



Spring 2015

Philly Coalition for REAL Justice: Constructing a Collective Identity Out of Many for Black Liberation

Emanuel Martinez
University of Pennsylvania

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/anthro_seniortheses

 Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Martinez, Emanuel, "Philly Coalition for REAL Justice: Constructing a Collective Identity Out of Many for Black Liberation" (2015). *Anthropology Senior Theses*. Paper 175.

Philly Coalition for REAL Justice: Constructing a Collective Identity Out of Many for Black Liberation

Abstract

This paper focuses on archiving the development of the Coalition for Racial Economic and Legal (REAL) Justice; a key piece of organizing in Philadelphia, PA against police brutality, and as part of the larger Black Lives Matter Movement. After which theorizing will be done to engage the processes that take place when collective identity and individual identity intersect and contribute to the creation of an organizing space. The observations outlined below are informed by my thorough involvement with the coalition since its establishment and my close following of grassroots organizers in Ferguson and in different cities of the U.S.

Disciplines

Anthropology

Philly Coalition for REAL Justice:
Constructing a Collective Identity Out of Many for Black Liberation

By

Emanuel Martinez

In

Anthropology

Submitted to the
Department of Anthropology
University of Pennsylvania

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Kathleen Hall

2015

“Rage is the manifestation of my self-love.”
- Resident of Philadelphia, November 4, 2014

Abstract

This paper focuses on archiving the development of the Coalition for Racial Economic and Legal (REAL) Justice; a key piece of organizing in Philadelphia, PA against police brutality, and as part of the larger Black Lives Matter Movement. After which theorizing will be done to engage the processes that take place when collective identity and individual identity intersect and contribute to the creation of an organizing space. The observations outlined below are informed by my thorough involvement with the coalition since its establishment and my close following of grassroots organizers in Ferguson and in different cities of the U.S.

From #FergusontoPhilly:

Laying Down the Ground Work in Philadelphia for People to Come Together

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown an 18-year-old African American male was fatally shot by Darrin Wilson a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. This case sparked an organized social movement in Ferguson, MO, across the United States, and to a lesser extent in different places across the world that criticized police brutality in the United States and across the globe and how it disproportionately targets people of color, but especially black individuals.¹ As a result, there have been hundreds of protests and demonstration starting in Ferguson, MO.² The weekend of October 10 – 13, 2014 organizers in Ferguson put out a national call for what would become known as the ‘Weekend of Resistance.’

Meanwhile, in Philadelphia demonstrations, protests, and community meetings relating to police brutality were taking place before the Ferguson incident occurred. After the fact, more student-led and community-led groups started emerging along with pre-existing groups that began to devote their attention and organizing efforts more and more to this issue. People Utilizing Real Power (PURP) had hosted a “Rally Against Police Brutality” on November 4, 2013. This is a community-oriented group led by college-aged

¹ Reference the Department of Justice reports on police involved shooting for the city of Ferguson and Philadelphia. They demonstrate the statistical evidence of the racial tensions between the police force and the black community in each respective city. Fachner, G., & Carter, S. (2015); *Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department*. (2015, March 4).

² What we have come to know as the “Black Lives Matter” Movement was created by three queer black women Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi in response to the officer involved shooting of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida on February 26, 2012. This has laid down the groundwork for the strong and clear language and narrative that has come to define the current Black Lives Matter Movement post-Ferguson incident. Garza, A (2014, December 6).

students. No doubt, they had developed a critical analysis of police brutality in Philadelphia independently from actions in Ferguson. On August 19, 2014, PURP held a protest “Fight Back for Ferguson – Justice for Mike Brown” in West Philadelphia that lasted over two hours. Kashara White, a member of PURP stated, “We got to speak to a lot of people and get to hear what the community was feeling and where they understood themselves to be in this and how we can move forward.”³

The International Action Center/Worker’s World Party chapter in Philadelphia, which largely focuses on workers’ rights and maintains relationships with unions in the city, started to incorporate Ferguson and police brutality into their discussion-centered event “Next Steps in the Struggle Against War and Racism: A Roundtable Discussion” on September 30, 2014. They continued to incorporate the language of these topics into their discussion-driven event “Building the Struggle Against War and Racism: Organizing Meeting” on October 7, 2014. On November 4, 2014 a forum for participants in the October 10-13 national convergence in St Louis and Ferguson was convened for their experience to be shared.⁴ With their “Planning Meeting for a Response to Ferguson, MO Grand Jury Ruling” event on November 11, 2014 their positionality continued to shift and became explicit and exclusively focused on police brutality rather than featuring it along with other work they were in solidarity with.

The Trayvon Martin Organizing Committee, which had already been organizing in Philadelphia around Martin’s case of police brutality in Florida in 2012, began to

³ *Rally Held In Philadelphia To Show Support For Ferguson, Missouri* (2014, August 19).

⁴ At this meeting another Penn student and myself reported back on our experience during the “Weekend of Resistance” along with other community members who had been to Ferguson since August.

respond to action in Ferguson by hosting “#HandsUp #TurnUp for Ferguson in Philly” on August 20, 2014 in Love Park on the 1500 block of JFK Boulevard. This organization is mainly composed of young people in their mid-20s and up who are allies to the movement. In Defense of Black Bodies, which is headed by early-20-year-olds natives of Philadelphia, began generating attention through social media in September thanks to their transformation of the ALS ice bucket challenge. They released a video through YouTube entitled “Blood Bucket Challenge” as a symbolic gesture to charge the U.S. as a nation with the genocide of black people.⁵ On Friday October 3, 2014 Students Organizing for Unity and Liberation (SOUL), started by two black women two years prior at the University of Pennsylvania, began doing its demonstrations #FergusonFridays with the intention of ensuring that the decreasing coverage of Ferguson at the moment was challenged.

On November 24, 2014 around 8pm the grand jury that was reviewing the Darrin Wilson case decided to not indict him with charges associated with killing Michael Brown. In the wake of this impending news, organizers in Ferguson put out a national call for cities across the U.S. to protest immediately once the decision was made public. Many of the aforementioned groups spontaneously converged at City Hall that night and protested throughout different parts of the city past midnight. On November 25, 2014, PURP held “We Stand with Ferguson: the Day After the Grand Jury Decision” at 4:00PM at Cecil B. Moore Ave and Broad St, in North Philadelphia. Along with PURP, the International Action Center/ Worker’s World Party answered the national call to protest the grand jury decision. “City Hall Response to Ferguson” began at Broad

⁵ *In Defense of Black Bodies-Blood Bucket Challenge*, (2014, September 10).

St and Market Ave, in Center City, at 3:00PM and later converged with PURP's rally. Meanwhile, SOUL held "SOUL Demonstration: No Indictment Means Slap in the Face" on UPenn's campus. During that day, members of the student organization painted a bloody handprint on the face of more than a hundred students to articulate a collective reaction to the non-indictment. After which, at 2PM dozens of Penn students convened outside of the Du Bois College House and marched through Locust Walk all the way to City Hall to join the city wide protest.⁶

Initial Formation of Town Hall Meeting Format

This is the context under which the "Philly Town Hall Meeting on Ferguson Grand Jury Injustice," convened on December 2, 2014, in Calvary Church, on 48th St and Baltimore Ave, in West Philadelphia.⁷ After which, it was articulated as the "Nth Ferguson to Philly Town Hall Meeting." Other social movement organizations (SMO) not previously mentioned were getting involved in the movement up until the non-indictment. For the purpose of this coalition to build power, Morris (1984) notes that external groups and resources are crucial for the types of collective actions that can take place. He also distinguishes the role of a "social movement centers" that act as point of connection between external groups (p. 745-746). In this way, the town hall meetings

⁶ Archival evidence for the aforementioned events that took place from August to late November comes from my personal notes. These events are also documented through social media, especially Facebook. Additionally, this list of organizations and events are not exhaustive in the scope of what took place during this period in Philadelphia community to address police brutality. I have highlighted because they have been some of the most significant organized actors in the Black Lives Matter Movement in the city.

⁷ Piette, J, (2014, December 2).

became a space for information to be exchange of different actions and events taking place around the city that focused on empowering black voices.

The first “Philly to Ferguson Town Hall Meeting” provided the first unified space for the individuals involved in all of the aforementioned different groups to come together. Several other groups also joined the meeting including:

- Supporters and organizers around MOVE: a black liberation group founded by John Africa in 1972 and which suffered a government sanctioned bombing of its house located on the 6200 block of Osage Ave in West Philadelphia in 1985.⁸
- Up Against the Law Legal Collective: had been educating activists and organizers in different movements in Philadelphia over the last few years about their rights when interacting with law enforcement officials.
- The Philadelphia Student Union (PSU): composed of high school students, had been organizing towards fighting the education crisis in the city.
- Philadelphians Organized to Witness, Empower, & Rebuild (POWER): a strong network that links several of the religious congregations in the city, had been organizing around their own campaigns.
- Resource Generation: a national network of wealthy young people who are trying to use the class privilege to uplift and support social justice work.
- Action Against Black Genocide – direct action oriented group in North Philly that emerged around the same time as the town hall meetings.

⁸ Current members and supporters have rallied support around political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal who was convicted for allegedly killing a police officer; *MOVE 9*, (2015).

- Philly Child Collective: had been providing free childcare for grassroots organizers since 2008.
- #TintedJustice: “a Philadelphia-based queer-trans-people-of-color collective of organizers, artists, and cultural workers...that makes street art portraits that centers women, queer and trans folks, and local lives lost due to racist and militarized state violence.”⁹
- Food Not Bombs – West Philly: Has been distributing free groceries to people in the neighborhood every Friday.

There are other SMOs and non-profits that were represented at these town hall meetings. However, I have focused on the aforementioned list because of the growing role they began to play as the town hall meetings transitioned into and articulated itself as a coalition.

Negotiating Collective and Individual Identities in Organizing Spaces

Organizing against police brutality in Philadelphia and across the country has focused on the black community, because they have been the most affected by the institutional racism it symbolizes. This initial criticism of anti-blackness in the U.S. has extended the discourse into all areas of life for black communities. From which, the broader Black Lives Matter Movement and discourse has emerged. Organizers and participants have by enlarge been able to manage the narrative of the movement among themselves and with the communities they are continuing to reach out to. Predominantly,

⁹ #TintedJustice, (2014).

there has been an incredible synchronicity in articulating the relationship of the black experience in the U.S. to institutional racism by independent offshoots across different locations. Solidarity actions have also taken place in other parts of the world.¹⁰

Over the evolution of the Black Lives Matter Movement there has been a constant renegotiation of the external representation and focus of the movement. During the third Town Hall Meeting, on January 6, 2015, a decision was taken to rearticulate the space as the Philly Coalition for Racial Economic and Legal (REAL) Justice as well as the establishment of a steering committee. Within the Philly Coalition for REAL Justice, as an organizing space, there has been constant conversations about representation, voice, inclusivity, leadership, and what the combinations of different identities manifested in different individuals means for how they come to occupy and contribute to these spaces. Though, many voices have been represented, from my intimate interactions with various of the aforementioned groups in Philadelphia, I noticed that a significant amount of the labor and rhetoric of the growing movement locally came from black women and black queer individuals. However, there was an initial tendency for men and generally older individuals to overpower those voices in public events and through mainstream media. Additionally, at the national level headlines have until this day predominantly focused on cases of police brutality against black heterosexual men.

Due to the nature and focus of the movement there was an almost automatic agreement that black voices should be leading and envisioning how the movement should unfold, and should also be at the front lines of the representation of the movement externally. To this end, Valocchi (2001) talks about the flexibility of collective identity of

¹⁰ Alfred, C, (2014, August 8); Jain, M, (2014, December 9).

social movements and how this is institutionalized through a group's organizational structure. "Depending on the flexibility of that structure, this change is either taken to the center of the existing movement, thus expanding or altering the movement's collective identity, or it is rejected, thus propelling individual participants to split from the existing movement" (p. 450). With this in mind, any groups on the peripheries whose internal involvement and external representation did not primarily prioritize all black voices did not receive substantial support, did not carry the same level of respect, and eventually either fizzled out or folded into other groups that were doing that type of work. One of the challenges that the coalition faced was the role that allies played.

By talking to different types of people who came to the town hall meetings I started to get exposed to the rich culture of social justice work that takes place in Philadelphia. This means that there are several SMOs and affinity groups that co-exist within the city. Specifically, there is a large group of college-aged students and young professionals, mostly white, who are social justice inclined and who do not have any strong ties or commitments to any SMOs. This presented a challenge for the coalition from the beginning. From December up until February there was an over-representation of white people who were coming to these town hall meetings.

The individual identities in the town hall space were negotiated by the automatic determination that the collective identity of the coalition was to be pro-black, black led, foremost for black people in Philadelphia. Here, Stryker (2007) and Lee's (2008) discussion of identity theory should help us begin to deconstruct these interactions. According to them, identity theory recognizes that within an individual there are multiple identities. An individual's internal prioritization of these identities determines the roles

that said individual plays in the spaces that they decide to participate in. Identity theory “is particularly useful for explaining variations in social movement participation” (p. 227; p. 38-39). The following paragraphs will provide an introductory description of several individuals involved in the coalition as I have come to know them and understand their identities. This context will help us understand different archetypes of individual identities, how they reinforce or loosen ties to the space, and how they all result in a collective identity for the coalition.

Gabe is a heterosexual black male in his mid-thirties who is a long time resident of Philadelphia, and native of Brooklyn, NY. He is the Co-Director of the Philadelphia Sankofa Community Empowerment. He also works in the Juvenile Justice Center and interacts with youth who have been incarcerated. Gabe has stated that, “when it comes to these issues it turns the political into the personal.”¹¹ His professional involvements, his demeanor and rhetoric emphasize his personal connection to shootings of black individuals in Philadelphia and his commitment to being a role model for young black men.

Joe and Betsey are a white couple in their sixties who moved to Philadelphia decades ago. Joe has been working in the post office and Betsey has worked as a secretary. They are both currently closely connected to and do work with the International Center and the Worker’s World Party in Philadelphia. They have been politically active since they were in college. In one of our conversations, Betsey stated that she was one of few women to be vocal during her college years during which time men dominated organizing spaces. They are life-long activists.

¹¹ Town Hall Meeting April 7, 2015

Morgan and Megan are two black sisters in their late early thirties who were born and raised in Philadelphia. Morgan is a queer woman that works in the restaurant industry and whose professional expertise comes in the form of being a chef. She has previous experience organizing with restaurant workers through Restaurant Opportunities Center – Philly Chapter. She has a thorough understanding of the racialized experiences of people of color who work in the restaurant industry. Megan is a social studies teacher who works in a Philadelphia charter school. She has been adamant and proactive about teaching her students about black history and culture that is empowering and builds political consciousness. They are part of the founders of Action Against Black Genocide.

Brendan is a white male in his early 20s, who in the last year has identified as queer. He grew up in a rural part of Pennsylvania close to Philadelphia. He grew up in an all white family. However, seven years ago his father remarried and now he has a black stepmother, two black sisters and brother. He has previous experience working with the Student Labor Action Project (SLAP) on unionizing several dining halls on campus at UPenn, where he is an undergraduate student graduating this spring. During the spring of 2014 he spent time in Brazil learning about the tactics of people’s grassroots land movement there. Academically, he has focused on deconstructing institutional power and systematic oppression.

I, Maní, am brown and queer, was born in Mexico, brought to the U.S. at a young age, and was undocumented until three years ago. I was homeless while going to a predominantly black-attended community college. I am currently a transfer student at UPenn and became active with SLAP about a year and a half ago and became involved with SOUL about a month and a half before the coalition started having meetings, and

after coming back from Ferguson. I developed a racial analysis through my academic focus on the colonial and modern experience of black and indigenous people in Latin America. Until, being involved with Penn for Immigrant Rights (PIR), SLAP, later SOUL, and then the coalition, I had only been involved in immigrant rights movements in New Jersey as a non-organizing participant.

I chose the aforementioned individuals because in one way or another the interjections of their identities are instructive to think about the process through which the coalition was formed. Everyone listed above except Brandon actively participate in the steering committee. The steering committee is a fluid group of about 15 individuals that have taken up different leadership roles and labor to further the cohesion of the coalition. Gabe, Betsey and Joe were part of the initial group of people that facilitated the first town hall meeting. From my observations, Gabe is not an individual that seeks attention, he listens attentively to what everyone else has to say, and is very thoughtful but careful with the things he says. People in the coalition have a high level of respect and appreciation for him, as do I. His attendance and commitment to the coalition seems to be an important priority to him. Gabe is also proactive about making the spaces that he is a part of inclusive and empowering for voices that are traditionally silenced or overlooked. This means encouraging especially younger black women and men steer conversations and objectives. Joe has been proactive about providing literature for protests and outreach. He also dedicates a lot of time to provide photography for the coalition and related events. Betsey does a lot of logistical labor to set up for the town hall meetings as well as manages the emerging finances of the coalition. Both Betsey and

Joe are always careful of the way they occupy the space and try to make sure that their presence is not dominating.

As an example of the white college-aged/ young professional allies, Brendan is a particular interesting identity to try to deconstruct in order consider the formation of the coalition. His current family background, what he is interested in academically, and the type of organizing that he has been a part of has made him critical to an extent of the role that he plays in being in solidarity with movements of people of color. Though, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which individuals' whiteness impact the organizing spaces of people of color. Also, many of the white individuals that have come to spaces that are organizing to empower and uplift black voices have often lacked a self-awareness of how they may be dominating these spaces in ways that weren't meant for them to do so.

Part of the structure of the coalition was this experimentation with committees: demands, action, healing, education, legal, fundraising, and media/outreach. As a result, from December to February especially, there were several offshoot meetings by these separate committees. One of the most active committees was the action committee. Due to the nature of its mission, the action committee attracted a lot of the younger people who were coming to the coalition meetings. Unintentionally, a white male rose up as the facilitator of the committee. He did not dominate the space and the facilitators of the larger coalition were comfortable with his involvement. However, as time progressed towards the first coalition-wide coordinated action on February 21, 2015 there were more and more white individuals that were coming to these smaller meetings than black individuals. Conflated with that was this unclear expectation for how white allies should

act and what they should contribute. The broader rhetoric was clear that the town hall meetings were to be led by black voices. However, in practice the group culture that developed in the space was not as clear. While focusing on black voices, facilitators of coalition meetings, and committees were intentional about allowing everyone's voices to be heard.

Another aspect of this issue is how being white college students and young professionals allows for a lot of these individuals to be part of these organizing spaces. They have the social capital in the form of free time to show up. On the other hand, the young men and women that may be the most affected by police brutality in Philadelphia may have a lot more responsibilities and less time to contribute. At the same time, the presence of the students in these spaces is contingent upon their commitments at school. These individuals tend to show up when the hype is high and it is easy for them to insert themselves without doing a lot of the labor that comes with organizing these town hall meetings and the many protests that have come before them and after. In the case of the coalition, these individuals were slowly and unintentionally pushed out because it wasn't a space that was at the center of the identities they prioritized. Brendan for example, though deeply appreciative of the work the coalition was doing, stopped coming to the coalition meetings to focus on his course load in the spring, as well as prioritize other activities that were connected to his identity as a student.

Throughout the last few months many people have come and gone and contributed to building to the coalition. However, many of those who have remained active, especially in the steering committee, are residents of Philadelphia because their identity is deeply tied to the work that the coalition is trying to do. Two of these

individuals are Morgan and Megan. They have always been critical of pushing the public representation of the coalition to mirror the internal labor and energy that comes from black youth, especially women, queer-identifying individuals, trans-identified individuals, and people with disabilities. Monitoring by them and others to ensure that the town hall meeting space is safe and empowering for these voices has had an important impact on the collective identity that everyone agrees on once they join the space and the group culture that has developed.

For me it has been incredibly important to be part of this space to show my solidarity as brown-passing person with a Latin American background. I articulate my displacement and state sanctioned illegality as a form of political violence. Furthermore, I recognize how the same industrial prison complex that disproportionately incarcerates black individuals in this country also incarcerates brown individuals. It also takes excessive force upon immigrants who are placed in detention centers and often stripped of their rights in these prisons because of their illegality. Separately from that, I recognize the internalized racism and denial of blackness in our identities that Latin@s and Latin Americans face when examining issues of systemic racism. I recognize my privilege as a student at UPenn and have worked towards humbling it to amplify the black voices that are part of the coalition and all other groups that support the Black Lives Matter Movement. Finally, by being involved in this work I have recognized a level of decolonizing discourse that I have not found elsewhere, especially in the Latin@ community. This has helped me heal from the internalized racism and xenophobia that I have experienced in the U.S.

From my understanding and involvement, the collective identity that has been developed through the Coalition for REAL Justice has been a genuine desire to uplift black voices. A mother of a police victim in Philadelphia, involved in the coalition, has said clearly, “None of us will ever be free until we all are free.”¹² This is the sentiment that permeates the group culture that the coalition is trying to build. The different individuals discussed above along with many others with significant commitments to the coalition have chosen to prioritize the identities that tie them to this organization. For those that are black it is a space for them to reaffirm their existence, their voice, and their self-determination. For the rest of us, it is a moment to listen, to learn, to amplify the black voices in the space, to respect the way we occupy that space, to be meditative and grateful for being allowed to share a space that ultimately is not meant for us, to stop being complicit in systemic racism, and to build together against white supremacy.

¹² February 21, 2015 at protest for Brandon Tate Brown a victim of police brutality in Philadelphia.

References

- #*TintedJustice*. (2014). Retrieved May 15, 2015, from <http://tintedjustice.tumblr.com/>
- Valocchi, S. (2001). *Individual Identities, Collective Identities, and Organizational Structure: The Relationship of the Political Left and Gay Liberation in the United States*. *Sociological Perspectives*, 44(4), 445-467. Retrieved May 15, 2015, from JSTOR.
- Alfred, C. (2014, August 8). *Protesters Say Ferguson Feels Like Gaza, Palestinians Tweet Back Advice*. Retrieved May 15, 2015, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/14/ferguson-gaza_n_5679923.html
- Fachner, G., & Carter, S. (2015). *An Assessment of Deadly Force in the Philadelphia Police Department*. Collaborative Reform Initiative. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.
- Garza, A. (2014, December 6). *A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement*. Retrieved May 15, 2015, from <http://blacklivesmatter.com/a-herstory-of-the-blacklivesmatter-movement/>
- In Defense of Black Bodies-Blood Bucket Challenge*. (2014, September 10). Retrieved May 15, 2015, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIyAcjKnbWY>
- Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department*. (2015, March 4). Retrieved May 15, 2015, from http://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson_police_department_report.pdf
- Jain, M. (2014, December 9). *Photos: Delhi Students Protest Ferguson Killing and Atrocities by Indian State*. Retrieved May 15, 2015, from <http://scroll.in/article/693906/photos-by-protesting-ferguson-killing-delhi-students-say-they-opposed-atrocities-of-indian-state>
- Lee, C. (2008). *Collective Identity, Individual Identity and Social Movements: The Right-of-Abode Seekers in Hong Kong*. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 17(1), 33-60. Retrieved May 15, 2015, from SAGE.
- MOVE 9*. (2015). Retrieved May 15, 2015, from <http://onamove.com/move-9>.
- Morris, A. (1981). *Black Southern Student Sit-in Movement: An Analysis of Internal Organization*. *American Sociological Review*, 46(6), 744-767. Retrieved May 15, 2015, from JSTOR.

Piette, J. (2014, December 2). *Philly Ferguson Town Hall Meeting*. Retrieved May 15, 2015, from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/109799466@N06/sets/72157647250959964/>

Rally Held In Philadelphia To Show Support For Ferguson, Missouri. (2014, August 19). Retrieved May 15, 2015, from <http://philadelphia.cbslocal.com/2014/08/19/rally-held-in-philadelphia-to-show-support-for-ferguson-missouri/>

Valocchi, S. (2001). *Individual Identities, Collective Identities, and Organizational Structure: The Relationship of the Political Left and Gay Liberation in the United States*. *Sociological Perspectives*, 44(4), 445-467. Retrieved May 15, 2015, from JSTOR.