

THE CAIRO REVIEW INTERVIEW

BLACK POWER

Chicago activist Charlene Carruthers on the first African American president, the campaign against police brutality, and the struggle for black liberation

The office of Black Youth Project 100 is a few blocks from President Barack Obama's private residence in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood. The organization's national director, **Charlene Carruthers**, like Obama in his younger activist days, is a Chicago community organizer. The similarities may stop there. Indeed, Carruthers has been loudly calling for the resignation of Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Obama's longtime Chicago political ally who served as his White House chief of staff. Her complaint: Emanuel's negligent leadership in the Chicago police shooting death of a black teenager in 2014.

Carruthers, 30, is among the new generation of grassroots activists across the United States demanding social and economic change, such as greater police accountability, decriminalization of black youth, women's and LGBTQ rights, and a fair minimum wage. At BYP 100, she trains young black activists to transform their local communities. In Chicago, she has been leading protests against police brutality, including a twenty-eight-hour sit-in at City Hall, and a march on the Magnificent Mile that disrupted commerce on the busiest shopping day of the year.

After growing up on Chicago's South Side, Carruthers graduated from Illinois Wesleyan University. One of her own transformational experiences was a school trip to post-apartheid South Africa, where she learned about the crimes committed in the name of white domination. She has held positions in various progressive organizations including the Women's Media Center in New York co-founded by feminist activist Gloria Steinem. *Cairo Review* Managing Editor **Scott MacLeod** interviewed Carruthers in Chicago on January 6, 2016.

▷ **Charlene Carruthers**,
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*Ryan Lowry for the
Cairo Review*

CAIRO REVIEW: *What's going on in this country? When Barack Obama was elected president eight years ago, it gave some people the impression that America had solved the race issue. But things aren't going so well.*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: I remember when then-state legislator Barack Obama ran for U.S. Senate, and I



marched in the parade, I was a college student at the time. And I voted for him when he ran for senate, and I voted for him when he ran for president for the first time. It was with the understanding that there was an optimism and a sentiment of progressivism that his platform at least sought to achieve. And shortly after, there was a wakeup call, again, about the power of politicians in actually transforming society. And I think that some people understood that before he was elected, but so many, even black radical folks, had optimism in that particular moment thinking it was the post-Bush era, and the possibilities seemed to be just big. Big. Big. Hope and change. And so what I've learned and what I hope many of us learned again are the limitations of any politician to change our lives or to transform our lives. And so what's going on in this country is that, yes, we have a black president, and he's a black president of a country that has spent centuries oppressing black folks, oppressing LGBTQ folks, women, queer, trans folks, a whole host of marginalized people. And what we're seeing today, particularly as it relates to police brutality, this stands in a long tradition of policing in this country, surveillance, hyper-surveillance and intimidation, and violence in this country. Unfortunately it's not new, however the systems have much more sophisticated tools and technology to maintain social control, particularly over black people, especially over black poor people.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How would you prioritize the concerns of black Americans?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: It's a huge issue. I'm a student and a lover of history, and I can't talk about where we are now or what the problem is without talking about where we've come from. I strongly believe that the black liberation movement, particularly as it connects to the Americas, started the first time that an African was taken from the continent and forcibly brought into chattel slavery. Since then, black folks have resisted. At that particular moment, and it continues today, this fight, the problem, is rooted in anti-blackness. The idea and the understanding, the collective understanding, that black people are not full human beings and that they do not require humane treatment, access to basic human rights, resources, and a recognition that we too are a part of this society, and that violence against our bodies should not be guaranteed. It should not be inevitable, the idea of social death, that being black automatically deems you as less than human, and at any moment, your body is vulnerable to violence. And we've seen that over and over again throughout history.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How does that translate into conditions today?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: It shows up in high unemployment rates in black communities, high rates of poverty, it shows up in a public welfare, a social welfare system that continuously strips away the dignity of people. I remember myself as a

child going into the public aid office with my mom, and what that experience is like for mothers and their children. Oftentimes you enter these offices, and you're spoken down to by whatever caseworker stands between you and the ability to buy food for the next month. What's also a part of the problem—it's one of the things that's great about the demands of Black Lives Matter—is that we live in a country where we're consistently shown that our lives don't matter, and that's really at the crux. All of those things come to a head when we talk about the prison industrial complex.

Here, in America, we imprison more people, per capita, than any industrialized or developed nation in the world, right? We have well over two million people who are incarcerated and that number grows when we talk about people who are under state supervision through parole, or under house arrest. We have corporations and individuals who profit from the incarceration of those people. In addition to the profits of corporations and the amount of money that states put into prisons, it is a stripping of people from communities, and it is a continued divestment not just from economic resources in our communities, but the human capital that allows our community to thrive and survive. And so prisons serve as a mechanism of social control, and a place to put people. And many people locate prisons and mass incarceration in the tradition of slavery in America. Especially when we talk about post-emancipation and the convict leasing system, and we look at the growth of prisons in the U.S. in the 1980s and the war on drugs, all those things tie up when we continue to put people in cages, and we continue to surveil people. And that impacts the entire society. It's a problem that's being exported to places around the world. Folks are replicating the system of incarceration that has been created and developed here in the United States in countries like South Africa and Australia, across Europe, in Southeast Asia. We use these big terms like "prison industrial complex," "anti-black racism," "capitalism," but what it boils down to is that there are segments of people in the American population who are deemed disposable and commodified through various means of labor and production, and how that shows up in our lives, particularly in black folks' lives, it cripples our ability to have futures where our children can walk down the street and not worry about being shot and killed, our children can go to quality public schools, and our people can actually have jobs, and do labor that's meaningful and valued.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Where does this come from? Obama, when he gave that famous speech on race in Philadelphia, criticized people who called anti-black racism endemic in the country, suggesting that Americans are basically generous and good people.*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: It's tough to wrap my mind around why black folks have had the experiences that we've had, and particularly in the United States of America and even in the West, be it Haiti or Jamaica, or anywhere in the Caribbean or even

South America, right? I do not believe that white people are born white supremacists or are born racists. I think it was absolutely intentional, a very long time ago, to mark black folks as a viable source of forced labor and a commodity, particularly by people who are also colonizers. People who had strong interest in building as much wealth as possible, amassing as much land as possible. Unlike many other groups, black folks, particularly black folks in America, our claims for our humanity aren't based in land ownership. What we have are our bodies. And our bodies have been continuously, continuously targeted, and used, again, for forced labor, sexual exploitation, and in addition to the robbing of the land from indigenous people, here, especially on this land, and throughout the Western Hemisphere, the exploitation of black bodies, the forced labor of black people, allow for capitalism to thrive in this region and in the world. So, it made money, and it makes money, and it also allows people to maintain and have an argument for why they should be in power. People aren't born with that, but people are born into institutions that support those ideas and see why they benefit from it, and they continue it. And it's not just propped up by politicians or by policy. It's propped up by cultural institutions. It's propped up by faith-based institutions. I do not believe that people are automatically good, that they act out of goodwill. The idea that white supremacy, anti-black racism, and I have to add, capitalism, are endemic to the U.S. is true. Because without those things, this country would not have built the wealth that it amassed, the land that it amassed, and the amount of people that were forcibly migrated, that story would not be the same. Period. It would not be the same.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How is this affecting young black Americans today, who are facing the issues on the ground?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: When we talk about reparations, we don't have to just talk about chattel slavery. We can talk about the Jim Crow era. We can even just talk about the 1990s. What has happened in Chicago two years ago. Two years ago, the mayor and the school board closed over fifty public schools. And so, these were schools that over 90 percent of the students that were impacted by the closures of those schools are black. And schools serve as anchor institutions in all communities, white, black, brown, it doesn't matter. To rip over fifty schools out of black communities and displace children, predominantly black children, into other schools, that's a problem. It's a huge problem. Divestment from public school education is a major problem that young black people face. The next is absolutely unemployment. Too many young black people who are able to work live in households that are low income or no income. One of the problems that is connected to that is the amount of young black people who work for a wage that is not a living wage. The other issue that I believe young black people face is police violence and police brutality—this

understanding that at any moment, particularly if you're a poor black person, at any moment, the police can target you, they can stop and frisk you, they can stop and search you, you could be engaged in activity that's not deemed criminal when other folks do it, like smoking marijuana, and you can end up in jail. Or you're a black trans woman and you're walking down the street, and you're assumed to be a sex worker, you're just stopped, and they take you to jail. Which is a very unsafe place for anybody, and definitely an unsafe place for a black transgender woman. Far too many of us are not only physically harmed by the police, but then are shipped off to jails and prisons. In America, you can be 13 years old and spend five years, until you're 18 or even longer, in a prison for a petty crime. They call it a juvenile detention center or something else to give it a nice name, but it's still a prison. And so, education, unemployment, police violence, and mass incarceration are among the most pressing issues. The last one, because I can't leave this out, particularly for LGBTQ youth, is homelessness. Here, not just in Chicago, New York City, even in the South in rural areas, we have thousands, thousands of young people who have no place to live, because they've been put out of their homes based on their identity as a lesbian, bisexual, transgender, gay, or queer young person. And so, while that issue doesn't get as much play as others do, when you don't have a home to go to, that destabilizes so many other parts of your life.

CAIRO REVIEW: *The issue of police violence against the black community has gotten huge media coverage the last few years, but it is not a new phenomenon.*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: Right. Right, it's not new.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Why is the country paying more attention to it?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: The country is paying more attention to police brutality, particularly as it relates to young black people, because young black people are taking to the streets and are refusing to consent to the continued oppression and violence that we face. And it's oftentimes young black folks who, especially in certain cities, in certain areas, it's young black folks who aren't a part of an organization, who don't get paid to do the work, but they show up because their lives are on the line. That's why the media is paying attention. I remember the week that we learned that Sandra Bland died in a jail cell in Texas, there were several other black women, who in that same week or two, died in jail cells. Growing up, there was no consciousness of that, and I'm sure that it happened. But it's because of the energy that's on the ground and that people are saying, "No, this is not okay. We're going to fight back against this. We're actually going to envision a world where this doesn't happen." That's why it's all over the media.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Why are young people rising up?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: They're rising up because of the stories of young people like Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant, Rekia Boyd, Mike Brown in Ferguson. Mike Brown, young folks in Ferguson saw his body there. They're also rising up because of the reaction from the state. When we decide to engage in direct action, be it a protest, a rally, civil disobedience, the police show up before we show up. Or the police show up in dozens of numbers, or they show up with teargas, they show up with tanks. I spent some time in Ferguson after Mike Brown was killed, and I remember going through checkpoints in Ferguson, and I remember the tanks and the National Guard there, in a neighborhood. They occupied that area, and the young black people there, the leaders and the organizers there, refused to just disappear and not show up. They refused to be okay with it. The state's reaction—it continued to be repressive, it continued to be violent—and they just refused to back down. Here in Chicago, D.C., New York City, New Orleans, folks are met with deep repression from the police or retaliation from the police when we take action, and honestly it just gives us more energy to do more. Because they could just stay home. But they don't, because their function is to try to control us as much as possible.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Where is all this going?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: BYP 100, we actually started in 2013, the weekend that George Zimmerman was found not guilty in the killing of Trayvon Martin. We'd been gathered right outside of Chicago for a convening that was planned a year in advance. And so we decided then that we needed an organization that was focused on base-building, meaning developing lots and lots of leaders, to organize ground campaigns for the sake of black liberation. And we've been organizing ever since then. And we have to continue to do that. We have to build a much wider base. We have chapters all over the country, and in 2014 we developed our first public policy agenda, called the Agenda to Keep Us Safe, and that focused on fundamentally changing the relationship between the police and young black people and ending mass criminalization.

CAIRO REVIEW: *The Trayvon Martin case, where a young black man in Florida was shot and killed by a white community watchman in 2012, reverberated widely.*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: Trayvon Martin was out of school on that day because he was suspended. And it was absolutely tied to what we call the school-to-prison pipeline, where young folks are placed in conditions in schools that are very similar to jails and prisons. I remember, I went to Chicago public schools, and we had metal detectors that we had to go through every morning, they checked our bags, the police could do a random search at any point in time, body searches, everything.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Tell us more about BYP 100's work.*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: On Martin Luther King weekend, we are launching our Agenda to Build Black Futures, which focuses on economic justice. We do not believe that you can talk about ending mass incarceration, police violence, at all without talking about creating an economy and a society that is just, where people work and earn and receive a living wage if they work wage jobs. We also believe that actually even for people who can't work, who aren't able to work, that we should have a guaranteed income in the United States of America. And for folks who are able to work and want to work, we should have full employment in this country. What's next for us is fighting for economic justice and bridging between the work that we do around policing and mass incarceration, with issues of reparations, with issues of workers' rights, issues of how we value women as not just laborers but those who are the heads of households. Also, how we connect issues of mass incarceration and police violence with the displacement of black folks from our neighborhoods, not just from gentrification, but from many other dynamics.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What concrete actions or measures does this involve?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: It's about improving black people's lives, to actually create things that will materially improve folks' lives. And so one of our entry points into economic justice work was the Fight for 15. The Fight for 15 is a campaign that was started by fast food workers in New York City who were demanding a \$15 [per day] living wage and a union so they could actually collectively bargain for their wages. And they won. They actually won it. And it's been won in other cities. But that needs to become a reality everywhere. It requires more than a press conference, more than a policy statement. It requires boots on the ground, people giving voice to it through digital media, people talking about it, people talking to their family members about the importance of it, and also even electing public officials who support it. And the only way that happens is through organizing. Our policy agendas provide frameworks and a vision, but we still have to do the organizing. And so that's the first part. The second part is that we do not have a collective understanding why our economy doesn't work for us. Black folks understand that, you know, too many of us are poor, but the "why" of that, that varies from person to person. And so we have to build a collective political consciousness that, no, it's not simply that black folks are lazy, or particularly that black Americans don't take advantage of the privileges that we have in this country. But we have a system that was never set up for our success. It was set up for a few people, particularly folks who buy in, who fall in line with what capitalism tells us we have to do. But for the majority of black folks, that doesn't happen. And so we have to organize, and then we also have to develop some type of shared

understanding of what's actually at stake here, and how we got to the place that we're at, in order to do what needs to be done.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Some of what you said seems to echo, or maybe he's echoing you, the message of Bernie Sanders about economic inequality. Is part of your campaign supporting candidates like Bernie Sanders?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: As an organization, BYP 100 politically does not support any particular candidate who's running for office, because there are no permanent friends or permanent allies, and perhaps there are no permanent enemies either. And so we don't endorse candidates at all, and I personally don't endorse candidates. What I do believe in is that we have a responsibility, no matter who the candidate is, particularly for candidates who make promises to our communities, to hold them accountable, and to agitate them into doing the things that we believe are right to do. Actually, I was in a meeting with Bernie Sanders not too long ago. He spoke about his economic justice platform. And the way he speaks about it, and the way that many white progressives or white socialists speak about economic justice, is all too often divorced from racial justice. It's like, "Well this will impact everyone, so yeah, of course it will improve the lives of black people, because this is going to improve the lives of everyone." As opposed to saying, "This is what's happening to black folks, brown folks, in this country, so this is why this needs to be done, not simply because this is going to improve the lives of everyone." It's a different orientation. I shared that with Bernie Sanders: for us you cannot talk about economic justice without talking about racial justice.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Let me bring you back to police violence. What is the problem between the police and the black community?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: I'll talk about Rekia Boyd. Rekia Boyd was a young black woman who was out with her friends one night in Chicago. Officer Dante Servin, they were near his home. He was off duty, he came out of his home, was in his car, had a confrontation with the small group of young black folks, and ultimately, Rekia was shot in the back of the head. She was the only one who died that night. And the officer maintains that he felt threatened, even though he was in his home, didn't have to come out of his home, he ended up in his car, he could have driven away, he could have done many things. He could have called someone who was on duty to deal with whatever threat he assumed they presented, but he didn't do any of those things. He maintains he shot over his shoulder, in his car, and killed Rekia. Because of Rekia's family and community supporters, Dante Servin was indicted, eventually, for killing Rekia, and he was charged with manslaughter. From the beginning, our state's

attorney, Anita Alvarez, who's the prosecutor here in Cook County, has mishandled the case. Last year, all the charges were dropped. The presiding judge said the reason why the charges were dismissed was because he was undercharged. He should have been charged for murder. What was so deeply offensive was the way the family was treated from the very beginning. Disregarded. The presumed innocence of the officer from beginning to the end, and not just like, you know, "innocent until proven guilty," but that "he couldn't have done it." Like, absolutely not. He was threatened, and the presumption was that he should be protected as much as possible. And then, for the charges to be dismissed because the state's attorney didn't bring up charges of murder. All through that, Dante Servin is still on the police force. We've been engaged in a campaign since May of 2015 calling for his firing with no pension. And for only the second time in recent history the Independent Police Review Authority and the then-police superintendent recommended that he be fired. That doesn't happen in Chicago. But it was because of sustained organizing, and a huge community outcry.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Can you review the Laquan McDonald case, which is in the news as we speak?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: Laquan McDonald was a teenager here in Chicago. He had a confrontation with some police officers. It's believed that it's possible that he was undergoing some type of mental instability in that moment, which doesn't surprise me when you're surrounded by police officers, to have some type of a moment, because I have it myself when I'm around police officers. There were some officers who responded immediately to the situation, and then more officers who arrived. And all this is on videotape, it's on dashcam videotape and there's also footage from a nearby fast food restaurant. And Laquan is shot sixteen times.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Sixteen times?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: Sixteen times. Laquan is shot by a police officer sixteen times. Shortly after the police officer arrives on the scene, shoots him sixteen times. He shoots him and continues to shoot him even after he's down and completely immobilized, and he continues to shoot him. For anyone who takes a moment to count to sixteen, that takes a long time to count to sixteen. After he was shot and killed, they did an autopsy the very next day, and the state, the county, knew what happened in that particular moment. They had the knowledge of where the shots were, where his body was, all of that. And then that's where the cover-up begins. Laquan is killed by officer [Jason] Van Dyke, and the Chicago Police Department [CPD] and the city do not release the dashcam video to the public. This is all happening in a moment where our mayor [Rahm Emanuel] is up for reelection, and he has a contested race. His aides

and people in his office know about the shooting and what happened, and then it is moved to have a \$5 million settlement to the family, that his administration approves. Due to several journalists and community advocates, there's a Freedom of Information Act, a FOIA request. I was in the courtroom the day that the judge decided to release the video to the public. And one has to ask themselves, in an age where there are videos released of Walter Scott being gunned down in South Carolina, there are pictures of Mike Brown lying on the ground, there are videos upon videos of black people being killed by police officers, why was this video not released?

CAIRO REVIEW: *Why?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: Why, right? Right?

CAIRO REVIEW: *Tell me.*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: I believe that the video was not released because it was not politically healthy for Mayor Rahm Emanuel's administration in that particular moment, and it was not healthy for the Chicago Police Department to show, in full color, the violence that its department enforces and performs on black folks. Because that's not the first time the CPD has killed someone. It wasn't the first time that week, it definitely wasn't the first time that month that it happened, that CPD shot some unarmed black person. And so, they didn't want the city to burn. Because they're looking at Baltimore, Ferguson, and they were so afraid that the young black people here too would set things on fire. And I believe that fear was well-founded, because the anger that young black folks have in this city is well-founded. And so they didn't want that to happen, and so they held back for those three reasons: the mayor's reelection campaign, CPD wanting to save face, and then their fear that the violence of CPD shown all over the world would absolutely result in this city burning. And so they didn't release it. It took a year, a whole year, for the court to get to the point where the court said that CPD had no standing to withhold this video. And then it was released.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You spoke about your fight for the liberation of black people. Are organizations like yours able to actually push the agenda, to make progress to the satisfaction of the black community?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: What has to happen now is we need a lot more people in this work in order to move forward an agenda that's not just reformist, but an agenda that actually moves us toward transformative demands and transformative change in our communities. We have to move past simply saying, "We need better cops." Actually, we need to be fighting to live in a society where we don't have cops. We need to go beyond just thinking that we can do little fixes to the system. Ending

mass incarceration is connected to police, to ending police violence. We can't simply just train officers to be better. We have to take power away from them. Here in Chicago, the CPD's budget takes up nearly 40 percent of the city's budget, nearly 40 percent. And so we have to move from putting Band-Aids on the system. That is what has to happen next. In order for us to do that, we need more people, we need more organizations, and we absolutely have to continue to invest in community organizing. And these young people who are rightfully angry about this system, they need support. They need support so they can do this work, and they can still live full lives. In my heart, deeply in my heart, I believe that we have the vision. The vision isn't even completely new, we didn't invent the idea that the police should have less power and one day perhaps we can live in a world where there are no police. That idea has been cooking for quite some time, and now we're in a moment where the critical mass of people who also believe that is growing. So it's my responsibility as an organizer to make sure that that number continues to grow and it exponentially grows. The only time we see any changes in policing and prisons is when people who are directly impacted no longer consent to it, are not cool with it. Like when you see the prison uprisings, when you saw the uprising in Ferguson, the uprising in Baltimore, people organizing, that's when things change. So we have to continue to not only resist but also reimagine and put forth visions of our ability to actually live in a different kind of world.

CAIRO REVIEW: *One could say that's very utopian. Or overly idealistic. You have a lot of barriers and a lot of resistance in this country to that kind of thinking.*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: Well, I have a friend who went on a march called the Trail of Dreams in maybe 2010, and he was part of a group of young, undocumented immigrants. And they walked from Miami to Washington, DC, to raise awareness and build relationships around the crisis of immigration in this country. My friend's name is Felipe Matos, and he called me when they were walking through the cotton fields in Georgia, and he was just like, "Charlene, I'm feeling really down today. I don't know if I can continue this." And I'm like, "Felipe, you know how I know that change is possible? Because my ancestors were slaves and had to pick those cotton fields forcibly, and chattel slavery was abolished in this country." That's how I know change is possible. It's absolutely possible. I think about the potential of black liberation as what we saw in the Haitian revolution. Like, it took two years after the French Revolution for people to take up arms in Haiti and to end slavery in Haiti, right? Our ancestors went up against amazing odds. I'm sure when people were like, "Yo, we can end slavery. Like, the kid I have doesn't have to be a slave." I'm sure people said, "This is impossible, you must be out of your mind." Right? But it was the people, like Nat Turner, the folks like Harriet Tubman, the folks like Sojourner Truth, who

said, “No.” Like Frederick Douglass, who said, “No, actually we can change this,” and they did. I’m sure it sounded really utopian back then to end slavery across the Western Hemisphere, but it was ended because people fought for it. Of course what happened in the aftermath was not perfect. I mean, we’re still in a situation, when we talk about prisons as a continuation of slavery.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How far did Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement bring things along?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: I think the story of the Civil Rights Movement and how it impacts us today is so complicated. When we look at the amount of things that were won—the Voting Rights Act, the Fair Housing Act, things like that—they’re unprecedented. They’re meaningful and have been meaningful for black folks’ lives, absolutely. I don’t see the Civil Rights Movement as a failure, just on face value. What I do think is that work has had to evolve and change in order to actually get us to where we need to be. Primarily, when we look at the Civil Rights Movement, the people whose ideas were allowed to grow, at least in the public consciousness, was limited. And that, in turn, impacted many of the limitations and the demands of the Civil Rights Movement. They weren’t looking at prisons then. And people who were LGBT, you almost don’t know about them. Or when we talk about women’s rights, it was, “This first, we’ll do that later.” There were always people, even within the Civil Rights Movement, who were fighting for a more visionary, a more inclusionary set of demands and ideas and things to fight for, but that’s not what happened. When King died, he was fighting for economic justice. They killed him in the moment when he was organizing black sanitation workers. And that scared people, in bigger ways than his fight for the access to voting, because that continues to get to the core of what makes America work the way that it does. That scares people to no end. And so King became an even greater threat right before he was killed.

The Civil Rights Movement, it doesn’t live in a vacuum. Right after that you have the Black Power Movement that built on the successes and the failures of the Civil Rights Movement, which was trying to take lessons and do things differently and do things better and be more unapologetically black. I would say that this movement that we’re in now is again in that tradition. We are students of the Civil Rights Movement, students of the Black Power Movement, and taking a look at what happened there. What worked, and what didn’t work? Why did the things that worked work, and why did the things that didn’t work, why didn’t they work? And how can we do things differently or how can we continue to do things? And what we know works is organizing and building a base of people. We know that building political consciousness works. We know what doesn’t work is having single leaders up front. What we do follow is

someone who organized at that time, Ella Baker, her motto of group-centered leadership. She was one of the architects of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, who did amazing work in the South, particularly in Mississippi. Ms. Baker, what she taught was the antithesis of what MLK did and what Malcolm X did, and what many of those other male charismatic leaders did.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Why do you say antithesis?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: She was completely against it. She was completely against this model of having the single leader, and not just the single leader, but the single male charismatic leader, who came from clergy or a faith-based community, making decisions, making key strategy decisions on their own, being the face of the movement, as opposed to the work coming from the people.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Couldn't you have both?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: Perhaps. They had both in that particular moment, and things changed, but there was an overreliance on the first one, on the single visionary, so-called visionary, and King was absolutely a visionary leader and he became more radical in his later years. But that's not the King we're often taught about. And so Ella Baker had a strong emphasis on developing lots and lots of strong leaders. Because once you chop down the solitary leader or the single leader, then the rest of your work can crumble if you haven't developed enough people to pick that work up. And that is absolutely what happened with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Is that what has happened in the black community in general?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: Oh it's happened so much. That's one of the problems, is that we prop up these individuals, and we don't invest in building strong leaders. One of the other issues we have is just even transitioning leadership. So, for me, I won't be in this job for more than four years, definitely no more than five. We've been talking about my transition and the transition of our other leaders and how we're developing some of our younger folks to take on leadership. Cause we cannot have what's happened in the past happen again.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Is that what's happening with your organization, with Black Lives Matter, that there is a kind of widespread grassroots organizing that's taking place, a new face of the black civil rights movement in America?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: I'm always hesitant to say if it's something new, because black feminist organizations that were around decades ago follow similar leadership models that we do today.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Is there a rising up of this model?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: Absolutely, it is different. Yes. I believe that what the face of leadership looks like, the demands that we make, how we organize, is different. It is different. I was trained in the Saul Alinsky model of organizing. I've been an organizer and activist for over twelve years. And my time and being trained with an Alinsky-based organization in northern Virginia as an organizer, I learned a very specific type of organizing, a very specific set of practice or habits of organizing. Since then, I've learned that some of those things work for black folks, and many of those things don't work for black folks. We have to organize in what we actually call a black queer feminist lens. And for us, what that means, it's reflective of our values and even how we just are with each other. That means that yeah, I'm absolutely one of the primary spokespeople for the organization. I am. And on a good day, I'm charismatic. But I'm not the only one. I don't make blanket decisions about our strategy on my own. Those are always done in collaboration and discussion with other people. And we see that in many other organizations and other formations, is how we interact, how we engage with each other, how we make decisions, who's visible, whose opinions and ideas are valued, that is something that the emergence of that kind of work and that kind of analysis I think is something that is very important and particular to this moment.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Is this a movement that has to be exclusive to black people, led by black people? Is there a role for white people? I think I saw a tweet from you about "White people, where are you? What are you doing to get rid of white supremacy?"*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: The work that we do in this country, particularly as it relates to police violence, economic justice, mass incarceration, absolutely has to be led by black people and connected to other movements. I think about the Latino-led segments of the immigrant rights movement, because there are black folks leading in the immigrant rights movement as well, when we start to talk about what migration means for non-black Latinos, and how folks are criminalized, they are criminalized in similar and in many cases the same ways that black folks are criminalized. So we are not going to take down prisons or jails without taking down detention centers. A large number, an overwhelming number of folks, are non-black Latinos. And so we'd do ourselves a disservice if we only talked about criminalization in silos; we have to make those connections. And so particularly when we talk about non-black people of color, there's so many connections that we have to make if we're going to win. Because black folks aren't going to win this on our own. Actually, the liberation of black folks is tied up with the liberation of all oppressed people. But the liberation of all oppressed people sure as hell is not going to happen without the liberation of

black people, and the ending of anti-black racism in this world. And so, yes, we have to make connections across movements.

CAIRO REVIEW: *The role and responsibility of whites?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: When it comes to white folks, white people absolutely have a role. I mean, their social location gives them not just privilege but deep levels of power to make decisions and move about the world in ways that black folks cannot move around the world. We don't have access to that whiteness and the privileges that come along with that. And so white folks absolutely have a responsibility to teach themselves and their children not only about white privilege but how anti-black racism shows up in their lives, and actively work to reduce the level of power that whiteness has in this world. And so what that means, what that means on a very practical level, is that white folks should not be organizing in black communities. Why are you the executive director, white person, of a black community-based organization? That happens here in Chicago, it happens all over, all over this country. Your schools, the resources that your schools have, you should not be okay with the fact that the school that's a couple miles away from you doesn't have those same resources because of how property taxes work in funding schools. So white folks have to stop consenting to the power that they have in order for this to work. We can make some wins, we can have successes, but we can't do that on our own. But we do have to lead it, and we do have to inform and be the folks who say, "Actually this is the kind of world we want to live in, and this is what we need from you in order to make that happen."

CAIRO REVIEW: *You don't want a white person coming into a black community to be a community organizer? What should that white person be doing?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: Oh my gosh, they need to go organize white folks. White folks who are organizers and have the skills, have the ability and the interest, the energy, to organize people to build power for the sake of changing this world into one where all people can live with their dignity, they absolutely need to go organize white moderates, white progressives, white conservatives. Someone needs to organize them, and outside of labor, it can't just be through a labor union. That's where they should be.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What about the responsibility of the black community? One of the criticisms is that the black community itself is a mess—drugs, black-on-black violence, shattered families. There are some people who say the black movement should be focusing on improving the quality of life and the values and the behaviors of the black community before fighting against police violence and things like that.*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: Black people have always fought to change black folks' values. That has been going on for more than a century. Since emancipation, black folks have done the work of respectability to push, you know, so-called good Christian values, morality, things like that. We've always done that. And that can only take us so far. And it consistently leaves out people who do not fit a certain mold. Black folks are still resisting and fighting against the things that happen within our communities. Interpersonal violence. There is a group of mothers in the Inglewood neighborhood in Chicago who have taken to occupying the streets and saying, "No gun violence here." They've done that, right? Like scores of black people who do mentoring programs, after-school programs, people who are part of faith communities, who do support within their communities. I think the activism and the organizing that happens when it comes to state violence and when it comes to interpersonal violence in black communities, they both exist. They show up differently. It is not the same to protest the young black person who shot another person—they're likely in jail or on their way to jail at some point—than when a police officer kills us. We know where to find that person, we know that we pay that person's salary, we know that they've actually sworn to protect and serve. But how we confront the young black person, and how we confront the police officer, both of those things actually do happen.

Why I organize, I organize so that the violence that happens in our communities between us, and the violence that happens by the state, ends. State violence is absolutely connected to the domestic violence that happens in our homes. And for me, as a black queer woman who grew up in a household that is best described as working class, that stuff didn't escape me. When I say we need funding for restorative justice, it's not just about when someone steals a car or someone kills someone, it is also about when someone is beating their partner in their household. I fight for all those things. My work is about all those things. And economic justice. Why are young people on the streets? Why are young people in survival economies like the drug economies and sex work, and things like that? Oftentimes it's because they have few choices about what they can do, few options. We need to create more options for young people. And, those things in the survival economies absolutely need to be decriminalized, so people don't go to jail for doing things that other people do every day. That's my take on the idea that black people just need to focus on themselves. We've always done that. We will always do that. The state absolutely plays a major role in many of the problems that exist in our communities.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You grew up on the South Side of Chicago. How has that brought you to where you are today, in terms of your activism?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: Growing up on the South Side of Chicago has so much to do with my worldview. My mom, she stayed at home until I was maybe 9 or

10, and since then she's worked low-wage domestic jobs and retail jobs all my life. And my dad works in insurance. I saw my dad graduate from college, he was an adult student. He was in the military for twenty-one years as well. I first learned about power in two things. One, from being in the welfare office with my mom, and two, hearing from my dad about him training white folks who would then be promoted over him.

CAIRO REVIEW: *That shaped your worldview?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: When I was in high school, I went to high school on the North Side of Chicago and I was in the international baccalaureate program, so my education was extremely globalized. And, it was a public school, and it was like a program, like a school within a school, because we had access to things that nobody else in the school had access to. Even from elementary school, because I went to an all-black elementary school that was Black History Month every day, pretty much. It's a public magnet school on the South Side. I always had a great public school education. That is what confirmed to me that this is possible: black children can receive a quality public school education when the state decides that they're worth it. It was decided that we were worth it because I was at a magnet school and a gifted center in elementary school. It was decided that we were worth it in high school because I was in the international baccalaureate program. Why aren't all students treated that way? I know you're deemed to have certain intellect because of your test scores and your reading skills and all the other things, but I was invested in from the very beginning both by my parents and by my teachers. That should be the standard. Not this mess that our children are in now.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You went to South Africa as a college student.*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: Oh, it was huge. That was the thing that politicized me. I went to college in central Illinois at a small, private liberal arts school, a predominantly white institution, and at the end of my first year, I had the opportunity to go study politics in South Africa for a May Term course. My professor is a white South African. It was 2004, post-Mandela being elected, going to Soweto, going to Robben Island, of course, but it was really the District Six Museum that did it for me. This museum basically has the belongings of people who were forcibly displaced, black folks and colored folks from a neighborhood, the government came in and razed the whole place. There was a whole museum that's dedicated to this neighborhood and what happened to this neighborhood. It just stuck with me. You physically moved people, you tore down a whole neighborhood. It just blew my mind. I've done a lot more traveling, and those experiences, be it from Palestine to Haiti to what else, China, they inform my politics very, very deeply.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Barack Obama said he was running for president to see a “more just, more equal, more free, more caring, and more prosperous” America. Has he achieved any of those things?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: I think that President Obama has made meaningful gains, particularly as it relates to things like healthcare. What’s happened with healthcare reform is completely unprecedented in the U.S. It has opened up the possibility and the reality for more people to not have to worry how they’re going to pay their medical bills. While that has happened, at the same time the Obama administration has deported more people than ever in history. And that not only saddens me, that angers me. That’s not okay.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How do you explain your disappointment, given the hope you had in Obama’s election?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: I was 23 at the time. His presidency has allowed me to understand policy and power in ways that I have never understood them. And so disappointment in a politician is part of the game. It’s inevitable. The limitations and how power can be exercised. I also think that he’s brought issues to the forefront, into different people’s consciousness around prisons, around the fact that he visited a prison in Oklahoma, no sitting president has done that before. But I understand these things to be steps toward much bigger things that have to be done, and many of those things have to happen on a more local level, period. I don’t understand them to be things that are transformative, particularly as it relates to mass incarceration, policing in this country, and even employment in this country. We’ve not had a federal works program. Or, when it comes to education. His administration didn’t transform how public education exists in this country. I think that he has had some successes and perhaps, in addition to healthcare reform, one of the major successes is around the narrative of what this country is for some people. Where he’s done well is around perhaps the rhetoric that we’re a nation of immigrants, while at the same time marginalizing black people, and other people and the indigenous people of this country who are not immigrants, who were forced to be here or had their land taken. So it’s full of tension for me, how I reconcile his presidency and what it has meant for this country. We’re still at war, that didn’t stop. Drones are killing people. That didn’t stop. Some people are being pardoned from prison, but Assata Shakur is still on the most-wanted list. So it’s full of contradictions.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Have Obama’s election and presidency somehow given a sense of empowerment or a symbolism for young black people?*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: I think some, yes, particularly in the aftermath or the wake of the first election. I think it did for some folks. I mean, young black folks

voted at a higher rate than any other youth demographic in 2008 and in 2012. And we also voted at higher rates in the midterm elections, too. And so, if voting is an indicator of energy, we showed up for him. And we showed up for other people. The rate of political participation was high. We'll see what happens in 2016.

CAIRO REVIEW: *In Ta-Nehisi Coates' new book, Between the World and Me, he seems very pessimistic about the future of black Americans. Obama seems hopeful and optimistic, he believes in the goodness of people and the possibility of unity, the possibility to progress, he made the comment in that speech about kind of criticizing people who elevate what is wrong with America over what is right with America. You seem more optimistic that organizing, pressure, pushing agendas can actually improve people's lives and maybe liberate black people in the end.*

CHARLENE CARRUTHERS: Yeah, I'm an organizer. So I can't do my job if I don't believe transformative change is possible. I'm under no illusion that change happens without an organized demand from people, and I can't overlook the wrongs that happen in this country because they're killing us. They're making our lives difficult. They are traumatizing us. And as the president of the United States your job is to be optimistic and to inspire people so that people can continue to believe in the version of democracy that we have, so people have to believe that America is great in order to continue to buy into the idea of the American dream and capitalism, things like that, so he has to do that. And I think Ta-Nehisi Coates, he is also necessary in this conversation, because too many people still don't get it, how dire this situation is. Because, you know, while black folks like myself, I have a job, but my mama still works a low-wage job and President Obama hasn't changed her life. She makes just too much to get healthcare, to get Medicaid, and not enough to pay for health insurance. So people like that, when I think about my mom, my aunt, my cousins, my siblings, like that, there's always contradictions and tensions there.