

The History of Now: Black Lives Matter

BY CHARMAINE LANG

Barbara Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the 21st Century*. University of California Press, 2018. (American Studies Now: Critical Histories of the Present, Book 6.) 240 pp. notes. glossary. bibl. pap., \$18.95, ISBN 978-0520292710.

My early memories of learning about history included considering how long ago an event happened. Distance between an event and the present became my barometer for determining whether it was indeed historical. The Civil War, the American Revolution, and other significant events helped to shape the world we currently live in — but I was not there to witness them. And so, for many years I thought history was encapsulated by the past.

Barbara Ransby's *Making All Black Lives Matter*, however, has expanded my understanding: the historical canon includes "the history of now." This book documents the history-making of the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLMM/M4BL¹) alongside the movement's emergence, instead of decades later after it has been analyzed in retrospect.

Some may see this approach as a departure from convention for a text about history, and they would be right — and it is an appropriate departure, since, as Ransby illustrates, this inclusive movement is anything but conventional. Ransby's own decades-long movement work, expertise as a historian, and use of ethnographic methods lend to her strengths as a storyteller, one who seamlessly weaves personal observation and experience as an activist into an accessible analysis of BLMM/M4BL.

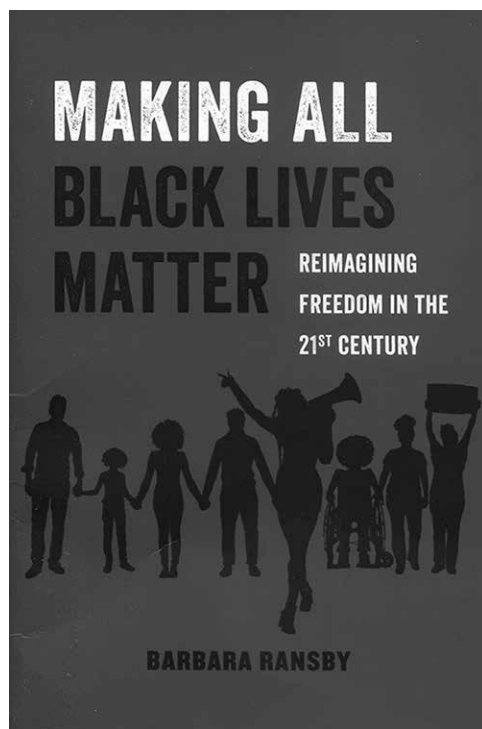
Ransby devotes much time and space to descriptive profiles of the movement's core leaders, whom she has interviewed, observed, and worked alongside as mentor, fellow activist, and participant observer. For those new to BLMM/M4BL, the unfamiliar names, accompanied by their movement contributions and descriptions, will provide needed

insight into the type of policy and grassroots work that is happening and let readers know about key organizations they can contact to become involved in the Movement for Black Lives. Of course, this list of leaders and organizations is neither exhaustive nor representative of all the work being done. For example, many of the individuals highlighted

for their exemplary work are either executive directors or attached to an organization. Less well-known activists and those who aren't tethered to organizations are not highlighted as substantially. This is a marked shortcoming, because these independent activists are also making significant contributions. *Making All Black Lives Matter* does, however, identify the movement's Black trans, queer, and women leaders — showing important progress from the past, when named leaders of Black radical movements were mainly cisgender, heterosexual Black men. This change centers and recognizes those who are most marginalized by oppressive systems as the ones who will generate strategies that lead to liberation.

Ransby's use of participant observation is mentioned but not extensively documented. As someone who uses this research method, I wanted to learn more about her process and

what she discovered. Participant observation has been defined as "a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning...aspects of their life routines and culture."² It also entails recording observations in field notes. I would love to have been able to read the field notes from Ransby's observations, but she does not include them. Most of the information she provides about participant observation is in the book's



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endnotes, but even there it is not extensive. Inclusion of field notes could have been helpful to researchers, especially those who are new to ethnographic methods. But Ransby's rationale for omitting them may have to do with protecting the health of the movement itself: "I have taken meticulous care," she writes in the introduction, "not to violate any confidences or expose any material that would undermine the ongoing work to which I remain committed. I am confident that I have adhered to this principle without compromising the truth-telling mission of the book" (p. 10).

Ransby describes her three-page epilogue, subtitled "A Personal Reflection," as "a love letter to the organizers in the Movement for Black Lives, and a tribute to their increasingly expansive vision" (p. 165). Endearingly, she thanks all the activists who do the significant, difficult, and at times heart-breaking work

of freedom-making. "When you chant, 'We know that we will win,' in a spiraling crescendo," she concludes, "I believe you. I believe you with love, hope, and expectation all wrapped around you in a fierce and unrelenting embrace" (p. 167).

This book may not provide all the documentation of research process that an ethnographer might wish for, but it deserves a place in the personal libraries of all those interested in learning more about U.S. history and liberation movements as well as in every public library. Accessible and equipped with a glossary of commonly used language in the text and a list of key figures this book is a great read for those beginning their activist journeys as well as for more seasoned activists who want to continue to expand their political education.

**This inclusive movement is anything
but conventional.**

Notes

1. Ransby is referring to "[t]he protest and transformative justice movement that emerged under the banner of the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLMM), and later the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL)" (p. 2). She describes BLMM/M4BL as "an assemblage of dozens of organizations and individuals that are actively in one another's orbit, having collaborated, debated, and collectively employed an array of tactics together: from bold direct actions to lobbying politicians and creating detailed policy documents—most notably, the 'Vision for Black Lives' platform, released in August 2016. It also includes a mass base of followers and supporters, who may not be formally affiliated with any of the lead organizations but are supportive of and sympathetic toward the spirit of the movement and are angered by the practices, policies, and events that sparked it" (p. 5).
2. Kathleen M. DeWalt and Billie R. DeWalt, *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers*, 2nd ed. (Alta Mira Press, 2010), p. 1.

[Charmaine Lang is a proud member of a Forward Together program called Echoing Ida (<https://forwardtogether.org/category/echoing-ida>), a community of Black women and nonbinary writers disrupting oppressive narratives and seeding a world where we can thrive. A North Carolina-based writer and researcher, she focuses on the intersections of race, gender and wellness. Charmaine is a doctoral candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Her dissertation research uses ethnographic methods to examine the social and economic determinants of self-care practices among Black women activists in Milwaukee. With her leisure time, Charmaine enjoys reading the stories of Black women, traveling domestically and internationally, and pursuing new food experiences.]