



**THE
PURPOSE
OF POWER**

HOW WE COME TOGETHER
WHEN WE FALL APART

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ONE WORLD
NEW YORK

The Purpose of Power is a work of nonfiction. Some names and identifying details have been changed.

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Published in the United States by One World, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Garza, Alicia, author.

Title: The purpose of power : how we come together when we fall apart / Alicia Garza.

Description: New York : One World, 2020.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020023583 (print) | LCCN 2020023584 (ebook) | ISBN 9780525509684 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780525509691 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Social movements. | Political participation.

Classification: LCC HM881 .G37 2020 (print) | LCC HM881 (ebook) DDC 303.48/4—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020023583>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020023584>

Ebook ISBN 9780525509691

oneworldlit.com

Illustration by iStock / OlgaLebedeva

Cover design: Michael Morris

Cover photograph: Rachel Eliza Griffiths

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When we built the Black Lives Matter Global Network, we had ideas about how we thought leadership should function but weren't sure how it would work in practice.

Patrisse, Opal, and I never planned to be the “leaders” of Black Lives Matter. We'd planned to operate behind the scenes, connecting people who wanted to get involved in changing the world. After the Black Lives Matter Freedom Ride to Ferguson, we were faced with a dilemma: The people we'd organized to participate in the freedom ride began to agitate to start chapters. Further, Black organizations (and individuals) that did not share our vision began to claim the work that we had been doing, asserting that they'd “started Black Lives Matter” but then espousing values that were not in alignment with our vision. In order for our work not to be stolen out from underneath us, we had to make some quick decisions about how to proceed, to establish our work as distinct from traditional mainstream civil rights organizations but do so in a way that could help grow the work without us.

For us, then, decentralization was both practical and political. It was practical in the sense that we were each committed to our own work outside Black Lives Matter, as well as within it, and needed and wanted more hands to share the load of building a strong network. It was also political: Decentralization could level the playing field of power. It would allow people who are often marginalized or blocked from exercising leadership to lead in public and out loud. Decentralization would allow for a different practice of power, where many people rather than a small few determined the direction of the project.

Patrisse and I were trained in an organizing tradition in which activists are taught to develop other leaders; this philosophy asserts that many leaders are needed to create transformative change, and those leaders should come from communities that have traditionally been excluded from power. And yet we were a part of hierarchical organizations. Hierarchy can help with efficiency—making decisions and getting things done—but of course it is also racialized, gendered, and classed, and it often reflects existing power dynamics.

Hierarchies also open themselves up to corruption and abuse when one person or a small group of people have too much power. There is good reason to be suspicious of hierarchies, particularly as they relate to Black people. Racism inherent in systems, structures, and practices in government, institutions, and the like has meant that Black people are often on the losing end of hierarchies.

Visible leadership within the Black liberation movement has historically skewed male, heterosexual, and charismatic, like the iconic trio of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Huey Newton. Each of these leaders oversaw decision-making and strategy for their respective organizations. For King, it was SCLC; for Malcolm X, it was the Nation of Islam; and for Huey Newton, it was the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. However, when each of these leaders was assassinated, so in large part were the movements they led. The struggle continued, but those specific movements, without their most recognizable leaders, were never the same. Since Black movements—particularly radical Black movements that challenge the state apparatus—are frequently targeted by the state for disruption, distortion, and destruction, considering different leadership models is as much strategic as it is political.

Decentralizing leadership, however, is not synonymous with having “no leaders.” Decentralization means distributing leadership throughout the organization rather than concentrating it in one place or in one person or even a few people.

Occupy Wall Street designated itself as “leaderless.” Everyone was a leader and no one was a leader. All that was required was that you showed up.

The problem, however, was that simply declaring that there were no leaders didn’t mean there weren’t any. And declaring that there were no leaders didn’t address the fact that not only were there leaders but those leaders struggled to not replicate the leadership they were fighting against. Leadership was largely male, largely heterosexual, largely white, and largely educated at elite universities. If we perpetuate the same dynamics that we aim to disrupt in our

movements for change, we are not interrupting power and we are not creating change—we are merely rebranding the same set of practices and the same dysfunctions.

Black Lives Matter designates itself a leader-full organization. That means that there isn't one leader but many. This isn't just rhetoric. Each chapter has chapter leads, and those leads develop leadership inside their chapters. They make decisions about the work of their own chapters, but they also help to make decisions about the activities and the positions of the larger network. And they reject the notion that one leader, or even three, can speak for all or make decisions for all. Trust me—I know this from firsthand experience. Leaders within Black Lives Matter will tell you that I am not the leader, and they will remind me of this fact as well if they believe I am unilaterally speaking for the network. I have become much more deliberate about being transparent about what opinions are mine and what statements are official—debated on and decided by the network itself.

Decentralization also has another purpose, however. It allows for an organization—or a group of people trying to accomplish something together, if you will—to get ideas, leadership, strategy, and input from more people. From that perspective, decentralization is simply smarter: It opens your organization to the contributions of everyone.

As an organizer, I see clear value and purpose in decentralized leadership. I value the input, opinions, and contributions of many, and decentralization can challenge the ways that we've been conditioned to value the input of some over others. It can also allow for a plurality of political worldviews, if constructed deliberately. But it's also a way to be strategic, to fight more effectively. Imagine if the Black Panther Party for Self Defense had functioned as a decentralized organization. Would it have been as easily decimated as it was under a centralized leadership framework?

At the same time, I do prefer working with some form of hierarchy, and I find some uses of hierarchy to be more efficient. Having many leaders, or rejecting the notion of leadership

altogether, means that more process is necessary to get things done. Difficult decision-making practices are not inherent in decentralized models—but a lack of skill and practice in using decentralized methods can lead to a circular process that doesn't get anything done. One of the challenges that decentralized practices posed for Black Lives Matter was how to make quick decisions in an ever-changing environment. We did not have a model for how to make decisions, grounded in our values, in moments when we needed to respond quickly to changing conditions. In my experience, decentralization, or perhaps a misapplication of decentralized methods of leadership, has meant that we've had to let go of many opportunities to make important interventions because we relied so heavily on not making centralized decisions. Perhaps some of that could also be attributed to the wide range of political perspectives inside the organization, approaches that we simply did not have time to analyze and debate together—the newness of our relationships and connections being an important factor. I believe that in organizing, one has to be able to adapt or pivot with nimbleness. Upholding principle over purpose can be harmful under these circumstances.

I also know that not everyone is strong in everything. Imagine asking a person with no experience in the kitchen to become a chef at a Michelin-star restaurant, without the proper training, simply because our principles that everyone is a leader tell us that they can. A misapplication of decentralized practices can at times result in bringing a knife to a gunfight. Denying that not everyone is good at everything can be dangerous for what we are trying to accomplish. So, while everyone can, theoretically, lead, leadership is not only earned, it is a skill that is deliberately built over time. Movements need millions of leaders. Decentralization, along with other methods and models of leadership, can help us activate those leaders. Rather than claiming that leadership does not exist or is not valid, movements must determine which forms of leadership best help to accomplish the objectives they want to achieve.