

Tracey L. Walters -“Black British Millennials’ New Strategy for Global Grassroots Activism”

Black British youth in the era of neoliberalism are facing decades of structural inequality accounting for high rates of unemployment, increasing rates of incarceration, and excessive police misconduct. In response to this marginalization, grassroots movements led by disaffected Millennials are fighting back against these longstanding problems. They are also speaking out against anti-black racism, climate change, and homophobia. Most importantly, their activism is interlinked to the global oppression of the black community in the U.S. and across the African diaspora.

Dr. King said, “Riots are the language of the unheard,” a statement that couldn’t be more appropriate to describe the frustration of black British youth who have taken to the streets to confront their oppressors through acts of civil disobedience. The Brixton riots of 1981 serve as an example of what happens when those who feel the weight of oppression and the lack of political power to change the system demand to be heard. Rioters are often mischaracterized as lawless criminals, but the riots in 1981, 1985, and 2011, that spread like wildfire in Brixton, Toxteth, Birmingham, Luton, and Leeds were not without cause. The 1981 riots were precipitated by the bombings of black homes and other acts of violence by the National Front, a white supremacist domestic terrorist organization who committed their crimes with impunity. Riots were also in response to the metropolitan police force’s aggressive “sus” laws (stop and search tactics) targeting black youth. Later, the 1985 and 2011 riots were instigated by unarmed black citizens being shot and killed by the police; in both cases, the deaths were defined as “lawful” killings and the police officers were exonerated. In each situation, riots resulted in days

of civil unrest, thousands of pounds of property damage, and injuries to civilians and law enforcement.

Rather than investigate the underlying factors which instigated the violent demonstrations, mainstream media and most politicians pathologized the demonstrators. Although the riots enabled aggrieved citizens to express their rage, they didn't produce institutional shifts addressing the root causes of the rebellions. Recognizing the need for an alternative strategy of resistance, a new generation participates in nonviolent civil disobedience in ways just as bold and disruptive as rioting.

Conditions for blacks in Britain are far from what they were in the 1980s. Today, Black Britons have made great strides in politics, business, and the legal and medical professions. Journalist Afua Hirsch reports, despite these gains, black people in Britain have the highest employment rate across all ethnic groups, black workers with degrees are on average, earning less than their white counterparts, and more likely to be stopped and searched by the police.

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/dec/02/revealed-the-stark-evidence-of-everyday-racial-bias-in-britain>. Thus, the Millennials find themselves fighting for the same reasons as the youth in the 1980s.

Today's activists are armed with technological resources which makes the job of organizing easier. Viral activism enables groups to use social media to promote their agendas to an international audience, to organize mass demonstrations beyond borders, and maintain control of their narratives. They can also engage in coalition building, and broadcast in real-time the activities of the movement. Another distinguishing feature of new grassroots movements is the inclusion of advocacy against sexism and LGBTQ rights, which have often been sidelined in black civil rights movements with a known history of sexism and homophobia.

BLMUK and organizations like The London Black Revolutionaries (LBR) have been two of the most impactful grassroots groups. Through their actions they have caught media attention, and made their concerns known beyond the U.K. The London Black Revolutionaries, founded in 2013, is a socialist organization of Blacks and Asians who describe themselves as “a self-determined working-class urban revolutionary organisation. Our principles and offensives range from anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic and anti-fascist campaigns and operations. We are a democratic-militant organisation that encourages self-leadership but strictly adheres to fighting oppression and exploitation in non-abstract forms”

<https://www.facebook.com/LondonBlackRevs/>. In addition to speaking out against excessive policing in black and minority communities, they have also advocated for the homeless and immigrant workers. BLMUK, established in 2016, is an offshoot of the American organization established three years earlier in response to the 2013 murder of Trayvon Martin who was killed by an auxiliary policeman, and the deaths of other black Americans killed by police. BLMUK organizes around the same core issues as the LBR. Both groups engage in direct action - disruptive behaviors (in public spaces) that are intended to bring awareness to what they perceive as human rights violations against marginalized groups.

LBR drew media attention after destroying hostile architecture designed to regulate public spaces and dissuade loitering, especially from the homeless. In protest of what they see as discriminatory anti-homeless practices, and to spotlight the larger issue of unaffordable housing and the lack of housing schemes for displaced persons, LBR poured concrete over the spikes of Tesco's window sills thereby, undermining the store's efforts to make these spaces uninhabitable for the homeless. [https://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/qbxvbp/the-new-wave-london-black-revolutionaries](https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/qbxvbp/the-new-wave-london-black-revolutionaries)

This effort was followed by the 2015 Reclaim Brixton demonstration to decry gentrification, evictions, and the rising cost of rent. In July 2016, along with the Malcolm X Movement, they called out Byron Burgers for working in tandem with immigration officials to arrest and detain immigrant workers, some of whom were undocumented. The raid resulted in the deportation of several restaurant employees. LBR and other groups demanded an apology from Byron, but the restaurant defended their actions and denied wrongdoing. In retaliation, LBR released live roaches and grasshoppers at two of the burger chain's fifty-six locations, disrupting dining and subsequently forcing the temporary closure of these two restaurants.

In contrast to the LBR, BLMUK, a multiracial coalition of activists, has taken a more traditional approach in its direct action strategies. In 2016, the group made headlines when they obstructed the tarmac at London Heathrow's airport for several hours creating major delays. The rally was two-fold: first to draw attention to police brutality (reportedly, they held a protest at Heathrow airport to acknowledge the death of Jimmy Mubenga who died from suffocation while in police custody on a deportation flight en route to Angola). The march was also about climate change. The group's Instagram page explained: "The climate crisis is a racist crisis--7/10 of the countries most affected by climate change are in sub saharan Africa."

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/06/climate-change-racist-crisis-london-city-airport-black-lives-matter>

The focus on global struggles for African descended people is a key feature for BLMUK and the LBR movement, and it's why both groups have stood in solidarity for police brutality in the U.S. and across the diaspora. In a unified front with black Americans, BLMUK and LBR each organized rallies in protest of the police officer who was acquitted in shooting and killing unarmed Missouri teenager Mike Brown. In November 2014, LBR drew a crowd of almost 800

protesters against Brown's death to demonstrate outside the American Embassy. On December 10th, 2014, LBR put together a die-in at the Westfield shopping center to protest the murder of African-American Eric Garner, a New York man choked to death by the police for selling cigarettes. (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/12/die-in-solidarity-black-people-police-brutality>).

BLMUK and LBR's alignment with the African American cause against police brutality has been questioned by Britons those who don't see the correlation between excessive policing in the U.S. and excessive policing in the U.K. BLMUK explains,

In the US, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Aiyana Jones, Trayvon Martin and countless others have lost their lives. Here, we have Mark Duggan, Sean Rigg, Christopher Alder, and many more. More than 1,500 people have died in the UK during or after police contact since 1990, and 147 of them were black, according to the charity Inquest...We were also protesting over the hundreds of other black people killed all over the world by police officers who often kill with impunity. For instance, in the UK, there has never been a successful prosecution of an officer for the death of a person under custody.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/12/die-in-solidarity-black-people-police-brutality>

In comparison to American grassroots organisations, LBR and BLMUK are disadvantaged. In America, organizations like BLM are able to sustain media coverage, they have investment from the community, and support from prominent politicians. While they haven't seen any real justice, they have been able to enact real change, such as requiring police officers to wear body cams to capture arrests and resolve complaints against officers. It remains

to be seen if LBR or BLMUK can be as impactful. In the article “Youth Struggles from Arab Spring to Black Lives Matter,” Alcinda Halwana argues, “Young people have been at the forefront of political change, however they have not yet been able to effect systemic change, while profound social transformation takes time, this generation is still wrestling with how to move beyond street protest and have a lasting impact on politics and governance.” Only time will tell if LBR or BLMUK will see the fruits of their labor.

Tracey L. Walters is an Associate Professor of Literature in the Department of Africana Studies at Stony Brook University where she also holds an affiliate appointment with the Department of English, and Women’s and Gender Studies. Dr. Walters has published numerous articles on Black women’s literature and three books: *African American Women and the Classicists Tradition: Black Women Writers from Wheatley to Morrison* (2007), an edited collection *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays* (2008), and an ebook *Zadie Smith* (2012). Forthcoming: *Not Your Mother’s Mammy: The Representation of the Domestic in Transatlantic Media* (Rutgers Press), and *Zadie Smith Decoded* (forthcoming).