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From Black Power to Black Lives Matter: Using Rita Williams-Garcia's *One Crazy Summer* to Navigate Intergenerational Tensions of the Civil Rights Movement(s)

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It is easy to look back at previous decades, and all their significant social movements, and to view them as we wish them to be remembered. The beauty of this is the ability to paint a better, more pleasing version of events to suit our sensibilities. The danger, however, is the erasure of realities, failure to learn from mistakes, and, often, the villainization of those undeserving of such stigma. A well-known victim of this selective remembering and retelling is the Civil Rights Movement. With all its branches and facets, and because of its crucial role in American history, the Civil Rights Movement has been the focus of much study, scholarship, and debate.

The trend in teaching and discussing the Movement over time has maintained a primary focus on Martin Luther King and the non-violent face of the Movement. King, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and other like-minded organizations are held as the standard for protest and respectability politics, the attempt "to prove to white America that blacks were worthy of full citizenship rights" (Harris). Scholarship and teaching that address other aspects of the Movement—those such as Malcolm X, the Black Power Movement, and the Black Panther Party—notoriously present the contributions of these activists primarily as violent, counterproductive, and damaging to the overall cause: "a dangerous band of gun-wielding macho revolutionaries. . . who seemed to hate the US and everything it stood for" (Davies 42). Often woven throughout these two distinct narratives are themes of intergenerational tension and conflict.

The Civil Rights Movement fronted by Dr. King is portrayed as being older, or at least more mature and respectable—traits generally assumed to come with age—than its Movement counterparts. It is not uncommon to see many in the Black Power Movement and Black Panther Party described as young and volatile, thereby creating the idea of an innate intergenerational divide in the overall narrative. While there might be some merit to this type of division, it neither fully nor accurately depicts the members or natures of various branches of the Movement. Furthermore, it unfairly characterizes and demonizes an entire, crucial aspect of the Civil Rights era: the Black Power Movement and the resulting Black Panther Party. An increasing number of scholars realize the need to change this, to "rehabilitate" and "even celebrate" the Panther's reputation, and to rewrite the narrative to reflect these movements and their "steadfast commitment to the Black community" more accurately (Davies 42; Kirkby 28). Though it will take time, there are some sources that seek to change this by teaching the fuller, more accurate narrative to younger generations. Books such as Rita Williams-Garcia's children's novel *One Crazy Summer* are a place to start.

When Williams-Garcia began writing *One Crazy Summer*, she chose to use children to enter and examine the Black Power Movement, specifically the Black Panther Party. As with any significant social movement, the Black Power Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement at large, had activists, detractors, and those who saw active participation as detrimental to the greater good. These divisions, much like the branches themselves, have often run along generational lines. While Williams-Garcia's story focuses primarily on three young sisters, it also includes a variety of voices that examine these varying perspectives and positions, people all trying to navigate the Civil Rights Movement and their



places in it. This intergenerational struggle, though set in 1960s America, mirrors much of the intergenerational struggle found in the current revival of the Civil Rights Movement, widely known as the Black Lives Matter movement. As such, *One Crazy Summer* can serve as an effective way to introduce the history and scope of the struggles housed in the long-term Civil Rights Movement(s), and to help to build bridges among all involved.

In the summer of 1968, when *One Crazy Summer* is set, the United States was in the midst of sustained racial turmoil. The previous two decades had seen changes to society that turned everything America knew upside down. The 1950s saw the forced integration of schools throughout the South and the remaining public spaces soon followed suit. The Civil Rights Movement had been building for decades, but the 50s and 60s saw the culmination of these earlier efforts as the Movement organized and leaders like Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X took the stage and became highly recognizable faces of the widespread Movement. This same period was also witness to gross acts and amounts of violence: fire hoses turned on school children, police dogs released to attack non-violent protestors, beatings, bombings, and lynchings. One by one, amid all the gains and progress toward equality in the eyes of the law, Black Americans saw these public faces—the ones who provided the community with strength and hope—assassinated for speaking up and taking a stand for the value and humanity of Blackness.

In less than two years, the Black community watched as Medgar Evers and Malcolm X survived the firebombings of their homes only to be killed by gunmen shortly thereafter—Evers in 1963 and X in 1965. Though the term “Black power” had been in the background of the Civil Rights Movement since the 1950s, the assassination of Malcolm X and a growing dissatisfaction with the slow pace of change brought about by the traditional Movement caused the idea of Black Power to take on a more substantial meaning and nature as Stokely Carmichael, head of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (or SNCC), used the term as a rallying cry during a 1966 speech in Greenwood, Mississippi (Joseph, “Why Black Lives” 18). Furthermore, many in the Black community began to voice the need for racial self-determination as a crucial component of true equality. Where the larger Civil Rights Movement's primary push was for equal treatment under the law, the Black Power Movement sought to achieve more holistic equality through self-representation, self-governance, and self-sufficiency (Joseph, “Historians” 8). As Carmichael moved SNCC to claim power and to become an all-Black organization for social change, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale sought to help Black Americans claim their power and take a stand against police brutality. This partnership resulted in the formation of the Black Panther Party in late 1966. Now, where Dr. King and the traditional Movement called for patience, non-violence, and right behavior to bring about change in federal law, Black Power activists and Black Panthers adhered to Malcolm X's belief in protecting one's self “by any means necessary” and doing whatever it took to gain autonomy and Black control over Black lives.

By the time of Martin Luther King's assassination in April of 1968, there was a more pronounced division between the Civil Rights factions. As his death sent much of the nation reeling, it also highlighted the reality that adherence to respectability politics still got people killed. This brutal act reaffirmed, for some, the effectiveness of “respectability” and nonviolence by identifying it as powerful enough to need permanent silencing, it moved some to abandon the hope of passive resistance in favor of a more self-defense-based positions, and left others in the middle to try and make sense of it all. These varying perspectives, and the need to begin to understand them, are precisely what makes Williams-Garcia's book so valuable, especially in a time when similar conversations persist.

The colorful cast of characters in *One Crazy Summer* does more than retell this history while offering a coming of age Civil Rights story. These characters are the embodiment of various beliefs and factions of the Movement that have been discussed. Williams-Garcia opens her novel with the voice of Delphine, the story's 11-year old narrator. It soon becomes clear that Delphine has taken a role of mother to her younger sisters, Vonetta and Fern, because their biological mother abandoned them when the youngest was an infant. Despite being a child herself, Delphine finds herself living more as an adult, caught between the generation before her and her own. The intergenerational tensions are further reinforced as the girl's paternal grandmother, Big Ma, and her adherence to tradition and respectability politics are introduced when Delphine explains, “That's mainly what I do. Keep Vonetta and Fern in line. The last thing Pa and Big Ma wanted to hear was how we made a grand Negro



spectacle of ourselves [. . .] around all these white people" (p. 2). As she is putting her only grandchildren on a plane in New York City, a plane on which they will fly to Oakland, California to meet the mother they do not know, Big Ma's primary concern is not that the girls will be frightened or homesick; rather, it is whether or not they will "act right" and be "as civilized as everyone else" so they represent their race well (p. 165). Williams-Garcia also hints at the intergenerational and ideological tension that will come once the girls land in California and meet their mother, Cecile, for the first time as Big Ma asks her son how he can send his children to "nothing but a boiling pot of trouble cooking. All them riots" (p. 5). Though a valid comment on parts of the city, terms like "boiling pot" and "trouble cooking" paint the traditional view of a Black Panther-run Oakland in a constant state of violence, which is neither what the girls go on to experience nor an accurate portrayal of the community overall.

Big Ma, as previously noted, holds tightly to tradition and refuses to embrace change of any kind. This can be seen when she refuses to call JFK Airport by its current name, preferring to stick with the original Idlewild, and her insistence that Mohammed Ali be called only Cassius Clay. This tight hold on tradition, coupled with concern about the "grand Negro spectacle," highlights the mindset of many in Big Ma's generation and also the connection to the more traditional branch of the Civil Rights Movement and its regard for respectability politics: act "right"—i.e. in a way that does not draw attention or criticism from white people—to "make sure [not to] misbehave or be an embarrassment to the Negro race" (p. 6). For Big Ma and many like her, the key to gaining rights and becoming a true part of society was proper behavior, which was defined as not doing things that white people didn't like or would consider unacceptable. The burden of maintaining the reputation of an entire race was on the shoulders of every individual Black American, even children. While there were obviously occasions when Martin Luther King and others drew great amounts of attention to themselves and the Black population, their actions were nothing short of what was viewed as peaceful, respectable. They made trouble for governments without making "grand Negro spectacles" of themselves. This is not a criticism of the non-violent Movement by any means; rather it serves to highlight the background against which all other civil rights movements in the United States have been and continue to be judged. Furthermore, this idea of respectability is the yardstick by which Big Ma measured Cecile, the girls' mother.

When Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern step off the plane in Oakland, they enter a world more different than any of them could have imagined. Certainly, there are the anticipated east coast/west coast cultural differences. Beyond those, the girls also find themselves thrust into the middle of ideological and political differences they struggle to understand. As noted earlier, Cecile, their mother, left them without so much as a word six years earlier, and the contact between mother and children has been non-existent. This alone immediately highlights generational differences between Cecile and Big Ma, who left her home in Alabama to move to New York to take care of her son and his girls after they were abandoned. That was the honorable, *respectable* thing to do. The girls soon realize, though, that despite having them come for a visit, Cecile is still anything but honorable and respectable—at least by traditional standards. Where Big Ma and, to a great extent, Delphine, have given up their own lives for the sake of the family, Cecile has created an isolated, individual-focused existence. She's not happy her daughters have come across the country for a visit. She's so unhappy, in fact, that she sends them off to day camp each morning and straight to their bedroom at night, essentially locking herself in her kitchen with her printing press and her words.

Cecile embodies what many people view as characteristics of the Black Panther Party: angry, secretive, and selfish. She refuses to allow her children into her kitchen, she makes no attempt to know them or to let them know her, strangers wearing black berets pay her late-night visits, and she sends a package to day camp with Delphine, telling her to "Give it to the Panthers. Tell them it's from Inzilla," the African name Cecile gives herself (p. 58). This fits quite well the description of Black Panthers that Delphine and the girls carried with them: "militant strangers" (p. 57), and when Cecile asks her to make the delivery Delphine knows she won't "be telling no Black Panthers what Cecile said . . . [and] just took the box and nodded, because that's how you treat crazy people" (p. 58). Yet here is their mother, sending them to the People's Center to get free breakfast from and spend their days with Black Panthers. All of this coupled with their visions of "Huey Newton on the evening news,



wearing his black beret" and "Militants, who [were] angry fist wavers with their mouths wide-open and their rifles ready for shooting" creates deep anxiety in the sisters (pp. 87-8), much like it did for people across the nation. The only version of the Panthers the media chose to portray was one of secrecy, selfishness, and violence, essentially a movement of misguided angry youth—not unlike mainstream media's current portrayal of the Black Lives Matter movement—and this is the version of the Panthers that became the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement (Clayton 451; Davies 50).

Arguably the greatest contribution of *One Crazy Summer* to the ongoing conversations about the Civil Rights Movement is the story's narrator, Delphine. Where Big Ma embodies the ideals of tradition and respectability and Cecile embodies much of the negativity attributed to the Black Panthers, Delphine straddles the two. From the time she steps off the plane in Oakland to the time she steps off the plane in New York, she wrestles with the entire spectrum of the Civil Rights Movement. Not only that, she brings young readers on the journey with her, exposing them to new realities and allows them to come to their own conclusions about what they experience together.

At the beginning of the journey, Delphine mirrors Big Ma in her concern for acting right, and for insuring that her sisters act right. This includes having what she calls her "talking to white folks' voice" (p. 52). She has seen "Black Panthers in Brooklyn. Black Panther posters with SEIZE THE TIME stapled onto telephone poles," just never "marching down Herkimer Street, knocking on [the] door demanding [they] give to the cause" (p. 57). Therefore, this immersion into the heart of the Black Panther movement is scary, and it is difficult for Delphine to take her sisters to the Panther-run People's Center.

As they begin to spend their days at the Center, Delphine notices a side of the group she has not seen before: care and concern for the overall wellbeing of people and the community. She is surprised to see faces of various colors in the breakfast line, and she notes that she had "never seen the Black Panthers making breakfast on the news. But then, beating eggs never makes the evening news" (pp. 63-4). Already her traditional views are being challenged. The more time the sisters spend at the People's Center, the more Delphine sees a different side of the Panthers. The girls spend their days with Sister Mukumbu, who teaches them about the history and community-oriented mission of the Panthers. They also learn new ways to think about revolutionaries and what all revolution can mean. It's not always bloody and violent, as the Panthers are most often portrayed, and it doesn't always mean laws changing as a result of aggressive protest or intimidation. What Delphine learns at the Center is revolutionary actions sometimes include providing food and other necessities to those who cannot afford them, teaching citizens their rights and how to protect them, and it always includes helping the marginalized and oppressed find their voices. The more Delphine learns about the community-focused mission of the Panthers, the more she begins to identify with their cause and, ultimately, with them. The transition from respectability politics to Black Power isn't seamless though.

One afternoon Delphine reads a newspaper article about Bobby Hutton, or Little Bobby, a 17-year-old Panther who was killed during a confrontation with police two days after the assassination of Martin Luther King. The kids at the Center spent their time making signs and banners for an upcoming rally calling for the release of Huey Newton and for the nearby park to be named after Little Bobby, and now reality sets in for Delphine as she laments,

I wished I hadn't opened up that newspaper. I wished I could go right on thinking we were having breakfast, painting signs, and learning our rights. I wished I didn't know that I was marching my sisters into a boiling pot of trouble cooking in Oakland. But it was too late for wishing. I knew full well what I knew. (p. 128)

Exposure to the violence most often associated with the Panthers caused Delphine to visualize herself and her sisters getting caught up in it. This realization pushes her to remove them from participating in the rally because, as she tells sister Mukumbu, "We didn't come here for the revolution" (p. 129).

Delphine goes on to express her fears that "just being . . . at the Center is dangerous" and that she bears the responsibility of looking for her sisters (p. 133). Sister Mukumbu's reply begins to make the true heart of the Black Panther community clear: "We look out for each other. The rally is one way of looking out for all of our sisters. All of our brothers. Unity, Sister Delphine. We have to stand



united" (p. 133). Delphine leaves the Center that day unconvinced, still certain that being alive is better than risking death in the name of unity, but a day trip starts to change her mind.

The tension in Delphine—that between pure respectability politics and self-determination—is most pronounced during a visit to a shop on the wharf in San Francisco. As the sisters enter the store, the white shop owner fixes his eyes on them and does not let up. It takes a minute, but Delphine finally understands it's because

We were black kids, and he expected us to be in his gift shop to steal. When he asked what we wanted, I answered him like I was at the Center . . . "We are citizens, and we demand respect." I grabbed Fern by the hand and said, "Let's go." I had that Black Panther stuff in me, and it was pouring out at every turn. I figured it was all right. Papa wouldn't have wanted me to spend our money where we weren't treated with respect. But I was sure Big Ma would have wanted us to say "Yes, sir" and "Please, sir" to show him we were just as civilized as everyone else. (pp. 164-5)

The defining moment, though, comes as the girls return from their trip in time to see "Cecile and two Black Panthers. Hands behind their backs. Handcuffed. Being led out of the house and down the walkway" (p. 167).

Seeing her mother being arrested for printing materials for the Panthers finally allows Delphine to realize, "It was just as Sister Mukumbu [was] trying to teach us. In Oakland they arrested you for being something. Saying something. If you were a freedom fighter, sooner or later you would be arrested" (p. 170). It is in this moment Delphine realizes that neither strict adherence to ideals of respectability nor working within the community to care for individual needs and to work toward self-determination will protect Black people from oppression. She also knows "there was no telling Big Ma that Cecile was a freedom fighter, oppressed by the Man" because it would only solidify Big Ma's belief in the selfishness of Cecile and those who got themselves locked up (p.180). There was a time Delphine would have believed that, too—that Cecile's selfishness got her what she deserved—but now Delphine knows her mother was arrested for playing a vital role in the fight for civil rights: the dissemination of information. Sister Mukumbu explains to Delphine that her mother was considered a threat because "Information is power . . . Keeping the people informed keeps people empowered" (p. 181), and it's difficult to oppress an informed population without experiencing backlash. Cecile's was clearly a non-violent act of revolution, a side of the Panthers typically not publicized.

Ultimately Delphine realizes the importance of community and speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves. She and her sisters attend the rally, where they partake in their own small act of revolution as they recite a modified version of one of their mother's poems. It is in Delphine's wonder at this moment, her amazement at the more than one thousand people who attend the rally, and as she jokes, "Talk about a grand Negro, well, a grand black spectacle" that we see her come full circle (p. 192). Having experienced both sides of the Civil Rights Movement and having born witness to the under-publicized and hidden character of the Black Panthers, she takes the best parts of both and finds her place in the larger movement for freedom.

The misrepresentation and villainization of movements that disrupt the status quo as much as Black Power and the Panthers did is not uncommon. It can be argued that the same thing is happening now with the Black Lives Matter movement (Clayton 451, 457). Made up primarily of peaceful but vocal and innovative protestors who also spend ample time working for change in their communities, this movement shares many of the same goals as the Panther party did in the 60s: Black self-determination, helping citizens understand their rights, and ending police brutality (Joseph, "Why Black Lives" 19; Nelson 1737). Much like they did to the Panthers, mainstream media shapes the narrative of Black Lives Matter primarily as young, irresponsible, violent, and damaging (Clayton 457, 473). The disconnect between media portrayal and reality is problematic for adults, who can search out a variety of sources and come to their own conclusions, but it is confusing and potentially damaging for children trying to make sense of it all.

This is why Delphine's voice is so important. As Howard and Ryan note, "Exposing tweens to a variety of texts is one way to give them access to multiple perspectives of characters as they navigate different aspects of 'betweenness'" (178). Though their article about *One Crazy Summer* focuses



specifically on the often confusing “betweenness” of the tween years, particularly regarding racial identity and agency, their claim remains true here. By allowing young readers to join her as she moves between what she knows, what she thinks she knows, and what she learns through personal experience, Delphine provides a safe space for kids to test the prevailing narratives, think critically about civil rights—then and now—and to discover their own feelings about and place in the Movement. As such, *One Crazy Summer* provides an excellent start to teaching the full scope of the Civil Rights Movement and all it continues to entail.

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