"Not Just What We Dismantle But Also What We Hope to Build": Alicia Garza on Black Lives Matter and Digital Activism

Alicia Garza is a writer, activist, and organizer around issues including the intersections between race and labour, the environment, and violence, particularly against trans and gender nonconforming people of colour, and is currently the Special Projects Director at the National Domestic Workers Alliance. In 2013, alongside Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors, she co-founded Black Lives Matter, an international activist network with regional chapters.

Clare Mulcahy (interviewer) is a recent graduate of the English and Film Studies doctoral program at University of Alberta, and is a full-time instructor at Northern Alberta Institute of Technology. Her research focuses on African American women journalists' negotiations of professional legitimacy through their turn-of-the-century writing in the African American press.

Abstract
What follows is an interview with Alicia Garza about Black Lives Matter and the relationship between traditional and digital activism.

Résumé
Ce qui suit est une entrevue avec Alicia Garza au sujet du mouvement Black Lives Matter et de la relation entre l'activisme traditionnel et l'activisme numérique.

So I'd like to start off by asking: why you do what you do in terms of Black Lives Matter (BLM) in particular?

The reason I do what I do is so we can have a future as a planet and as a world. We're in a set of conditions in this country and what happens in this country affects what happens in the world. For me, my commitment is grounded in the impact that this country has on the well-being of people all over the world and the impact that this nation-state has on its own citizens. Given that, it feels really important to be part of an ever-growing group of people who are doing the hard work of figuring out not just what we dismantle, but also what we hope to build.

Going off of that, can you talk about how BLM started and if you understand it to be a feminist movement?

Sure. We created this project in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman and the murder of Trayvon Martin, in response to a state-sanctioned, extra-judicial murder of a child by a vigilante. But it was also very much trying to respond to a set of larger conditions that point to the overall quality of life of Black people in this country and around the world. With the way in which this nation-state was developed, Black lives play a particular role in the maintenance of a larger set of systems that marginalize millions of oppressed and disenfranchised people. But that set of conditions is actually very unique for Black people, just like it's unique for Indigenous people, and just like it's unique for immigrants and other people of colour. The way that folks are racialized really determines a lot of their outcomes and life chances.

When we talk about BLM, I think one of the biggest misconceptions about it is that it is a movement to save the lives of Black men. So to that we have two responses: we definitely consider BLM to be feminist both in its origins and also in its practice, but there's lots of confusion and even distortion of who BLM is, particularly as it relates to the question of feminism and the eradication of patriarchy, and particularly as it relates to

transphobia and homophobia. We did not create this organizing project to save the lives of men; we created it to preserve the sanctity of the lives of Black people, using a queer feminist lens. BLM as a network was really created from the experiences of three Black women, all of whom are feminist, two of whom are queer, one of whom is the daughter of Nigerian immigrants. And state-sanctioned violence is much, much bigger than police violence; it's the impact of the state in meting out either control or straight-up harm.

Why do you think BLM is represented in mainstream media as a movement that is about police violence against Black men? Why is that the narrative that repeats?

It depends on which media you're talking about. [laughs] I think that by and large this country has a really hard time understanding the complexity of blackness. And that is a product of a settler-colonialist, white supremacist nation, where anybody who's not white gets flattened, homogenized, and given a role in a gendered and racialized division of labour. And I think that the media here is not immune to that; a lot of the narratives and viewpoints and frameworks really reflect the overall ideology of the nation-state. One other dynamic that's really important to acknowledge is that, within our mainstream media, there are still very few people of colour, and Black people specifically, who are making decisions about what is being covered and from what angle.

It's also a movement issue. I think largely progressive movements still have a long way to go when it comes to understanding the intersections between race, gender, and class. Even with people who have the best of intentions and who are politically aligned, because of the prevalence of narratives that centre Black men, it's somewhat easy to think that anything having to do with BLM is about Black men being killed by the police. And then there's a dynamic where Black cisgendered men are more likely to experience violence at the hands of police in the form of murder. Black women, however, are more likely to experience violence by the police in the form of sexual assault, and I think we see similar rates for Black trans people, gender nonconforming, or otherwise visibly queer folks. So I think it's those dynamics interacting in an interesting interplay with one another that create the condition to have this kind of perception of what BLM is about.

The last point you were making about how Black women and Black trans and visibly queer people are more likely to be sexually assaulted—do you think that's somehow harder to rally around or harder to protest in some way?

I think it's a harder issue to protest. It's less widely reported on in mainstream media. It's really the most egregious thing that we see projected on television screens across the world; journalists will even tell you that if 'it bleeds, it leads.' But I also think that, even within Black freedom movements, there can be a privileging of the cisgendered male body over all bodies. And I think that is attached to narratives that are very old in our community, to the stories that we tell about enslavement in this country. Even though Black women actually had to carry the burden that was typically assigned to both men and women, because Black women were denied access to womanhood and treated like men, there's still very much this way in which Black cisgendered men are seen as the centre of the family. And everything else is the second act. Everything else is the appetizer and cisgendered men are the main course. [laughs] Those tropes include things like the endangered Black male and the male-less Black family and, so to restore the family, you would have to restore the male figure to the family, which then of course is restoring patriarchy.

There's been this propagation of narratives from the faith community, and there were these tendencies as well in the Black nationalist tradition. Revolutionary Black nationalist traditions really did not do enough to complicate gender and gender roles as they've been ascribed. They then continued to propagate this narrative that is patriarchal at best and at worst is just fiction. But I think alongside those problematic narratives has always been Black feminists, Black queer folk, Black gender non-conforming folk, who were like, 'That's bullshit. We don't actually need to replicate a white supremacist ideal of what family is or isn't in order to be deserving of dignity.' There's always been that tension there.

Turning specifically to the Internet, I'd like to talk more about the affordances and restrictions of working online.

I think the benefit of the Internet, of course, is easy and instant access to anything and everything. You can actually be transported across time and space and geographic boundaries to be engaged with something that's happening in real time, which has been a real benefit to social movements. On the flip side, that level of access to everything means that there's access to everything. Even when social movements are using technology and the Internet specifically to further our aims, it's also being used to surveil what activists are doing, because it's largely happening in this space that is really open to everyone. It's very much a tool that is increasingly being used by law enforcement agencies to disrupt and criminalize activity that is critical of the state.

So what are the ways that you've actively tried to shape the online community and what kinds of resistance have you met to that?

I think when we started BLM, we were trying to provide space for an Internet community that was already active around the violence that was being enacted around Black lives. So we created this set of social media platforms so people could talk to each other directly. The idea behind it wasn't to control the conversation, it was actually to take us out as middle-brokers, so people could talk to each other directly about what was happening in their cities and what they wanted to see done about it.

What we understood from the very beginning was that it's not enough to talk online. That's great, but ultimately they needed to take the fruits of that conversation and do something in real-time, in real life, in their physical locations. And what we found was that people not only wanted connection on the Internet, but they wanted it off the Internet too. So we put out a call for people to take action together and the response was really overwhelming. We couldn't even accommodate the demand that was there. And that's actually how our chapter structure developed. We brought people together offline in St. Louis over a weekend, where they got to meet local leaders, they got to participate in organizing and direct action, they got to support people on the front lines, and they just got to build relationships with people. And what we realized, as a group, was that what was happening in St. Louis wasn't that different from what was happening in the cities that we work from. So what needed to change was actually our response to it.

People decided that they wanted to continue to organize together under the banner of BLM in their local areas. So now we use the Internet and technology to create community, but also to act as an access place for people who want to be involved in a movement for social justice.

We know *not* to use the Internet for organizing, for strategic political conversations, for target research. Doing that kind of stuff online actually makes us really vulnerable to the types of surveillance I talked about earlier.

So the movement started with Facebook and Twitter specifically. Have there been new kinds of social media or digital platforms that have been useful for you?

Yeah! First and foremost, I think it's really important to distinguish us from the movement. And I say that because, in my conversations with folks, I think they really assume that we are responsible for everything that's happening in this country and around the world. [laughs] And we're totally not! We really are sticklers about it because it causes tension. People are like, 'Why are you claiming our work?' and we're like, 'We're not, but other people are just mushing it all together.' So we want to be as principled as possible in saying it's not all us.

Yeah, so maybe a better question is, within the movement, have you seen specific kinds of technology being used in innovative ways?

So in our network, lots of us use encrypted technology to be able to communicate with one another, apps like WhatsApp or Signal. And then, of course, depending on the age demographic, people use different platforms. I'm still on Facebook, which is apparently old and out. [laughs]

I've been told that!

Which then makes me feel some kind of way, because that's the only platform I like. Twitter, it's too much for me; Instagram, I don't want to see a thousand fucking pictures; and Vine and Snapchat, I have them but I need tutorials.

Yeah, Snapchat is beyond me. [laughs]

Way beyond my paygrade. But a lot of our activist youth use it and use it very strategically and use it very consistently. One thing we grapple with a little bit is, how do we deal with the fact that people engage differently on different platforms for different reasons. Sometimes people will be like, 'You didn't say shit about this thing.' And we'll be like, 'Yeah, but you're looking for us on Snapchat, we're not even on Snapchat. So if that's where you're looking, of course you're going to be disappointed, because we don't have a presence there.'

Do you think it's necessary to cover a wide range of social media, or more important for people to use the tools that they find effective for them?

I think it's more important for people to use the tools that they find effective for them. And what's even more important than that is to make sure that, no matter what platforms and tools you're using, that you're really taking advantage of being with people in real time.

Yeah, I'd like to talk more about that. You were talking about how there needs to be a coming back to real space and real time. Do you think that Internet activism, or hashtag activism, is a tool or is it doing something entirely new and different from traditional activism?

I think that there's still a lot of learning happening about the best ways to mobilize people in a digital age where people's group behaviour has changed. I don't think there's any one answer there. If you look at some of these bigger platforms like MoveOn, for example, they have a huge reach, but they also have a pretty diverse group of people who are involved, and it's in some ways difficult to find the common denominator that will move the majority of people. Then if you look at a platform like ColorOfChange, which has like upwards of two million members, they pay a lot of attention to what their base wants and there are times, I think, when they have to make choices about which issues they step forward on because of the behaviour of their base. But I think where there's a lot of synergy and where there probably wasn't like five years ago or ten years ago, is that the Internet is an important tool to help facilitate organizing at a scale that has impact within its particular context.

What the jury's still out on is, can the Internet *replace* traditional methods of organizing? I think where

we fall, because we're organizers, is -- no. Nothing can replace the hard work of doing that kind of face-to-face engagement, even though people have tried, across time. I don't think you can shift that, mostly because I think organizing is so very much about relationships, and transforming relationships, and the Internet allows you to build relationships, but they are somewhat artificial. That's the major contradiction there. With a real person in real time, it's actually kind of hard to stay fake. Whereas on the Internet, everything is curated, everything. I don't care if you talk about, 'I'm so honest on Twitter, I'm 100% myself on Facebook.' You're totally curating everything. [laughs] I do it too! So for us, the main path is to figure out what's the best and brightest way to use many tools in cooperation with each other, rather than trying to replace what we already know works with something that we actually don't know if it works in the same way. The big downside to traditional organizing is the scale question. On two feet or in a wheelchair, you can only reach so many people per day. And we've got that shit down to a science. We know how many people we can talk to in an hour in like a traditional canvassing operation. We even know how many of those people that we talk to will agree to become a part of something. But I think, with the Internet, the lifespan is shorter. It's pretty hard to keep somebody involved and engaged on the Internet in the same thing over a long period of time, which is actually what we're going for.

With forms of protests, like a march, do you think there's a visibility that makes it a more effective form of protest than tweeting something, for instance?

It really depends on the context. We've had to organize actions against many different kinds of targets. We had to launch something against a crowd-funding site and, actually, the most effective way to target them was on the Internet because everything they did was on the Internet, and I'm not even sure they had a physical location.

So holding a march in protest would not be productive? [laughs]

Yeah! [laughs] We had a big blow-out with them. They actually withdrew $23,000 that we had raised for legal defense for activists, because somebody had flagged our fundraiser. And then, they were 'holding it' until

the issue was resolved and we were like, 'Yeah, that's not going to happen.' If I'm correct, I became aware of that issue around 8 o'clock at night and probably by 9 o'clock had put it out on Twitter and asked people to work on it. By 11 o'clock, I had a response from a higher up in the company and I had all of our money. So that's one example of the power of the Internet. But when it comes to a mayor, for example, Twitter's not actually that effective. Because a mayor is not accountable to how many tweets they get; a mayor is accountable to votes. Unless you can translate tweets into votes, you don't actually wield power. The other thing that mayors are accountable to is, of course, money, so unless you can turn tweets into dollars, then there's no dice. Different tools are useful in different contexts for different reasons, and the strategic organizer is thinking about what tools are appropriate for what context and for what time.