‘Pressed to the Wall … But Fighting Back’: The Black Radical Tradition and the Legacy of the Chicago Race Riots 1919

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Recently, I watched the opening episode of the new HBO series “Watchmen.” Like millions of other viewers, I was pleasantly surprised to see that the episode began with the white terrorist assault on the community of Greenwood in Tulsa, Okla., popularly known as the Black Wall Street Massacre.

The Black Wall Street riot resulted in as many as 300 Black people killed and hundreds more injured and has left a critical mark on the Black popular memory in recent decades, which we will discuss later. The omnipresence of Black Wall Street in the Black imagination undoubtedly influenced its insertion into the debut episode.

The premier episode opened with a young Willis Reeves sitting in a Black movie theater watching a motion picture while his mother played the score on a piano. This fictional film featured a Black sheriff coming to the rescue of a frontier town and

recalled the cinematography of Oscar Micheaux, the father of Black Cinema, and his two early films, “The Homesteader” and “Within Our Gates,” the latter being a cultural response to D.W. Griffith’s “Birth of A Nation” and the Chicago Race Riot of 1919.

Willie’s film-going experience is abruptly ended by a white supremacist aerial assault. Immediately after Willie is transported out of town, the building he was in explodes from another bomb, killing his parents. The episode then moves to the present, where an unarmed Black police officer is shot by a white supremacist. In the following scenes, it is revealed that the hero of the television show, played by Regina King is, once again, a police officer.

I know what you are wondering. “I thought this article was about Chicago 1919? Why in the world is he talking about Tulsa 1921?” For this reason, let’s turn to this popular social media meme.

This widely distributed meme displays the way the period of racial violence and resistance has been largely retained as part of the Black capitalist imagination. This sort of memory obscures the way that the accumulation of Black wealth was the precise purpose for the colonial violence African people in the United State have endured.

Instead, the lesson of Black Wall Street has become that “the color of Black Power is green.” Neither “Watchmen,” this meme, nor the popular documentary series “Hidden Colors” makes mention of the African Blood Brotherhood, the revolutionary nationalist organization led by Black Communist Cyril Briggs, which took up arms and defended Greenwood. Black capitalist histories have instead erased the legacy of New Negro-era Black radicalism.

This article seeks to recover the history of interwar Black Radicalism’s response to

white terror. I aim to make three points:

1. Cultural workers played a vital role in leading the call for armed self-defense and revolution;
2. This was an internationalist struggle where African descended people clearly understood the white terror in the U.S. as a form of colonial violence, they saw their local and national struggles as tied to the international revolutions and;
3. This legacy still informs the vanguard of African global revolution in the 21st century.

Ida B. Wells recognized lynchings as colonial violence

Let's go back a little further, and then I promise we will move forward in time. In March 1892, three friends of Ida B. Wells–Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Henry Stewart–were killed as a part of the People's Grocery lynching. Co-owners of the People's Grocery, Moss, McDowell and Stewart were murdered at the moment that their business began to rival a local white grocery store.

Wells credits this event for the radical shift in how she viewed lynchings. Before, she admits, she believed them to be excessive acts against criminals. Yet, as Megan Ming Francis notes, Wells discovered that the cause of lynchings is economic and not criminal. Unfortunately, when recounting the history of lynchings and racial violence, it is assumed that allegations of sexual assault were the leading cause. THEY WERE NOT. Ignoring this reality limits not only our analysis but our political practice.

Racial violence in the United States was a form of colonial violence. The purpose was to reinforce the unevenly structured relations between white people and Black people in the United States. Ida B. Wells, Marcus Garvey, Claude McKay and subsequent activists recognized this and it became the factor for Black international

formation. In response to the death of her friends, Ida B. Wells noted that it was “a scene of shocking savagery that would have disgraced the Congo.”

Migration of the African working class

Black Internationalism of the early 20th century was the product of the contradictions of global Black migration. Before he was shot to death, Thomas Moss reportedly said: “Tell my people to go West — there is no justice for them here.”

Ida B. Wells moved to Chicago, Ill. Jim Crow’s racial terror is one push factor that overdetermined the rural to urban migration of millions of African Americans known as the Great Migration. Yet, Black migrants were met with more white terrorism.

Illinois was home to three of the largest destinations–Springfield, East Saint Louis and Chicago–in the Red Summer of 1919, a term dubbed by James Weldon Johnson, an NAACP leader at the time. Two years earlier, the U.S. had been rocked with a series of race riots, including the one in East Saint Louis. W.E.B. Du Bois and Johnson responded by organizing a silent march in protest.

Yet, two years later, African Americans did not respond passively to racial violence. In 1919, over forty cities in the U.S. experienced race riots and as many as 1,000 people were killed. Arguably the worst, however, was in Chicago between July 27th and Aug. 3rd.

However, the Red Summer represented a turning point. While white violence claimed the lives of 23 Black Chicagoans, responding in armed self-defense, 15 whites were killed. Similarly, just weeks earlier in Longview, Texas, Black residents used their rifles in self-defense. This prompted the publication of “If We Must Die,” which became an anthem of Black resistance. Not surprisingly, however, it was not originally published in a Black organ but instead in a new socialist publication, *The Liberator*, edging towards the political shifts in Black radical politics:

IF WE MUST DIE

IF we must die—let it not be like hogs

Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,

While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,

Making their mock at our accursed lot.

If we must die—oh, let us nobly die,

So that our precious blood may not be shed

In vain; then even the monsters we defy

Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!

Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;

Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave,

And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!

What though before us lies the open grave?

Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,

Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

— Claude McKay (1919)

Claude McKay and the African Blood Brotherhood

Let us compare McKay's poem to another piece of cultural work produced that year: Oscar Micheaux's "Within Our Gates." Also, a response to the Red Summer, Micheaux's film, while groundbreaking, represented the respectability politics and pigmentocracy of the mainstream civil rights activists.

"If We Must Die" helped prompt the organization of the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) in September 1919. This was a period of global revolutionary struggle. McKay and others were inspired by the groundswell of anticolonial struggles amongst African people around the world as well as the Bolshevik Revolution, and even the Irish Revolution. Even Marcus Garvey, who spoke disparagingly of white American socialists, spoke favorably of Lenin, the Bolsheviks and he supported Irish struggles. However, it is important to note that the ABB and McKay were inspired by the Communist International and the Bolsheviks, but not organized by them. They organized independently.

McKay represented another Black migration, the movement of African and Caribbean migrants from the periphery of the Western empire to its metropolitan centers. In 1912, McKay immigrated to the United States from Jamaica to attend Tuskegee Institute but was quickly shocked by the white power he encountered.

As Winston James argues in "Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicals in Early Twentieth-Century America," these confrontations with American racial capitalism had a jolting impact on Caribbean migrants for whom class and other privileges eroded. For in the United States, "race became the modality through which class was lived." Immigration of African and Caribbean people to the U.S. in the early 20th century generated cross identification within the African diaspora that caused a multidirectional shift in identity and politics.

McKay, Cyril Briggs, Grace Campbell, Otto Huiswood and the leadership of the ABB developed the Universal Negro Improvement Association into a vanguard

organization in the Black Freedom struggle. Sympathetic with the mass movement and respectful of the leadership of Marcus Garvey and the UNIA, they had all embraced socialism, in its different forms. Sympathetic with the struggles of the global working class, they also gained inspiration from the anticolonial struggles and socialist revolutions of the age. The ABB's internationalism is captured in Briggs's 1920 statement, "The cause of freedom, whether in Asia or Ireland or Africa, is our cause."

The ABB also forged unity between African American and Afro-Caribbean migrants. As Minkah Makalani notes in his seminal text on Black internationalism "In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939":

"The ABB's membership consisted largely of workers — skilled laborers in Chicago; coal miners in West Virginia; World War I Veterans in Tulsa, Oklahoma; Anglo-Caribbean migrant laborers in the Domincan Republic and Panama."

At its peak, the ABB had 8,000 members. This paled in comparison to the millions in the ranks of the UNIA. Fashioned as "revolutionary secret order," the ABB sought to raise the consciousness of the global African working class through what later became known as programmatic influence.

In 1921, the ABB gained a surge in popularity as reports of their armed defense of Tulsa spread. The following year, the ABB merged with the Communist Party. Vladimir Lenin had already stressed the importance of solidarity with anticolonial struggles in Africa and Asia.

Yet, it is people like McKay and Huiswood who not only sharpened the Communist International's position on the Negro Question: that is, the right to self-determination for the Black working class in the United States and Africa. The end

result was, in fact, a synthesis of communist and Garveyist thought at the Sixth Comintern in 1928 with the production of the Black Belt Thesis on the U.S. and the Native Republic Thesis on South Africa, which demanded Black independence in the U.S. and national leadership in South Africa.

The one downfall, however, is that the ABB and the UNIA never found complete unity. The conflict between the ABB and the UNIA was hastened by government agitation — the first Black agents of the then Bureau of Investigation (now FBI) were hired to infiltrate and bring down both movements.

However, the ABB suffered from its own failure to accept the will of the people. The African masses had chosen Garvey and the UNIA. As many argue, in the United States the movement would have been much stronger if the ABB leadership had made a stauncher commitment to principled engagement from within as members of the UNIA. In South Africa, far away from the center of conflict in New York, activists such as James La Guma synthesized Garveyism and Socialism — it would not be until the 1960s that these efforts would be reignited.

The Hip Hop Generation

As I have tried to show in my discussion of McKay's response to the Red Summer, cultural work and cultural workers were central to Black radical formation. Cultural workers have the ability to move us beyond contemporary crises and enable the masses to imagine a new world beyond oppression — historian Robin Kelley refers to these radical productions as freedom dreams.

Much of the contemporary freedom dreaming has been devoid of meaningful Black internationalism and calls to arms. Instead, appeals to the American nation-state and calls for nonviolent direct action have predominated.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the end of apartheid, the creation of NAFTA

and the creation of Operation Gatekeeper. Defined by a rise in neoliberal policy and cultural production, this period has been defined by an increased transnational movement of capital but a fracturing of Black international unity.

We must remember that 1994 was also the year of the Rwandan Genocide and the U.S. invasion of Haiti. Confronted with images (1) a tendency of reformist activists would join with the Democratic Party or, at the least, further engage the arena of electoral politics; (2) a new generation of cultural nationalism would emerge. Far more intersectional than its predecessors, this tendency would be just as biologically determined as earlier forms of cultural nationalism. If not more turmoil throughout the African diaspora, the last 25 years have consisted of crosscurrents of disidentification. At no place is this sharper than at many college campuses. Yet this tide has begun to recede. And, once again, it is the product of struggle and cultural production.

Too often the activism in the era of Black Lives Matter has targeted local, state and national reforms as organizational goals — and even worse, mere demands to make white politicians "say black lives matter" became the terrain of struggle. We saw this fatal contradiction during the 2016 election season.

Following a 2015 interaction between BLM activists and Hillary Clinton, I proposed that three dimensions would emerge from this age of Black radicalism:

- a tendency of reformist activists would join with the Democratic Party or, at the least, further engage the arena of electoral politics;
- a new generation of cultural nationalism would emerge. Far more intersectional than its predecessors, this tendency would be just as biologically determined as earlier forms of cultural nationalism, if not more; and
- revolutionary socialist tendencies would inevitably spread.

Recent studies show that the masses of youth are embracing socialism. This turn towards socialism has been matched with calls for armed self-defense. Chants such as “Fist Up! Fight Back!” and “Black Power Matters” guide the masses at demonstrations. As well, groups such as the Huey P. Newton Gun Club and Guerilla Maneframe have sought to train the masses of the African Working Class. This is the true legacy of 1919 — socialism and self-defense.