

June 6, 2019

Dear Dr. King,

I write to you not only to partake in the ongoing conversation that surrounds civil activism but because I feel it is my moral obligation to speak on the current dilemmas that haunt my nation. I do not aim to question, critique, or dismiss the power and impact your agenda has had on our society. Nor do I aim to challenge people's right to speak their truth and occupy space in a way that they see fit. However, as a student of color in the 21st century, I hope to offer a unique perspective on how to address the pervasive civil injustices that continue to plague our ever-changing society.

As fellow outsiders to the dominant racial discourse, I'm sure we can agree that there is a necessary uncomfortable conversation that must be forced to occur, in order that the power dynamics, racial disparities, and rhetoric surrounding oppressed minorities are properly addressed. Cognizant of the complexities of social politics, and its derivation from a history that was heavily influenced by your actions, I maintain the dilemma of how to rectify the economic, social, racial, and gendered injustices that perpetuate inequality.

Now let me be clear: I respect your non-violent campaign approach and agree that it is necessary to work outside the system that creates the conditions that limit equitable living for people of color. But your demonstrations called for a kind of social analysis that I would argue is

not achievable through the same methods today. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are no longer radical enough to shift the power to the people most directly affected by the oppressive nature of our government. Through the political wars waged on innocent people, our society is dominated by a demoralizing sentiment that makes people insensitive to the pervasive existence of racism. It is now necessary to provoke analysis from the intersection of race, class, economic status, and gender.

In spite of the fact that the brutal, exploitative, and highly racialized nature of our history is widely known, there continues to be a disregard of the systemic nature of the socio-economic marginalization of minorities. Our government is guilty of atrocities similar to the broken promises made in Birmingham by merchants. I regret to inform you of the failed promises made in the Civil Rights Act to create justice. Rather than benefit our intersectional communities, the civil changes made worked to placate the social-political turmoil of your generation and did little to terminate the discrimination in our nation. It removed the need for the government to address race in politics and created a colorblind rhetoric that demands racism to be occult. Racism is just as strong now as ever and it continues to manifest itself in new, inexplicit ways.

Now we must not only fight for a more inclusive society, but for an inclusive government that creates an environment that fosters equity. Although your fight centered on breaking down the barriers of legal segregation, our fight continues in order to challenge the legacies of enslavement that oppress us.

It is true that through rallies, protests, and lobbying, communities both then and now have come together in an attempt to negotiate for the equitable treatment of people, yet it remains that white men in power continue to refuse to engage in rectifying the situation. The system is built in a way that preserves the white power structure and fails to account for the voices of the oppressed. Unlike your agenda that fought against the symptoms of a broken system, attention has shifted to challenging the system itself.

Now, and more prevalent than ever, in a nation that claims equality, police brutality has led to clear examples of the pervasive injustices that trouble our communities. The mobilization of people through social media and unification of voices has led to a faceless movement deliberately decentralizing power to protest racial inequality. The Trayvon Martin murder and fatal police shootings of African American men in 2013 sparked a movement out of the same anger, fear, and exhaustion that motivated your followers. These brutalities have not given the people permission to organize against the system; it unified people with a common purpose. Black Lives Matter is dealing with a new name for an old phenomenon. Where youth have found a motive to mobilize and organize for the nation, they have the capacity to build.

Not that your generation of activist can't support in the struggle for equity, but as seen as the creation of Black Lives Matter, there is an intergenerational tension among civil rights advocates, in which racial integration is the paramount goal but the means to get there is contested. Although younger and older factions of activists are not diametrically opposed in each other's motives, their tactics create tensions that divide our communities internally.

One example of this intergenerational tension is in the open rejection of “respectability politics”. In which what is no longer accepted is the notion that, like your followers, the oppressed must assemble in a way that proves their ability to be a part of what is respected and palatable in white America. Rather, this organizing tactic is seen as an insult by the Black and Latino youth who are the ones being targeted and killed in our criminal justice system. Similar to the masses that join you in the streets, I believe that it is the people who are most directly affected who should be listened too. It is them who should be leading the fight against their oppressors, and those with the resources to help should be listening and ready to offer support.

Those iconic images of people who were led by your bravery, those that show them dressed in their finest while the dogs are unleashed on them and officers hose them to the ground are no longer a representation of how we can fight back. Alternately, demonstrators dressed in black hoodies and jeans are now not only a way to fight again a system that demands assimilation to a white standard, but a way of standing in solidarity with Trayvon Martin. A man killed because of the criminalization of blacks, not because he was a suspicious character hiding behind a hoodie.

We demonstrators in our jeans and hoodies are not “ghetto” for refusing to get dressed up to get tear gassed. The very notion that what we wear dictates our character -- or perceived character by those in power -- is ludicrous. Wearing a suit won’t change the circumstances we face. Having to change to be accepted mirrors the thinking that if we just clean up our act, just say no to drugs, and pick ourselves up by our bootstraps we will be able to prosper and evoke

social change. However, this ideology negates the systemic powers at play and does not hold those in power accountable for the historic creation of a socially stratified nation.

Fighting back using an intersectional approach forces the denaturalization of the policies and regulation that have criminalized poor blacks. This intergenerational conflict is a racial and class conflict that has caused us to arrive at an impasse. Where the upper- and middle-class blacks who benefited most from the civil rights movement can't recognize their privilege. This class privilege stands in the way of their ability to recognize the role they have had in harming their communities. Whether it is through the government jobs that they gained following your movement or through their open disapproval of dangerous youth in the media, this dominant ideology divides communities that should be standing together.

We can no longer create tension that demands change nor dramatize existing social issues in a way that changes the system from the top down. Now we must infiltrate the system and remove the neoliberal policies that allow for the discriminatory exploitation of the unheard. Genuine integration must be made a reality in our society and government, and should be led by those most directly affected.

While acts of protest and social defiance were controversial in your time, I believe the way in which we now take to the streets in solidarity should have the same power. We must work in a way that wakes up the masses from their apathetic slumber in order to provoke awareness and create effective agents of change. The elders that once fought to integrate schools and

housing must now listen to the emerging communities living in the projects and fighting against the forces that channel them from school to prison.

Respectfully your student,

D.M.G.