

Alicia Garza: Situated Analysis and Practicing Being Free

In her essay “Home,” Toni Morrison explores her attempts to “convert a racist house [the society consumed by white supremacy in which we all exist] into a race-specific yet nonracist home,” a project that strives towards being both “free and situated” (5). To be both free and situated speaks to the necessity of working towards a world in which everyone is truly free while simultaneously remaining situated within and aware of the world that we inhabit now. Being both free and situated is essential to effective action against injustice because to restrict one’s strategies, critiques, and imagination to what seems ‘possible’ in the world that we live in now is to never truly move beyond that world. However, to focus entirely on the world in which we want to live and disregard the complexities, power dynamics, and context of the world that we live in now is to render one’s work irrelevant and ineffective in the here and now. In a world where racism has endured and evolved over thousands of years and has renamed and rebranded itself countless times, many organizers, activists, and scholars of race theory approach race as an immovable construct that can never be drained of its “lethal cling” (5). This approach is grounded in being situated, or ‘realistic,’ but obscures being free. To rewrite race is to give equal weight to being free and being situated, accomplished by allowing the power of imagination to replace the constraints of ‘reality,’ thus allowing one to imagine what a free world could look like, and to let strategies stem from that focus. One person who skillfully balances being free and situated is Alicia Garza, a co-founder of #BlackLivesMatter (BLM), a “chapter-based national organization working for the validity of black life” (*#BlackLivesMatter*). Garza’s ability to unapologetically focus on black people’s struggles, needs, and accomplishments without losing sight of the transformative freedom she knows can be achieved demonstrates an investment in both where we are – a racist and unjust world – and where we want to be – a world of “racial

specificity without racial hierarchy” (Morrison 8). Her work is fueled by imagination of what is possible, not just the awareness that our current reality is not good enough, and by the strength she finds in her communities, spaces where people can map out what freedom might look like. By holding space for the injustices of our current society *and* remaining invested in what a truly free world could look like and modeling this imagined reality for others, Garza rewrites activists’ approach to race.

The idea that racial pride and specificity will always be accompanied by race-based hatred and violence is prevalent among many who work towards racial justice. This belief is illustrated in racial and legal scholar Derrick Bell’s 1992 short story, “The Space Traders.” In “The Space Traders,” set in the year 2000, strange creatures arrive from outer space and offer the United States a trade: huge amounts of gold, safe and infinite nuclear energy, and special chemicals that would reverse human-made pollution, in exchange for every black person in the country (Bell 1). The country is given sixteen days to respond, and predictably, the outcome does not value black lives – the trade is accepted, and the story ends with black people being marched onto the aliens’ ship in chains (13). Throughout the debates that we are shown in the days leading up to the trade, the only group who seems to genuinely care for black lives is black people. The government relishes the chance to ship off a group that relies heavily on welfare and other social services, but worries that white people may feel too guilty if the trade goes through (3). Big business leaders are strongly against the trade because black people are “crucial in stabilizing the economy with its ever-increasing disparity between the incomes of rich and poor” – if black people were gone, poor white people would start to see that their real enemies were the mega-rich corporation heads (9). In other words, Derrick Bell’s vision of the future was one in which black lives continued to be seen as commodities, nuisances, or simply irrelevant. Even the

most prominent black character, Gleason Golightly, advises black people that in order to avoid the trade, they must convince the white populous that the aliens intend to transport every black citizen to a “land of milk and honey,” since a major motivation for racism is “the deeply held belief that black people should not have anything that white people don’t have” (7). In the world that Bell predicts, even hypothetically, there is no hope for racial justice. The story sends the message that since racism will never be eradicated, black people must simply get better at working around it and tricking white people to get what they need because freedom is not possible, and because no one will work for the validity of black lives besides black people. Bell is so deeply situated in the realities of racism – its insidiousness, its longevity – that he cannot, or chooses not to, picture a world in which people are free.

Another work that emphasizes being situated at the expense of being free is Randall Robinson’s *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*. Robinson certainly strikes a more hopeful note than Bell, but ultimately the message is the same: the world will not change, so act and think accordingly. In the penultimate chapter of *The Debt*, “Thoughts About Restitution,” Robinson makes a case for reparations in response to slavery that is both morally compelling and logically infallible. He details the life of a hypothetical contemporary black man who would be seen as a failure or problem by society, but arrived at his lack of education and minimum-wage job due to centuries of violence and racial inequalities, from slavery through the civil rights movement, and continuing through the twenty-first century. Robinson references other precedent-setting cases in which at least partial reparations were paid to racial or ethnic groups who had been attacked by their own governments, such as Jewish Europeans after the Holocaust or Japanese Americans after the internment camps of World War II. Despite all of this, Robinson asserts that reparations for slavery are an impossibility that black people should not expect, and

the chapter in fact focuses on the futility of fighting for reparations more than the injustice of not having received them. The chapter begins with a description of a 1993 bill that “did not ask for reparations for the descendants of slaves but merely a commission to study the effects of slavery,” and won only twenty-eight cosponsors, eighteen of whom were black, from the 435-member U.S. House of Representatives (201). The U.S.’s failure to even consider the deep ramifications of slavery frames the message of the rest of the chapter, that “the white power structure would never support reparations because to do so would operate against its interests” (205). Robinson asserts that “the issue here is not whether or not we can, or will, win reparations. The issue is whether we will fight for reparations because we have decided for ourselves that they are our due” (206). While this stance empowers black people more than “The Space Traders,” it still operates under the assumption that the world will always be racist, and that despite the obvious legal and moral necessity of providing reparations in some form, black people will never be seen as whole, human, or valuable enough to be given what they are so clearly owed. The reality of being situated is emphasized at the expense of believing in the possibility of freedom.

Black Lives Matter was formed in the wake of George Zimmerman’s acquittal, a political moment that drenched black people in being situated and, for many, dampened the possibility of becoming free. Garza watched the verdict unfold with friends in a bar in Oakland, and said that “it was as if we had all been punched in the gut” (Guynn). She thought of her brother, a tall, 25-year-old black man with a big afro, and his similarity to Martin, and felt “a deep sense of grief that [she couldn’t] protect him” (Guynn). From this place of mourning, Garza wrote a Facebook post that she called “a love letter to black people,” and ended it with “black people, I love you, I love us, we matter, our lives matter, black lives matter” (Garza, “#BlackLivesMatter with Alicia

Garza”). Garza’s friend and fellow organizer Patrisse Cullors put a hashtag in front of Garza’s final phrase, and the concise and affirming slogan spread from there (Garza, “#BlackLivesMatter with Alicia Garza”). “#blacklivesmatter” soon became a common refrain among those working towards racial justice, or those simply angered by the state of black lives and frustrated by being forced to reside inside a “racist house.” Fellow organizer Opal Tometi suggested that the three of them create an online platform surrounding the slogan and the world it envisioned. This platform was intended to be a way “for people to connect with each other online so they can actually do something offline, because we know liking, retweeting, and sharing is not building power, it’s liking, retweeting, and sharing” (Garza, “#BlackLivesMatter with Alicia Garza”). Thus, the #BlackLivesMatter movement was created out of the concurrent needs to be situated and free – the Facebook post that set things into motion was written by Garza in response to a harsh and discouraging reminder that, as our world stands, black lives do not matter. In moments like that it is particularly difficult to reject the ideology illustrated in Bell and Robinson’s aforementioned work, that the world is hopelessly racist and only capable of so much change. However, Garza was unwilling to accept this current state of things as a future reality, and committed herself to achieving the world she wanted to inhabit, regardless of the apparent impossibility of the task.

The BLM movement’s political philosophies and strategies all stem from the belief that freedom is possible, yet remain firmly situated in the reality of white supremacist heteropatriarchy (*#BlackLivesMatter*). In fact, BLM is situated in ways that are heavily informed by what it would mean to be free and what steps could be taken towards freedom in our current world. Toni Morrison describes this approach to getting free in “Home”:

What I am determined to do is to take what is articulated as an elusive race-free paradise and domesticate it. I am determined to concretize a literary [in this case

political] discourse that (outside of science fiction) resonates exclusively in the register of permanently unrealizable dream. It is a discourse that (unwittingly) allows racism an intellectual weight to which it has absolutely no claim. (8)

BLM assumes that the supposedly “unrealizable dream” of freedom is possible, and takes steps to concretize it through their approach to activism, thereby refusing to give so much “intellectual weight” to racism by regarding it as inevitable. The “Herstory” tab on BLM’s website, for example, was written by Garza and pushes back against white supremacist heteropatriarchy in several ways, each challenge to this system exhibiting how a free world could look different than this one. Garza begins by crediting herself, Opal, and Patrisse for starting the BLM movement, as well as thanking the “cultural workers, artists, designers, and techies [who] offered their labor and love to expand #BlackLivesMatter beyond a social media hashtag” and providing links to the aforementioned contributors’ works (*#BlackLivesMatter*). This action is then placed within the context of the theft of black queer women’s work, an operation of white supremacy that functions to further erase and marginalize this already heavily marginalized group by robbing them of agency over their intellectual property. As Garza discusses, after giving several examples of how BLM’s platform has been misappropriated, “when you design an event/campaign/et cetera based on the work of Black queer women, don’t invite them to participate in shaping it, but ask them to provide materials and ideas for next steps for said event, that’s racism in practice” (*#BlackLivesMatter*). By using the term “Herstory” instead of “History,” explicitly naming herself and the other queer Black women who created BLM as co-founders, and raising up the work of other marginalized participants, Garza demonstrates what a free world could look like while simultaneously indicting the social and political forces that inhibit that reality. This reflects Garza and the BLM movement’s commitment to “[converting] a

racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home”; within the house of white supremacy, BLM carves out a space that is “unapologetically black” and centers around particularly marginalized groups within that racial category, specifically queer, trans, dis- or differently-abled, and feminine-of-center people (*#BlackLivesMatter*).

Garza’s efforts to “domesticate” the idea of an “elusive race-free paradise” are illustrated through her affirmations of blackness, her centering of joy in organizing, and her valuing of community. The slogan “black lives matter” arose from her love for her people and her grief for their/her pain, and this practice of centering, affirming, and valuing black life at the core of her organizing work represents her efforts to design a racial home, where blackness is enunciated but race is not weaponized, within a racist house. Discussing the work of achieving racial specificity without lethal cling, Toni Morrison reflects, “If I had to live in a racial house, it was important, at the least, to rebuild it so that it was not a windowless prison into which I was forced, a thick-walled, impenetrable container from which no cry could be heard, but rather an open house, grounded, yet generous in its supply of windows and doors” (4). Garza’s work is grounded in her deep love for blackness and black people, and community support and the joy of her work serve as her doors and windows, allowing her to breathe in the racial home she is creating. Reflecting on the creation of BLM and on the divisiveness that some accuse the movement of perpetuating by focusing on race and on blackness specifically, Garza responds that “it’s actually OK... to celebrate what it means to be black, how we’ve survived and thrived through the worst conditions possible” (Smith). Garza’s admiration for black people’s ability to overcome motivates her to work towards a world where they no longer have to – she knows that this task will require frustrating and difficult work, but she has no doubt that her people will move forward in celebration, strength, and resistance until it is achieved.

The doors and windows of the racial home Garza constructs through her work, the things that allow her to breathe in the fight for black (and everyone else's) liberation, are her commitment to collective care and to the communities that she's a part of or that she creates. When asked about how she suggests people practice self-care when organizing, Garza challenged the idea that self-care should be necessary within a nurturing community: "I like collective care because it is about the spaces that we create that either help to rejuvenate us, help to keep us going for another day, or they deplete us even more. So self-care is possible inside of a community that cares" ("#BlackLivesMatter with Alicia Garza"). In the world that Garza is imagining into reality, activism is a collective practice that doesn't extract too much energy from individuals because their community holds them up and makes sure that they aren't spread too thin. This faith in the communities she surrounds herself with is what fuels Garza's work even when she feels overly "situated" in the injustices of our current world to the point that she feels that her efforts may be futile. She reflects that what "keeps her going" is "knowing that for every person that says [organizing people to get free is] not gonna work, there's thirty people in motion" ("#BlackLivesMatter with Alicia Garza). In contrast to the resigned pessimism of Bell and Robinson's work that asserts that freedom is necessary but doubts that freedom is possible, Garza inhabits and creates communities – such as BLM – that assert that freedom is an achievable goal yet the community members also support one another in the face of perpetual pain and disappointment. The doors and windows of Garza's racial home make sure that no one is forced into the shelter that she and BLM are building – in Garza's racial home, everyone gets what they need and gives what they can to and from the community, with affirmation for blackness and commitment to the collective freedom held at the center of this refuge from white supremacy. By creating this shelter within her work, Garza imagines into reality the world she

wishes to inhabit within the situated here and now. As Garza puts it, “We’re trying to figure out ways of building communities and so we can practice what a new world would look like if we had our way” (“#BlackLivesMatter with Alicia Garza”).

Garza and BLM’s work to create “an open house, grounded, yet generous in its supply of windows and doors” shows what is possible within the situated here and now, but at the center of their organizing is the goal of creating a future distinct from the unjust present that we inhabit so that they, and everyone else, may truly be free (Morrison 3-4). Morrison describes rebuilding a racial house “so that it was not a windowless prison into which I was forced” as the least that she must do to survive – at the most, she finds it “imperative... to transform this house completely” (4). This is what is at the core of BLM’s work, the goal of transforming the racial house into “...a place where race both matters and is rendered impotent; a place ‘already made for [black people], both snug and wide open...’” (9). On the genesis of the BLM movement, Garza reflects that “Patrisse, Opal, and myself began an organizing project that was intended to build a political home for black people in this country and around the world who were trying to reimagine what a more equitable, transformative world can look like, not just in theory but in practice” (“#BlackLivesMatter with Alicia Garza”). BLM fosters this political home by modeling what such a transformative world could look like through their philosophies and actions. For example, while one of BLM’s foundational goals is to extract accountability from the government and law enforcement for the murders of unarmed black people, its founders explicitly reject the idea that incarceration is justice (*#BlackLivesMatter*). They ask that the slogan “black lives matter” not be used to “celebrate the imprisonment of any individual,” even though many people who support the BLM movement see incarceration of police officers who murder unarmed black people as the main goal of the movement (*#BlackLivesMatter*). Discussing this contradiction, Garza says that

what's real is that sometimes for people to feel complete, they wanna see something happen. So, am I gonna tell Tamira Rice that she's wrong for wanting the police who killed her son to go to jail? No, I'ma work with her. I'ma listen to her. I'ma work to figure out, what are other ways that we can have accountability, what are other ways that wholeness can come? (“#BlackLivesMatter with Alicia Garza”)

BLM explores and suggests “other ways that wholeness can come” through the policy proposals they put forth with the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), “a collective of more than 50 organizations representing thousands of Black people from across the country” (*The Movement for Black Lives*). The M4BL released a platform comprised of several demands designed to help organizations and individuals that value black life move towards “a world in which the full humanity and dignity of all people is recognized” (*The Movement for Black Lives*). This platform includes such categories as “end the war on black people,” “reparations,” and “invest/divest,” each of which detail steps that must be taken if freedom is to be achieved that many view as ‘unrealistic,’ ‘ridiculous,’ or even a stunt to secure donations and grants (Richardson). Such steps include an end to capital punishment, money bail, the use of criminal history on job, housing, or other applications, and to “jails, detention centers, youth facilities, and prisons as we know them”; free access to higher education for all black people; a guaranteed minimum livable income for all black people; and divestment from fossil fuels and law enforcement (*The Movement for Black Lives*). Though the organizers of M4BL certainly realize that many see these demands as entirely unrealistic, they know that they cannot achieve freedom without mapping out what it could look like. While approaches like Robinson’s emphasize the necessity of asserting black humanity but hesitate to invest in freedom because it is seen as

impossible, approaches like BLM's center the necessity of freedom as paramount and work backwards from there, regardless of how they are perceived. As Garza explains, "in organizing, we begin to articulate our best vision of what is possible, and how we think we might get there" ("#BlackLivesMatter with Alicia Garza"). Thus the role of imagination is essential to Garza and BLM's work – they begin with their "best vision of what is possible," a completely transformed racial house, and move forward with strategies from there, instead of assessing what seems 'reasonable' given the world that we are situated in now. This approach to liberation is best encapsulated by Garza's plea for those who feel compelled to work towards freedom: "If you believed that freedom was possible in our lifetime, what would you do? How would you do it? Who would you do it with? And then I beg you, to do it" ("#BlackLivesMatter with Alicia Garza). Freedom will never be within reach if those who would try to secure it are convinced that this is impossible, generation after generation.

In a world consumed by white supremacy, where no one is exempt from breathing in its poisonous ideology every day of their lives, extracting that poison from the atmosphere can seem like an insurmountable challenge. Thus, to truly believe that freedom is possible, and to work towards that goal in meaningful ways while remaining situated within the current power dynamics and shortcomings of our world, is to rewrite race. Alicia Garza and the Black Lives Matter movement rewrite race through their deep investment in freedom and their centering of what is possible over what is present. Through the use of imagination and the affirmation of black people's worth, accomplishments, and struggles, Garza created an accessible and inclusive networking platform comprised of people who are situated but want to be free. She has been able to mobilize thousands of people who are "sick and tired of being sick and tired" by insisting that more is possible and that more is deserved. Thus, by basing her organizing strategies in the

inevitability rather than futility of achieving freedom, modeling what it means to be free and situated through her own work, and drawing strength from the communities she inhabits and helps to build, Alicia Garza rewrites race.

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