Where we left off

While public interest in protesting police violence may be on the decline, anti-Black violence in the service of white supremacy is not. Given this, we must return to the history of political movements in solidarity with Black rights in this country to assess the most viable path forward: reform or liberation. I will argue that Black liberation, rather than reform, is the only means of demolishing white supremacy. We not only need to abolish the police, but we need to go further to end gerrymandering, predatory loan services, and mass incarceration. It is my position that only liberationist politics can uproot the foundations on which these anti-Black practices are built, thereby achieving meaningful freedom for Black people.

According to U.S. News & World Report, over 40% of Americans do not believe systemic racism exists. In this year of 2024, we know that this is far from the truth. As expressed in the article "Is the United States a racist country?" author Rashawn Ray (2021) argues that, for Black people, racism is deeply rooted in every aspect of life. Ray (2021) writes: "These stories acknowledge that life is different if you are Black, and unfortunately, systemic racism seems to ripple through our social institutions and into our daily social interactions, whether in Congress or at a coffee shop down the street from the Capitol" (Ray 2021). Whether we are discussing what to name one's child, worrying about the threat of law enforcement while driving, or determining which hospital will best serve one, the grip of racism continues to run deep in the everyday lives of Black people (Ray 2021). This reality was magnified on a global scale in 2020 when the police murdered George Floyd. It was a reminder for Black and non-Black people alike that anti-Black racism continues to be an issue within our society.

Floyd's murder led to international protests against police brutality under the umbrella of Black Lives Matter. However, unsurprisingly, identifying the solution to police brutality in particular and anti-Black racism in general led to division among members of BLM, Black people embedded in local and federal politics, and other allies of the Black community. Some advocated for defunding the police. Defunding the police, according to Su, O'Rourke, and Binder (2022), would allow resources to flow into underprivileged areas, result in those communities asserting more democratic control, and finally, reduce police violence (1208). Some cities in America, such as Los Angeles, Seattle, and Camden, NJ, did attempt to alter their spending on the police force (Marcovitz 2021, 47). They began to focus on de-escalation tactics in their training: "Many state legislatures took action in 2020 to ban chokeholds for every police department in their state" (50). Despite the demand for significant changes to policing, many advocates of defunding the police restricted their political analysis to reform rather than liberation. That is, these cities focused on reorganizing the existing system–reform–as opposed to a revolutionary overhaul of the status quo–liberation.

In contrast to demands to defund the police, activists called for the total abolition of policing. Geo Maher (2021) explains the difference between police abolition and reform in his book *A World Without Police*:

> Abolition isn't reform. It isn't social policy, lobbying, progressive think tanks, or progressive legislation to cushion the blows of a violent status quote. [...] It's a horizon for the total rebuilding of society from the bottom up: a society with no police or prisons because there's nothing that needs policing and no one who needs to be in prison (Maher 2021, 151).

In line with prison abolitionists before him, including Angela Davis and Michelle Alexander, Maher argues for the liberation from policing rather than a reformation of policing. By redistributing goods and resources into society–investing in mental health facilities, schools, housing, etc. - Maher argues that policing and prisons would become obsolete. This does not mean, of course, that people would not, at times, break the law. Instead, police abolition entails a complete restructuring of society so that everyone's most basic needs are met, thereby alleviating a significant portion of the motivations underlying crime. He also argues for community programs in place of police forces.

Inspired by the recent resurgence of protests against anti-Black violence, this thesis will analyze the different strategies historically used by prominent Black activists and theorists who advocated for liberation – for some, through revolution – from the conditions of racist oppression in the United States to envision an ideal society for everyone. I aim to draw from the history of Black political organizing to argue for liberation, rather than reform, as the necessary means for overthrowing the legacies of anti-Black racism and white supremacy that endure today. In order to avoid conflating different expressions of anti-Blackness throughout the history of the United States, I will give careful attention to the concrete conditions structuring the lived experience of each activist and/or theorists considered herein.

Section one of this thesis defines what I mean by "white supremacy" and "anti-Blackness" in order to provide a foundation on which we can understand the conditions within which Black political movements for equality occurred. I recognize that anti-Blackness characterizing, for example, chattel slavery differs from conditions of anti-Blackness confronting our society today.

In section two, I examine the conditions of chattel slavery through the lens of Frederick Douglass' autobiographies. The goal here is to i) identify what freedoms Black people fought for, namely freedom from enslavement, and ii) begin to develop a picture of early expressions of Black reform versus Black liberation. Ultimately, I will argue that Douglass is best understood as a reformist. He advocated for the abolition of slavery, which entailed a significant disruption of the status quo. However, his political demands were limited to extending rights already available to white people to include previously excluded Black people.

Section three focuses on political movements that are dominant under Jim Crow. First, I analyze Martin Luther King Jr.'s politics as a reformist because, like Douglass, he envisioned Black freedom as the freedom to be included in rights disallowed to Black people and, yet, extended to white people. His pacifism further proves that MLK Jr. is best understood as a reformist because, historically, a willingness to engage in political violence is associated with revolution and, thus, liberation. Finally, I will discuss the Black Panther Party (BPP) as the most extreme form of Black liberation during the mid-20th century. The BPP openly advocated for revolution and argued that liberation required an overthrow of anti-Blackness and capitalism. In other words, the BPP were total revolutionaries who understood that freedom for Black people could only be achieved through the dissolution of white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and capitalism. Through their programs, such as the free lunch program, they worked to combat an issue widespread across the entire community that was not being addressed by providing the necessary resources.

White Supremacy and Anti-Blackness

Before delving into a discussion of Black reform versus Black liberation, I want first to explain what I mean by "white supremacy" and "anti-Black racism." Of course, one is more

likely than not to have some understanding of what these concepts refer to. But, by fleshing out the nuances related to each, I seek to provide greater context to understand. In her article "Whiteness as Property," Cherly Harris (1993) defines white supremacy as follows:

> By 'white supremacy' I do not mean to allude only to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings (Harris 1993, 1714).

This definition covers the deep roots that white supremacy holds in all aspects of society and therefore, every interaction that Black people face in public and in private. As Harris points out, white supremacy is not restricted to self-conscious racism like we might associate with organizations such as the KKK. One does not have to be aware of their internalized white supremacist attitudes for them to exist. This is precisely what makes white supremacy so insidious: it is not always easy to identify. Instead, we should understand white supremacy as a structure of our society that disenfranchises non-white people and privileges white people. Politically, this means that white people are disproportionately represented in positions of power, including, most notably, the number of white versus non-white people who have held the office of president. Economically, white supremacy means that white people are overrepresented in positions of economic power such as, for example, that of CEO.

Conversely, it means that jobs that pay the least in our society are more likely than not performed by people of color. Furthermore, culturally, white supremacy means the perceived superiority of things like Eurocentric beauty standards. In a white supremacist society, blonde

hair and blue eyes are deemed the highest form of beauty, and dark skin and curly hair are regarded as inferior. In sum, we should say that white supremacy entails a hierarchization of racial identities where whiteness is at the top–white people have the most significant goods and resources in our society–and non-white people are at the bottom.

While white supremacy concerns the general view that white people are superior to all other non-white people, anti-Black racism, in particular, is the targeted discrimination of Black people. Anti-Black racism, like white supremacy, is more than a mere attitude one consciously or unconsciously holds. It also includes a range of dehumanizing and/or violent socio-political practices that disenfranchise Black people.

The origin of anti-Black racism in this country cannot be understood outside of the context of chattel slavery, beginning in 1619. During this period, African people were kidnapped from their continent and forced into centuries of servitude. Transatlantic chattel slavery was not the first time a society had implemented slavery. What is unique about the U.S., however, is that enslaved subjects were i) treated as the total property of another, ii) children of enslaved people were born into enslavement, meaning that they were always already enslaved subjects, and iii) one could be enslaved simply on the basis of their race. As Harris argues: "Race and property were [...] conflated by establishing a form of property contingent on race–only Blacks were subjugated as slaves and treated as property" (Harris 1993, 1716). To be Black was a sufficient condition for enslavement during chattel slavery; whiteness was a shield from the potential to be enslaved.

Anti-Black racism and white supremacy did not end with the abolition of chattel slavery. Instead, they transformed to constitute the historical era of Jim Crow. Under Jim Crow, it was no longer legal to enslave Black people. However, it was perfectly legal to discriminate against

Black people based entirely on the color of their skin. Again, this form of discrimination was not merely attitudinal, though it was undoubtedly explicitly and implicitly held by many white people of the time. In addition to this, however, Jim Crow entailed the institutionalization of anti-Black policies that strictly limited the resources available to and for Black people. Segregation is perhaps the most notable feature of Jim Crow. It can be summed up by the *Plessy v. Ferguson 163 U.S. 537 (1896)* case of "separate but equal" (Harris 1993, 1745). For example, there were separate public drinking fountains for white and Black people. Famously, under Jim Crow, Black people were expected to sit at the back of the bus and/or give up their seat for a white person. That Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat demonstrates that anti-Blackness was a legal institution of Jim Crow.

Even following these unfortunate historical events and attempts at correcting these issues politically, white supremacy continues to morph and evolve into today's time. Black people are still feeling the weight of all aspects of white supremacy. Politically, our representation in politics is still unequal, and equitable attempts in higher education through affirmative action have been eradicated. Additionally, police brutality and mass incarceration continue to disenfranchise and harm the Black community. Police brutality and the mass incarceration of Black people. Socially and economically, the disparities in healthcare and employment opportunities available to Black people as compared to whites represent the continuation of the differential allocation of resources according to anti-Black policies–policies that are implicit today.

As Harris points out, white supremacy occurs both in social settings and in institutions. It is this very coalition of institutions and social settings that construct the very livelihood of Black people in America, completely reshaping how they interact with access to basic needs -

whether mental or physical - overall. In order to begin the steps to destabilize white supremacy, we must refer back to history and what steps were taken to enact change in those instances. The most significant figure in fighting for emancipation, Frederick Douglass, wanted to achieve liberation through education.

Douglass and Chattel Slavery

Born into chattel slavery, Frederick Douglass endured the most extreme forms of white supremacy and anti-Black racism. As an enslaved person, Douglass was dehumanized and treated as mere property. This meant that he and all enslaved peoples were vulnerable to gratuitous violence. Enslaved people did not have a right to life. These processes of dehumanization were not, however, solely physical. Douglass endured psychological harm as a result of, for example, not being able to ask or know his birthdate or gain an education. In the context of chattel slavery, freedom for Douglass meant freedom from bondage. For him, this was achieved mainly through education so formerly enslaved persons could meaningfully participate in political life. Implicit in Douglass' account of freedom is an underlying commitment to reform wherein Black people gain access to political life previously unavailable under chattel slavery.

A slave captor ensured an enslaved person's bondage from birth through many methods of dehumanization. Because of an enslaved person's status as property, they were not afforded basic knowledge about their birth other than what was relevant for their captors. Douglass points out how, for instance, "I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County" (Douglass and Gates 1994, 8). No record was kept in an archive or written or printed birth certificate. Although an enslaved person may have an idea, there was

never "any authentic record containing it" (Douglass and Gates 1994, 8). The enslaved person had to rely directly on the information provided by the captor, which was often deemed irrelevant and lost, or purposely withheld the exact *location* of an enslaved person's birth was recorded so a captor would know where to look if or when an enslaved person escaped their bondage. Thanks to the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850, being able to track and locate enslaved persons became essential to upholding chattel slavery as an institution. In fact, the earliest forms of policing in this country lay in the so-called slave patrols–men who were paid to track down and forcibly return escaped enslaved people.[1] Overall, many methods were used to subjugate Black people during this time.

I consider Douglass' lack of knowledge surrounding his birth date a form of dehumanization because Douglass describes himself as feeling inferior as compared to his white counterparts in his youth: "The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege" (Douglass and Gates 1994, 8). It was dehumanizing to realize that the white children were equipped with this information while the black children were denied this right. By withholding this information and successfully creating an unjust imbalance, Douglass became aware of how his captor kept him and his people subservient at an early age. This was one of many ways captors sought to keep enslaved people in bondage through the process of dehumanization.

Another element of dehumanization essential to the reproduction of chattel slavery was the purposeful separation between an enslaved person and their family. Douglass briefly describes his forcible separation from his mother at a young age: "My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant—before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom [...]

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[1] For more on the history of policing and white supremacy in the U.S. see Angela Davis, "Slavery, Civil Rights, and Abolitionist Perspectives Toward Prison," in *Are Prisons Obsolete?*

to part children from their mothers at a very early age" (Douglass and Gates 1994, 9). First, this further divides an enslaved person from the knowledge of their actual birthday. Undoubtedly, one's mother will likely record one's birth even if one's captor refuses to document such an event. Nevertheless, if one's mother is not around and cannot answer questions, one is prevented from accessing this knowledge.

Second, dehumanization could also result from not receiving the "natural affection" that follows from the proximity of having one's mother around. The child is, thus, alienated from their kin and unable to develop familial relationships. According to Douglass, he was estranged from his mother for the purpose of "hinder[ing] the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child" (Douglass and Gates 1994, 9). The distance was so prevalent in Douglass' life that when his mother eventually passed, he compared it as being equivalent to learning of the death of a total stranger.

Douglass embraced education as, in his view, the best means of combating attempts to dehumanize him and, eventually, achieve freedom. During this time, "it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read" (Douglass and Gates 1994, 17). By making education unlawful for enslaved people, it fed into the vast institution of chattel slavery, the belief that education was not required for enslaved people as it was for the rest of the population. However, it was unsafe for the many reasons that Douglass later discovered. His captor, Mr. Auld, declared, "It would forever unfit him to be enslaved. He would at once become unmanageable and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy" (Douglass and Gates 1994, 17). While Douglass later came to this conclusion, slaveowners had a common understanding of the dangers of educating enslaved people.

When Douglass first became educated in his adolescence, he was itching to explore what more there was to life. He recognized that his people were the only ones suffering and that the injustices they faced, as reported in the news, were disproportionately unjust. As he grew older, he realized that the power to enslave - especially a whole race of people - stemmed from the ignorance of the enslaved people. In his own words, he described this new understanding as "a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled in vain. I now understood. . . a most perplexing difficulty. . . the white man's power to enslave the black man" (Douglass and Gates 1994, 23).

All in all, Douglass desired freedom from enslavement, which shows up in the many different ways I have mentioned above. Suppressing the knowledge one has and can gain is a form of enslavement. Forcing separation from one's identity at birth and closest family members because of their status as property is a form of enslavement through dehumanization. The more well-known examples of being enslaved, which included freedom from violence, moving as one pleases in the public sphere without it being deemed illegal, and having their own families, were all yet another form of enslavement.

Education is necessary for understanding how these inequities are highly unjust and perpetuated within the systems of institutional chattel slavery, white supremacy, and anti-black racism in politics. Education is also vital because it allows people to better understand their rights as citizens and exercise them effectively. Similar to Martin Luther King Jr., who will be discussed next, Douglass recognizes the importance of participation in politics. This grants black people a level of agency to explore liberation.

If we translate this definition of liberation into today's time, we can see that Douglass' version of liberation falls short. However, education is still a necessary component. As stated

earlier, white supremacy structures have inconspicuously morphed into these institutions that still oppress us today. However, many Americans still believe that racism is either not as prevalent as it once was or that it does not exist at all. Additionally, unlike the age of chattel slavery, every American is required to receive an education and cannot drop out of school until well into their teen years. The internet itself allows for the spread of all kinds of information. Furthermore, social media has created even more avenues for people to learn new information that has historically been left out of traditional media and education. During 2020, many videos and stories began circulating online of police brutality, and people became aware of just how prevalent the issue was.

MLK and Jim Crow (1950s-1960s)

When reflecting on the life and mission of Martin Luther King Jr., we typically associate him with leading the Civil Rights Movement during the Jim Crow Laws era. His 39 years of life were dedicated to fighting against white supremacy. Martin Luther King Jr. was born to the Reverend Michael King and Alberta King. Encouraged from a young age to pursue ministry, he used his spiritual beliefs to catalyze his passion for social justice. Essential to his politics and in line with his religious values, King advocated for pacifism and nonviolence. This is evidenced in his protest strategy in concert with the NAACP, which led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. This led to the banning bus segregation laws through the Supreme Court case of *Browder v Gayle 352 U.S. 903*. He also worked with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to organize sit-ins to protest segregated lunch counters. Most notably, he organized the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, which included 200,000 people marching the nation's capital, and King delivered his most memorable speech, "I Have a Dream."

His Christian beliefs, in addition to his education on Mahatma Gandhi's tactics, led King to adopt nonviolent methodologies among his followers and the entire Civil Rights Movement: "The Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom (Stride, 79; Papers 5:422). When implementing it through his leadership positions in the numerous movements he was a part of, he created six principles of nonviolence. The first three include resisting without resorting to violence, not humiliating the oppressor, and that evil should be attacked instead of the people committing evil acts (King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 84). The last three principles included suffering without retaliating, refusing to harbor feelings of hate towards the oppressor, and having faith that justice would eventually unfold (King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 86).

This non-violent approach also worked to combat the assumption that Black people are inherently hyper-criminal. The hyper-criminalization of Black people dates back to chattel slavery. Because of white supremacy, Black people were viewed as inferior and, sometimes, as dangerous. To be clear, Black people did not have to do anything to be perceived as such. Their skin color alone was sufficient to rouse suspicion from the white gaze. The white gaze, according to Marquis Bey (2016), "[causes] Black bodies [to] appear in the form of a sheer exteriority. . . a single Black thing, unindividuated, threatening, ominous, Black" (272). It is inherent, crafted by white supremacy, and reverses the idea of "innocent until proven guilty."

Marquis Bey (2016) describes the negative assumptions associated with Blackness in an anti-Black society as "bodily scripts": "The body, in effect, is a text onto which scripts and meanings are inscribed" (272). Stereotypes of Black people being hypersexual, thugs, gangsters, and many more negative portrayals can incite fear in white people, even when Black people

aren't acting in a threatening manner. Due to this, Black people had to be hyper-aware of their presence. The fact that their skin color alone constituted a perceived threat created a barrier for Black people being able to interact in society in a comfortable, relaxed manner.

Jim Crow laws created "Discriminatory laws designed to disenfranchise and segregate Black Americans from White Americans, particularly in the US South" (Moore 2023, 1). Anti-black discrimination was now formally codified into law. Not only were Black people "segregated in railway cars, theaters, schools, prisons, and hospitals," methods of creating discriminatory laws were institutionalized through various methods of disenfranchisement (Moore 2023, 1). The first were literacy tests, requiring a new voter to pass all sorts of complex tests that ranged from reading and writing to interpreting US statutes. Being newly released from their positions as enslaved persons, many had not received a primary education. The second was poll taxes, which, again, because of their newly freed status, many formerly enslaved people had little to no wealth to their name. The third was having primaries exclude Black people entirely, leaving them out of a crucial step in the electoral process.

Black people not only fought against formalized systems of racial segregation that disallowed Black people from accessing essential public goods but also the informal systems of anti-black violence through the hyper-criminalization of black bodies. The police contributed to much of the structural enforcement of Jim Crow laws and the hyper-criminalization of Black people we still see today; anti-black racism was also expressed outside of the law. For example, lynching was a common form of extrajudicial killings targeting Black people who were perceived as guilty according to bodily scripts associated with Blackness rather than an actual crime. The lack of intervention from the police led to horrific instances of lynching stemming from white supremacist mob violence. The killing of a Black person typically occurred by

hanging them, allowing it to become a sort of public spectacle. Entire families, including children, would be in attendance, which was treated as a celebration.

The fact that white people would most often get away with these extrajudicial killings of Black people during Jim Crow contributed not only to a culture of excitement for white people–it was a spectacular expression of their power over Black people–but also an internal sense of dread and constant state of hyper-vigilance for Black people. Lynchings were established to remind Black people that they were inferior to white people and vulnerable to violence. This, along with many other basic protections given to citizens of the U.S. through the law, were withheld and even weaponized against them. The police, being a medium between upholding and enforcing the rules, bred many of these conditions. Our fundamental rights, which are to be protected by the law, were not extended to black people thanks to the failure of the police to intervene. Furthermore, lynchings were extrajudicial, meaning that a black person's every procedural justice right was stripped of him when white mobs such as the KKK took it upon themselves to enact justice, and because they aligned themselves with the police, it led to its legitimacy.

When Martin Luther King Jr. envisioned liberation, he imagined it through this era of Jim Crow. He fought for access to political office. In order to enact real change and eradicate the laws that created formalized structures of anti-black racism, he believed there needed to be Black people in office voting on and creating new laws. He dreamed of utilizing the democratic process to its fullest power: "This is the glory of democracy" (Montgomery Bus Boycott). Infiltrating the political system was important, but so was meaningful political engagement. He advocated for more informed decision-making and fulfilling our rights to assemble and protest.

King also advocated for our First Amendment rights to assemble and protest in order to steer clear of the potential for violence further: "The only weapon that we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest" (Montgomery Bus Boycott). It was important for King to take this approach for the above reasons. But also, because of his love of democracy and "[exercising] our citizenship to the fullness of its meaning," King believed in utilizing every aspect of democracy, down to exercising our natural human rights as codified in the Bill of Rights (Montgomery Bus Boycott). Since Black people were not even considered fully human at one point in time, this was an important step towards leveling the barriers that Black people encountered daily.

The Black Panther Party (BPP)

The Black Panther Party (BPP) shared with Martin Luther King Jr. the political commitment to overthrowing white supremacy and anti-Blackness. Unlike them, however, the BPP recognized that white supremacy could not be overthrown without, at the same time, overthrowing capitalism. They understood that white supremacy boosted the U.S. economy since the days of chattel slavery.

As Edward Baptist (2016) argued in his text, *The Half has Never Been Told*, chattel slavery laid the foundation for industrialization in the U.S. Baptist writes:

 White enslavers were able to force enslaved African-American migrants to pick cotton faster and more efficiently than free people. Their practices rapidly transformed the southern states into the dominant force in the global cotton market, and cotton was the

world's most widely traded commodity at the time, as it was the key raw material during the first century of the industrial revolution.[2]

From the perspective of enslavers, it was more profitable to use enslaved labor to, for example, harvest crops than to pay a free person for the same job. Here, we see how anti-Blackness and capitalism merged: Black people were enslaved to produce profits for their white captors. Emancipation ended white people's ability to exploit Black people through enslavement, but it did not prevent new forms of capitalist exploitation and anti-Blackness to emerge.

The BPP recognized that Black liberation required a socialist revolution because white supremacy and capitalism worked hand in hand to oppress Black people and poor white people. Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party in 1966 as an explicitly socialist organization. They aimed to adopt a Marxist-Leninist ideology, Vladimir Lenin's interpretation of classical Marxism. He believed that overthrowing capitalism would not happen naturally but rather required a professional vanguard party to lead the proletariat. Therefore, the proletariat could establish a dictatorship as the first stage of moving towards communism.

For the BPP, it was important that they "not only thought about the Marxist-Leninist theory - we put it into practice. This is what the Black Panther Party is about" (Alkebulan 2007, 139). Their approach involved beginning the Breakfast for Children Program. During this time, the government did not delegate many resources to the idea of a social safety net; the BPP recognized the government's failure to ensure that children had food, so they took it upon themselves to fill this need. This program was also meant to demonstrate how to provide necessary, basic resources to those weary of socialism.

[2] Baptist, xxi

To further elaborate and prioritize their mission, the BPP created a ten-point program that all members devoted themselves to fighting. The ten-point program essentially laid out their demands from the American government that would effectively lead to liberation from white supremacy. Similarly to other figures discussed earlier in this thesis, the BPP's ten points were directly informed by the concrete conditions of anti-Black racism of the time. That being said, some of their points more directly address instances such as enlistment; I want to highlight the points they develop that most directly correspond to the idea of liberation for Black People as a whole.

The first that addresses this is their demand for "full employment for our people," the second point of the ten (Ten-Point Program). The BPP understood the importance of receiving equal opportunities and access to employment to finance one's ability to sustain oneself. Many barriers prevented this, one of the main ones being workplace discrimination. Since white men were typically in the position of the employer, and there was no oversight of their hiring practices, they could discriminate in terms of race and pass it off as scrutiny. Additionally, as the BPP points out, white people had always been in charge of the means of production; if the reins were passed to Black people so that they could have some control as well, this would help to balance the differences in power. At the very least, the BPP suggested that the government provide a guaranteed income.

Another demand to emphasize is their third point, in which they request reparations for what they refer to as being a robbery of the Black community by capitalists. Specifically, they refer to this idea of receiving "the overdue debt of forty acres and two mules" (Ten-Point Program). This references the failure of Reconstruction, which was supposed to include compensation for the centuries of unpaid labor that resulted from slavery. However, the land

distribution was cut short after President Andrew Johnson entered office. Furthermore, many formerly enslaved people fell victim to the practice of sharecropping, which created "a system of land rentals that. . . [was] a deeply exploitative debt relationship" (Manenitz). Because of this, Black people never received equal footing economically. The effects of this are still, unfortunately, felt today.

The last demand to highlight is the tenth, to have all of one's basic needs, which the BPP identifies as "Land, Bread, Housing, Education, Clothing, Justice and Peace" (Ten-Point Program). Although these are both broad yet specific demands, when thought about holistically, this is again requesting what they believe to be one's living essentials. It involves material possessions, food and water, shelter, and clothes, as well as one's ability to function normally in society and experience it just and peacefully. The institutional, political, and cultural structures of white supremacy are all wholly unjust, as well as the way the criminal justice system convicts and sentences Black people compared to other races. Encountering white supremacy on a day-to-day basis makes Black people wary of their subsequent encounter, which is far from peaceful.

The BPP's approach to liberation required total revolution by any means necessary. The BPP realized from its inception that it would be unable to strive towards an armed revolution like it first hoped. The first reason is that they were already closely surveilled and monitored environment; in order to ensure their success as an organization and movement, they began to prioritize other goals. The second reason was that the average Black person simply wanted political reform as opposed to the "dangerous stresses of revolution" (Alkebulan 2007, 27).

They instead adapted to create programs that "addressed real needs" (Alkebulan 2007, 29). Their Breakfast Programs, Liberation Schools, and Medical Clinics were programs they

instituted, which led to recruiting more new members after seeing the tangible work they produced. These programs also served as a way to prove the idea of socialism being put into practice. On the other hand, revolution for the BPP was not off the table. Implementing these programs served as a "practical political move," referred to by Paul Alkebulan (2007) as "survival pending revolution" (41). It allowed the BPP to still simultaneously fight anti-black racism and capitalism while reshaping the organization's image in the public sphere as well as the eye of the government (41).

Liberation vs. Reform: My analysis

From studying these historical figures, movements, organizations, and differing ideologies, I can conclude that liberation, in my opinion, would prove to be a more practical approach to toppling white supremacy once and for all. The continued existence of white supremacy in itself proves this.

While I argue against reform, it is crucial to recognize how this approach, aligning closely with that of Martin Luther King Jr., did have its benefits. For instance, King's call to nonviolence, even in the face of violence, allowed the American public to be unable to deny the horrific treatment that Black people endured during that time. One fitting example is the brutal assault of peaceful protestors by police officers that occurred on the bridge during the march from Selma to Montgomery. Because they did not respond with violence, it was made clear that the assault was unprompted and excessive. By approaching these issues using a formal, democratic process, it highlighted the unjust nature of the treatment received by Black people and how the aggressive measures stood in stark contrast.

Additionally, reform led to the Civil Rights Movement. In the context of King's era and the Jim Crow laws, this movement made significant strides to unravel the segregation and unequal amenities that existed during that time. Through working within the law, new laws arose, adding to the Bill of Rights and instituting the inability to discriminate. Today, Black people can function in political office the same as their white counterparts, as King envisioned. However, reform has fallen short in that the number of Black politicians is unequal and not accurately representative of the Black population as a whole in the United States. Furthermore, the Black community as a whole does not exercise their political rights as their ancestors did during the Jim Crow era. However, white supremacy still exists, and we see less involvement in activism and movements that fight for racial equity.

Overall, white supremacy persists through many structures present in today's society. Healthcare discrimination occurs when outdated understandings of, for instance, a Black patient's pain tolerance, are used in practice. Gerrymandering attempts to use unconstitutional means to separate the Black vote. And mass incarceration, which is responsible for the majority of inmates being Black men. In summary, a vast amount of disparities still exist between Black people and all other races. Because we see how white supremacy simply morphs and evolves into other anti-black structures, the necessary solution is to attack the problem at its roots.

Liberation calls for disassembling the fixated structures we have become accustomed to in society. Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (2021) refer to this sensation as habitualization. It is the idea that "we construct our own society but we also accept it as it is because others have created it before us," or that society is simply a habit that we continually perform (Conerly, Holmes, and Tamang 2021). Dismantling structures that have existed for decades, even centuries, are unfathomable to many because we have only experienced society in

a certain way. Therefore, we opt for reformative methods that allow for little to no disruption in how we experience our everyday lives.

We saw this unfold with the aversion that arose with the idea of dismantling the police; not only did the general public have an uneducated opinion, but they were afraid of society functioning differently, even if it would be for the better. The term "defunding" automatically struck fear in many and led many to believe that crime would soon run rampant following such drastic measures. However, it is these drastic measures that could result in the end of instances of police brutality, for example. As Su, O'Rourke, and Binder (2022) outlined, the resources would simply be diverted to other institutions that relieve police of burdens - such as mental health episodes - that they are ill-equipped to handle.

Although the idea of liberation may be overwhelming, it is vital. Although it may be difficult to imagine a society following prison abolition or an entirely new process of drawing electoral borders, major solutions are required to address significant issues. Additionally, we have attempted to address these problems since we are aware of their existence. But the very fact that they are still problematic - and white supremacy in general - shows that the reform approach that has been utilized nowadays is inadequate. So, this leads to the question, what steps must be taken to inch us closer to liberation?

To answer this question, my philosophy aligns most closely with the Black Panther Party (BPP). Although they could not implement their more radical ideas, they were able to create grassroots programs to assert a positive influence and impact in their communities. In the BPP, the very definition of a Marxist-Leninist organization centers around this concept of a vanguard party leading the revolution. This applies to liberation as well. For the figures I have mentioned, especially MLK Jr. and the BPP, Black people had a visible figure and organization to rally

behind. MLK became famous for his speeches because they mirrored the sentiments felt by the entire community but were able to be articulated through one man in an eloquent manner that cannot be achieved by just anyone. It is comparable to the idea of political parties, an organization wholly dedicated to pursuing a specific set of ideas and beliefs.

The following tangible step towards liberation was, in fact, a request in the Ten-Point Program of the Black Panther Party. This includes the need to request reparations from the US government. They understood the disparities that the Black community faced when it came to economic status. While the overall goal was the overthrow of capitalism, they again appreciate the need to enact a tangible plan of action to address economic inequality by addressing the more immediate needs of the Black community by alleviating poverty.

In conclusion, white supremacy cannot be exterminated without the drastic measures that come along with the concept of liberation. We know this because of the existence of white supremacy today amid reformative steps being taken to combat these issues. However, it must be noted that the needs of the Black community have yet to be adequately handled and must be confronted immediately. Therefore, although liberation may not encompass a type of violent revolution at this moment as the BPP imagined, we must work harder than our ancestors during King's time to finally put an end to white supremacy once and for all.

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