

[The Slave's Cause and Abolition's Presence](#)

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The Slave's Cause and Abolition's Presence

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In the wake of Trayvon Martin's murder, the world has witnessed the tremendous growth of a new movement for Black liberation. The Black Lives Matter movement has advanced crucial ideas about not only the structural violences of white supremacy and systemic racism that attempt to govern Black life, but has also worked to imagine and construct new meanings for, and within, the traditions of liberation, revolution, and abolition. Alicia Garza has described it as "an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise." It is also an "affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience." [1]

As activists under the banner of Black Lives Matter (BLM) work to envision a new era of freedom(s), they are asking not only what reforms are possible within our current systems, but also, crucially, what possibilities, if any, for a true justice are possible under the present state. BLM activists are working to imagine and create a new world through the transformative process of protest. This struggle has long roots in American history. Like abolitionists before them, BLM activists, recognizing the need for abolition(s) in combination with creation, search out not just reform, but profound transformation. While not to be fully confined to simple comparison, if, in the historiography of abolition, we describe phases of the movement in terms of waves, then BLM could certainly be given consideration as the new wave.

Manisha Sinha's new book, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*, is a monumental study of the American abolition movement across the *longue durée*. Although written and researched over the course of a decade, in light of recent events, the publication of the book could hardly have been timelier. *The Slave's Cause* works to bring a full history of the abolition movement to a broader public. Sinha centers the work of African American abolitionists as the lifeblood of the movement, both in the practical work they did to enact freedom, but also in the intellectual force they brought to the cause. The story Sinha tells is one in which abolitionists, black and white, struggled constantly over ideals and tactics and for meaningful notions of law, citizenship, justice, freedom, and nation. The work was long, and treacherous. There was no guarantee they would win. For, to follow the story of the abolition movement is to also follow the story of American slavery, and both grew more robust, indispensable, and dangerous as the nation matured.

Reflecting on the "Propaganda of History" in his 1935 publication *Black Reconstruction*, historian and activist W.E.B. Du Bois stated that the "abolitionists attacked slavery because it was wrong and their moral battle cannot be truthfully minimized or forgotten." [2] Sinha picks up Du Bois's position as she argues that within this history of abolition lies the origin story of the "conflict over the contours

and nature of American democracy.” [3] She suggests that the abolitionists never “really became popular” because, always in struggle, they continually focused on the “shortcomings of the present to prepare the way for the achievements of the future” and “refused to be satisfied by the success of their movement and warned of the dangers lurking ahead.” Their caution has been justified by the long counterrevolution that followed emancipation. [4] Many of their freedom dreams, to use Robin D.G. Kelley’s term, still remain unfinished, unrealized, or have been quashed.

Following the aftermath of Michael Brown’s murder by police officer Darren Wilson, in a piece called “Otherwise, Ferguson,” Ashon Crawley posited that that which is between liberation/future and present/past acts as both nightmare and dream, and conspires thus: “America, for black, brown, indigenous folks, has always been something of a nightmare, something of a confluence of political, economic, and juridical violence that produces the ongoing desire for the otherwise than this.” In the work of dreaming and imagining, Crawley also reminds us of the deep connection between the past, present, and future- that “Each moment awake from such dreams, we long for the otherwise, the otherwise than this situation, this truth, this reality. But longing for the otherwise, we also dig into memory: how did these tears get here?” [5]

Abolition in the United States, especially for the vanguard of the movement, was about these entangled visions. The movement looked both within, and beyond, American traditions to radically transform the social, political, and economic life of the nation in the name of Black freedom. In his *New York Times* review of *The Slave’s Cause*, Ira Berlin said that it is “difficult to imagine a more comprehensive history of the abolition movement.” [6] This will probably be true for a long time to come, but the study of history is also predicated on the present. Surely, as we see the call of Black Lives Matter expand and shift, we will continue to see new avenues of exploration of the past presented in the name of just futures as called forth by the young activists who, like those before them, struggle for a “new birth of freedom.” [7]

I use Lincoln here because we must be reminded, especially in this presidential electoral cycle, that abolition was, and is, about more than presidents, politics, and voting under a system that no matter how much it has changed, still devalues Black life in ways that abolitionists denounced centuries ago. Abolitionists decried the nature of the American republic, even as many welcomed the passing of post-war amendments that attempted to remake American law, and that would later support the work of activists in the Civil Rights Era. Abolition does not lie in gesturing by politicians in the name of radical traditions they cannot hope to uphold, nor even fully in the work of those who would reform American institutions. The inheritance of abolition must be more than this. Despite its missteps and foibles, for which the movement has received ample criticism, the heart of abolitionism was rooted in the revolutionary, the insurrectionary, and the visionary. Abolitionists concerned themselves not just with politics or laws, but also, as *The Slave’s Cause* shows, with hearts, minds, bodies, souls, and deep understandings of systems in which governance was just one component. The work of emancipation is not yet done. The legacy of the abolitionist movement is present in the work of Black Lives Matter activists who refuse to compromise, and who look to expand and imagine a new, meaningful, and lasting liberation.

[1] Alicia Garza “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement” *The Feminist Wire* October 7,

2014 <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>

[2] W.E.B. Du Bois *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 716.

[3] Manisha Sinha *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 1.

[4] *Ibid.*, 589.

[5] Ashon Crawley "Otherwise, Ferguson" <http://interfictions.com/otherwise-fergusonashon-crawley/>

[6] Ira Berlin "'The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition,' by Manisha Sinha" February 26, 2016 http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/books/review/the-slaves-cause-a-history-of-abolition-by-manisha-sinha.html?_r=0

[7] Abraham Lincoln "Gettysburg Address" 1863 <http://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/?dod-date=1119>

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