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## “Not Your Grandmamma’s Civil Rights Movement”:<sup>1</sup> A New Take on Black Activism

“It’s illegal to yell ‘Fire!’ in a crowded theater, right?”

“It is.”

“Well, I’ve whispered ‘Racism’ in a post-racial world.”

Paul Beatty, *The Sellout: A Novel*

And still you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description.

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*

### The Failure of the Post-Racial Ideal

The election of former president Barack Hussein Obama in 2008 has contributed to the new wave of popularity of the much-debated concept of “post-raciality,” the theory according to which the United States has finally moved – or is about to move – beyond race, so that the color of one’s skin will no longer influence one’s life in significant ways, and will definitely not hold people back in their pursuit of a fulfilling existence and in their enjoyment of the privileges that come with fully recognized citizenship. The election to the White House of a black man was in fact seen by many as the jewel in the crown of the American Dream of equality, democracy, and upward social mobility through meritocracy: the proof that, through hard work and a charismatic personality, anyone can elevate themselves to the highest office in the country. As Nicole Fleetwood notes in her compelling study of the visual politics of race, Obama has achieved iconic status, and

has been identified as the latest addition to a long line of great black male leaders who have contributed to making the United States a more just and equal society in which racism is to become a thing of the past (32).

The public imagination associates each charismatic black male leader of the past to a moment or event of particular relevance to America's race relations: Frederick Douglass is remembered as the black voice of the abolitionist movement, while Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X are associated with the victories of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and to the end of racial segregation. Consequently, Obama has been identified as the man who was supposed to lead the United States to removing the last obstacle on the way to harmonious race relations, ushering the country into a new era in which race does not affect the wellbeing of individuals and communities. This historical period in which *de facto* discriminations would be a thing of the past is what many have identified as the post-racial phase in US history.

Although the term "post-racial" was first coined as late as 1971,<sup>2</sup> the idea itself has a much longer history and has resurfaced cyclically in the United States' past.<sup>3</sup> African American philosopher Howard McGary mentions Frederick Douglass himself as one of the first advocates of a post-racial society in which individuals would be free to reach their full potential regardless of their race (10). However, what was new in the wake of Obama's election was the widespread feeling that, for the first time, the post-racial ideal could be indeed put into practice. In his essay, McGary pinpoints two different conceptions of a post-racial society: the first is a society in which race is not recognized as a defining element of one's identity, an idea which implies that the recognition of races prevents people from treating each other as peers; the second is a society in which white privilege is eradicated and all races enjoy equal opportunities, but in which the cultural specificities of every minority are acknowledged and cherished, therefore supporting the recognition of races without racism (13). Almost two years after the election of President Trump it is clear that both conceptions of post-raciality are still far from being a reality in the United States, though the second had seemed possible for a moment. Ytasha Womack accurately describes the feeling of hope and trust in the future that Obama's election had triggered in many Americans:

One has to admit that it's a compelling and attractive concept – the idea that after centuries of political and spiritual conflict, a nation went to the polls and in one glorious, transformative act literally purged the land of the scourges of racism, exclusion, and discord. Yes, it is a romantic notion. (X)

However, if ten years after Obama's election it is abundantly clear that post-raciality was and remains a "romantic notion," one has to admit that even in 2008 the possibility of eradicating the color line from American society seemed still a distant goal. Political scientist Michael Tesler has aptly pointed out how during the presidential campaign Obama's racialized figure was at the heart of debates regarding his suitability or lack thereof for the presidency of the United States, a fact that, in his words, characterized the debate as *most*-racial instead of post-racial. Moreover, Tesler highlighted how in 2014, according to several surveys,<sup>4</sup> Americans of all ethnicities believed that the first term of Obama's presidency had not marked a post-racial moment in the history of the United States and feared that racial polarization would continue to affect the fabric of American society (5). To quote Saidiya Hartman, it seems that in the aftermath of Obama's presidency, black Americans continue to live in "the afterlife of slavery," so that it is difficult to postulate a "post" era when so many aspects of black citizens' lives are still influenced by the imbalance in power relations that originated in slavery times. Hartman goes on to state that "because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by the toxic products of this social math – limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment – slavery is a clear and present danger rather than the faded burden of a too-long memory" (6).

The most dramatic evidence that the United States is *not* a post-racial society is given by the treatment of black Americans in the criminal justice system and the frequent news reports of violent encounters between the police and young African Americans that many scholars denounce as a form of social control similar to those enacted in Southern plantations by overseers and slave patrols, and later by the Ku Klux Klan through the systematic lynching of African Americans who challenged the status quo. Acclaimed author Ta-Nehisi Coates recently denounced the climate of

tension and fear for one's life that permeates many black neighborhoods, and that can be directly linked to the nation's past:

How can it be that, with some regularity, the news describes the shooting of an unarmed African American by the very police officers sworn to protect Americans? . . . The answer is in our past, in our résumé, in our work experience. From the days of slave patrols, through the era of lynching and work farms, into this time of mass incarceration, criminal justice has been the primary tool for managing the divide between black and white. . . . We will need a lot more than a good president – than a great president – to terminate it. (n. pag.)

In this sense, the post-racial ideal is, at best, defective, in that it fails to account not only for the consequences of four hundred years of racial discrimination, but also for the ways in which race, class, gender and sexuality are interwoven in shaping images of the Other, something that intersectionality theory has long pointed out. McGary suggests that Frederick Douglass and other “assimilationists” and “universalists” (10) were working towards the post-racial society already in the nineteenth century, and that Douglass in particular “valued all humanity over race, gender or nation” (11). However, scholars working from a feminist standpoint such as bell hooks, Angela Davis and Patricia Hill-Collins have long pointed to the flawed nature of the universalist approach, which fails to consider the intersectionality of identity categories. According to these scholars, addressing race alone is not enough, since the experience of people targeted by discrimination always results from the overlapping of different identity categories, so that their treatment in mainstream society cannot be explained simply as a result of their perceived race, nor through the sum of different and independent forms of discrimination – such as racism and sexism – but gives rise to hybrid forms of subordination that cannot be understood in isolation. In this sense, Obama's election may have sparked some hope for better racial relations, but was not functional in addressing the several and overlapping forms of discrimination based on race, class and gender that disadvantaged social groups experience.

In this social context, black activism is updating its agenda and reshaping the imagery of black social movements created more than fifty

years ago in the context of the Civil Rights movement. Contemporary activists, especially after the election of Donald Trump swept away the last remains of the dream of a post-racial society, are reflecting on the limitations of previous strategies based on respectability and on the logic of “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps,” claiming that this kind of approach overlooks the consequences of institutional racism, and that the latter can be tackled only through wide-ranging reforms rather than through the modification of individuals’ values and lifestyles. Moreover, contemporary black activism deliberately focuses on creating more and more participatory grassroots movements that do not depend on a strong male leadership, but in which decisions are made collectively and, thanks to the use of social media, initiatives are planned in a capillary, fast-paced way.

Last but not least, it is important to notice that women and LGBTQ people are the protagonists of contemporary black activism,<sup>5</sup> which as a consequence is characterized by a more inclusive approach and by the firm desire to reject every form of discrimination based not only on race, but also on gender, sexuality, class, religion, age and physical condition. This accounts for a deep awareness of the role of intersectionality, in line with the principle that racial discrimination cannot be effectively countered unless other forms of discrimination are tackled as well. We could say that the linearity of the great tradition of charismatic black male leaders has begun to wobble with Obama, leaving room for a new approach to activism which privileges a plurality of voices instead of a single charismatic leader. Invested with the responsibility of tearing down the walls that separate American society from the possibility of becoming not only an integrated but a truly anti-racist society, Obama is the first black male leader who is perceived as having failed to live up to the expectations that the mass of his electorate had entrusted to him: the actualization of the post-racial dream.

“Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power” says Nanny to Janie in Zora Neale Hurston’s masterpiece *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, adding that, however, “we don’t know nothin’ but what we see” (29). Similarly, Ta-Nehisi Coates in his bestseller *Between the World and Me* suggests that “perhaps there has been, at some point in history, some great power whose elevation was exempt from the violent exploitation of

other human bodies” but that “if there has been, I have yet to discover it” (8). In the aftermath of Emancipation, Nanny imagined a post-racial society as something possible only in a remote, mythical place, a far-away idyllic island where black people could be empowered. Almost eighty years later, Coates can envision a post-racial world as something possible only in a distant past, in an equally remote, almost legendary civilization that has discovered a way to be great without devaluing the lives of part of its population. In both narrations, post-raciality is impossible in the time and place in which the narrator is writing: it is either a thing of another world or of another time, an idea that looms on the horizon but is never brought to fruition and, today more than ever, never a substantial part of the contemporary scene.

### The Resurgence of Black Activism and the Rejection of the Charismatic Black Male Leader

“Before BLM there was a dormancy in our black freedom movement,” states Patrisse Khan-Cullors, one of the co-founders of #BlackLivesMatter and the inventor of the famous hashtag, in an interview for *The Guardian*: “obviously many of us were doing work, but we’ve been able to reignite a whole entire new generation, not just inside the US but across the globe, centering black people and centering the fight against white supremacy” (n. pag.). As a matter of fact, the protests that have erupted since the killing of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Philando Castile and many other African Americans who have died at the hands of the police, have been extraordinarily effective in mobilizing a highly diverse crowd of activists who are encouraging the country to reflect on how black lives are valued in the context of the its institutions. #BlackLivesMatter – and the dozens of other grassroots movements inspired by it – have drawn attention to the issue of racial discrimination in the United States with an intensity that has not been witnessed since the great social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, sparking an interest in the specificities of anti-black discrimination that previous initiatives had not been able to elicit.

#BlackLivesMatter was born out of the indignation expressed by three

women – Patrisse Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi – after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watch volunteer who shot seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012 as he was walking to the house of his father’s fiancée – located in a gated community of Sanford, Florida – after having bought Skittles and iced tea at a local store. “I continue to be surprised at how little black lives matter” wrote activist Alicia Garza in the aftermath of the verdict, to which Khan-Cullors commented: “#BlackLivesMatter.” Shortly after, the simple hashtag, which merely remarked the presumably self-evident truth according to which the lives of black people count, had become viral and was being used as the slogan of a newly energized generation of black activists.

Political scientist Fredrick C. Harris has aptly noticed that #BlackLivesMatter (#BLM hereafter) is a break from the tradition of black activism in the United States and that, though contemporary protesters acknowledge the debt of gratitude that binds them to the work of previous generations of civil rights activist, they have been quick to point out that “this current wave of protest is not your grandmamma’s civil rights movement” (n. pag.). #BLM activists differ from their predecessors both in the strategies they employ to carry out their initiatives and in the ideals that sustain their movement. Tactically, the main novelty that shapes #BLM protests is certainly the use of technology and social media, which allows contemporary activists to reach millions of people in milliseconds, enabling them to organize protests extremely quickly and to have a stronger impact on mass media, which are more likely than in the past to report on police brutality and on other manifestations of anti-black violence.

The use of photos and actual footage of episodes of racially-motivated brutality to elicit a response from a dormant public opinion is not new in itself. Pictures that showed the horrors of slavery were strategically circulated already by the abolitionist movement – a famous example is the photo of slave Gordon’s horribly scarred back, widely distributed by the abolitionists and later reprinted by *Harper’s Weekly*. By the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement had learnt how to fully exploit the potential of visual culture: television allowed a much broader and faster circulation of images, and civil rights activists were aware of the power of the new medium in shaping public opinion and of the importance of projecting a

positive and respectable public image. Young activists who took part in sit-ins and marches were trained to not respond to provocations, and images of respectable black citizens wearing their best clothes and protesting peacefully despite the violence perpetrated against them by white mobs and the police circulated quickly and caused outrage in the US as well as internationally. There is ample evidence that black activists of previous generations had already proved capable of using mass media strategically, but what is new in contemporary activism is not only how fast images can now circulate, but above all how the accessibility of technology can transform virtually anybody into a reporter who can actively participate in capturing and spreading images of what happens in – and to – the black community almost in real time.

The participatory act of collecting and circulating an ever-growing archive of images has certainly influenced another aspect that distinguishes #BLM and contemporary black activism in general from previous movements: the rejection of a hierarchical structure guided by a charismatic male leader in favor of a more pluralistic approach, in which participatory democracy is at the core of group-led initiatives. This new approach is not the result of a lack of charismatic figures that could fill this supposed void in leadership, as many ex civil rights activists have suggested, but a conscious choice based on the critical assessment of the victories and defeats of the previous decades, which results in the preference for a different kind of leadership. Younger activists seem in fact to be in an ideal position to critically assess the results of the work of previous generations and to eventually question their strategies: as Mark Anthony Neal has noticed, “the generation(s) of black youth born after the early successes of the traditional civil rights movement are in fact divorced from the nostalgia associated with these successes and thus positioned to critically engage the movement’s legacy from a state of objectivity that the traditional civil rights leadership is both unwilling and incapable of doing” (103).

Moreover, Erica Edwards has convincingly argued that the top-down approach privileged by previous phases of black activism was part of an effort, carried on in popular and scholarly environments alike, to document the work of charismatic male leaders at the expense of the exhausting but unchronicled endeavors of ordinary people. Edwards has pointed out that



the narrative of the “Great Man leadership” has obscured the heterogeneous nature of the people involved in the struggle for civil rights, reducing it to a top-down narrative that perpetuates antidemocratic practices and uncritically grants power to normative masculinity (XV).

#BLM activists, on the contrary, are adamant in refusing the dictates of patriarchy, embodied in the previous decades in what Mark Anthony Neal has termed the “Strong Black Man” (25). The archetype of the Strong Black Man represents the kind of heteronormative, patriarchal black maleness conceived as the counter-image to the distorted representations of unreliable, irresponsible, threatening and ultimately dangerous black men that populated and still populate much part of mainstream public imagination. Despite recognizing that the need for Strong Black Men images was rooted in a legitimate attempt to counteract negative portrayals of black masculinity, younger activists reject this counterstereotype, and insist on an approach that centers the perspectives of women and LGBTQ people. This approach is deemed not only fairer and more democratic, but ultimately also preferable from a tactical point of view: as Fredrick Harris has summarized, “charismatic leaders can be co-opted by powerful interests, place their own self-interest above that of the collective, be targeted by government repression, or even be assassinated, as were Martin Luther King and Malcolm X” (n. pag.). Therefore, a community-centered, bottom-up approach such as the one that #BLM opted for is also seen as a safer strategy.

### #BlackLivesMatter: Humanity over Respectability

One of the main traits that differentiates #BLM from previous phases of black activism is the group’s insistence on the humane treatment of black lives over a more specific concern for civil and political rights. This is not to say that the group has no precise political and social goals – obviously, denouncing and fighting police brutality and mass incarceration are among their priorities – but the strategy through which activists are mobilized is that of eliciting empathy through an appeal to common humanity. The assertion that black lives matter and that Blacks deserve to

be treated humanely, as banal as it may seem, has actually a long history in African American activism. 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century anti-slavery campaigns were often focused on proving that people of African descent were human beings and deserved to be treated as such, debunking the theories of scientific racism that represented blacks as sub-human: Sojourner Truth's famous *Ain't I a Woman?*<sup>5</sup> speech is a good example of how the question of humanity was raised as a way to establish a common ground between white and black women and the consequent imperative to be treated as peers. During the 1960s and 1970s, however, the focus on civil rights – more than on human rights – dominated the campaigns of African American leaders and organizations, a focus that translated into the successful passage of fundamental legislation, such as the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the Voting Rights Act in 1965 and the Fair Housing Act in 1968.

It is no coincidence that #BLM is looking back at the historical roots of black activism, and that young activists feel the need to reassert black people's humanity. The group in fact has been very active in articulating how the main problems they are addressing – i.e. police brutality and mass incarceration – derive directly from the institution of slavery, altered to suit the standards of a would-be post-racial society, in which the police has replaced slave patrollers and the exploitation of the unpaid labor of prison inmates has replaced the free labor provided by African slaves. #BLM activists are highlighting how the current situation of many impoverished Black and Latinx communities resembles slavery in many ways: the group has repeatedly denounced that a disproportionate number of people in these communities are denied basic services, such as affordable health care, quality food, safe housing and good education, a situation which leads people driven by lack of opportunities to commit petty crimes and non-violent offenses for which they receive decidedly harsher sentences than offenders coming from predominantly white and affluent communities.<sup>6</sup>

The criminalization of poverty and lack of resources – for which activist and legal scholar Michelle Alexander has coined the expression “New Jim Crow” – has therefore effectively replaced slavery and segregation as a means for ensuring the persistence of white privilege in a post-Civil Rights society. #BLM's focus on *black* lives – contested by those who advocate that all lives matter – is therefore easily explained in the light of a long

tradition of devaluing *black* lives, not *all* lives, in American society. The specificity of anti-blackness is directly linked to the politics of the “peculiar institution,” which denied the humanity of black people and reduced them literally to chattel. As a result, black lives continue to be more vulnerable to racially-motivated violence, and institutions are proving not only unable and unwilling to fully protect them, but actually complicit in the violence perpetrated against them. Now as under the peculiar institution, #BLM claims, the real value of black lives in human terms is far from being universally recognized. On the contrary, the commodity value of these lives is as cherished as in slavery times, since the free labor of black inmates generates an income that makes the prison industrial complex a very profitable machine.

The claim for black humanity has also been used to challenge the politics of respectability,<sup>7</sup> that is the idea according to which black people will receive better treatment if they conform to the values and aesthetics of mainstream society. This approach dates back to the so-called culture of dissemblance,<sup>8</sup> an aesthetic based on self-effacement and a display of modesty and chastity adopted by African American women at the turn of the century as a way to counteract the stereotype of the black Jezebel<sup>9</sup> and to protect themselves from sexual and domestic abuse at the hands of their white employers. Dissembling can be considered the first form of respectability politics, in that respectability was not adopted as a passive adaptation to white middle-class moral standards, but as a form of resistance to abuse. Through this smart performance of identity, African American women could in fact create alternative and positive images of black femininity and reclaim some control over their bodies and their sexuality. This is the reason why, between the 1890s to the 1920s, this policy was adopted and sponsored by black women reformers, such as Nannie Burroughs and Ida B. Wells, who realized that, as black women activists, their authority and credibility as activists had to be supported by an immaculate moral reputation.<sup>10</sup>

However, it is important to point out that the politics of respectability was shaped by important class dynamics: originally adopted to promote positive images of the black community and fight negative stereotypes, respectability was later employed by the black bourgeoisie as an elitist

aesthetic that would set them apart from the black poor.<sup>11</sup> As argued by Higginbotham, in fact, since in post-Emancipation America all black people had very limited access to well-paying jobs, it was usually the adherence to the aesthetics and values of white middle-class respectability, rather than financial stability, that played the most crucial role in class distinction among African Americans (185-230). As a consequence, if the politics of respectability originally served to protect black women, over time this approach started to be seen as specific to a middle-class or even elitist discourse, since the black bourgeoisie began to appropriate respectability politics as a set of moral and aesthetic standards that separated them from poor and uneducated members of the community, deemed “unassimilated.”

The politics of respectability resurfaced during the Civil Rights movement, since, as we have seen, promoting positive images of the African American community was considered instrumental in the fight for civil rights. Many of the leaders of the movement were religious figures and encouraged activists to adopt non-violent strategies and to protest peacefully. Activists were taught to avoid reacting to the provocations of white racists and were encouraged to show dignity and decorum during marches and sit-ins, and to display impeccable manners as part of a well-planned political strategy supporting the leaders’ claims that African Americans were worthy of civil rights. A very telling example of how respectability influenced the agenda of the movement is that of Claudette Colvin, the fifteen-year-old girl who, nine months before Rosa Parks, refused to give up her seat to a white man on a segregated Montgomery bus and was arrested as a consequence of her refusal. The fact that Parks is remembered as the mother of the Civil Rights movement while Colvin has been erased from public memory has to do with the politics of respectability that the movement strongly supported. Colvin was in fact a poor, dark-skinned teenager who was discovered to be unwed and pregnant shortly after her arrest, while Parks was a middle-aged, light-skinned woman with a good reputation, and was therefore considered a more suitable candidate to represent the movement.

However, if respectability as a political strategy has strongly influenced previous phases of black activism, today’s #BLM supporters have been adamant in rejecting this approach, a position that is exacerbating the

generational divide between ex-civil rights activists and contemporary community organizers. Most “baby boomers” who took part in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s are in fact complaining that the new generations are rejecting their tactics and organizing strategies and, above all, are projecting a negative and unacceptable image of the whole African American community. Again, Reynolds’ words aptly illustrate this position when she complains that “at protests today, it is difficult to distinguish legitimate activists from the mob actors who burn and loot. The demonstrations are peppered with hate speech, profanity, and guys with sagging pants that show their underwear . . . BLM seems intent on rejecting our proven methods. This movement is ignoring what our history has taught” (n. pag.). Reynolds complaints are not new: from Jesse Jackson’s call to responsible black fatherhood during the Million Man March in 1995 to Bill Cosby’s infamous “Pound Cake Speech” in 2004,<sup>12</sup> numerous are the African American leaders who have tried to convince the black community of the strategic validity of respectability to reach full racial equality: if black people behave in a respectable manner, they claim, injustices associated with racial discrimination will diminish and eventually stop.<sup>13</sup>

#BLM activists, on the other hand, are determined to disavow the validity of an approach based on traditional notions of middle-class respectability and point out that everybody should be granted humane treatment regardless of their looks and moral standards. We could actually state that #BLM was born out of a specific opposition to the politics of respectability, and in support of what has been termed the “politics of the hoodie” (542). In the aftermath of the Trayvon Martin murder, in fact, the attention of the media had immediately focused on one detail: the fact that the teenager was wearing a hoodie, which had allegedly made him suspicious in the eyes of his killer. Several commentators argued that if only Martin had worn something different he might still be alive, and Fox News host Geraldo Rivera even ventured to say that the hoodie was as responsible as Zimmerman in killing the young man.<sup>14</sup> The reaction of #BLM was immediately characterized by a strong denunciation of this discourse, and the group has since repeatedly stressed that episodes of racially-motivated violence should not be condoned or downplayed because the victim did not conform to traditional standards of respectability.

The same attitude informs the agenda of other contemporary black movements. The Million Hoodies Movement for Social Justice, founded to compensate for the media's failure to objectively report on the circumstances of Trayvon Martin's murder, has also appropriated the "politics of the hoodie" and discarded the traditional "respectable" approach. In March 2012, the group promoted a march in Union Square, NYC, inviting participants to wear a hoodie to show their support for Martin's family and to protest against the media's portrayal of the young victim as a thug. Million Hoodies has therefore turned the hoodie into a symbol of solidarity with the victims of police brutality and an emblem of their support for those who are routinely racially profiled. By clearly evoking the Million Man March organized by Farrakhan in 1995 with their name, the Million Hoodies March organizers point to its politics of respectability and its top-down approach to activism only to reject them. Farrakhan is in fact known for his conservative approach to militancy: for example, before the Million Man March he had encouraged black women and girls to stay at home with the children and be a virtuous example to them, while during the event he spurred black men to be good husbands and fathers and behave responsibly. The Million Hoodies activists, on the contrary, stress that the rhetoric of personal responsibility does not prevent institutional racism, and that a display of respectability does not guarantee black people's safety in their interactions with law enforcement.

Contemporary black activism has therefore decidedly turned its back on the politics of respectability. Young activists are pointing out that this approach is not only elitist, in that those who are perceived as non-respectable are left behind and are not deemed worthy of human rights, but also that it blames the victim rather than the perpetrator, since instead of requiring racist people and institutions to change, it demands that black people adapt their appearance and behavior to comply with the standards set by those very racist institutions. Most importantly, #BLM calls attention to the fact that respectability politics does not address institutional racism, the form of racism that most often and most dangerously harms black people in contemporary American society. The emphasis on personal responsibility, in fact, demands that black people respond individually to forms of racism that are embedded in institutions – such as racism in law enforcement, in

the legal system, in education, in the job market and in real estate. On the other hand, #BLM activists, as well as numerous scholars whose work focuses on dismantling institutional racism, argue that individual “adjustments” in one’s attire or behavior will not remove the structural barriers to racial equality that only wide-ranging social reforms could ensure. “The signature of respectability politics is its disavowal of the legitimacy of black rage” writes journalist Michelle Smith, who has claimed that the politics of respectability and the rhetoric of personal liability contribute to spreading the false belief that black people who do not conform to more traditional aesthetics and morals deserve the unjust treatment they receive, so that their rage will be dismissed as simple hooliganism and not as a politically salient response to widespread racial discrimination (n. pag.).

### Literary Representation of the “Politics of the Hoodie”

The new approach to activism of #BLM and other contemporary organizations fighting for social justice is mirrored in the literature produced by activists and professional writers whose work focuses on anti-black violence. The rejection of respectability politics, the necessity to re-assert the value of black lives, and the acknowledgement of the work of women and LGBTQ subjects as community organizers have in fact found their way into several of the literary works that have been published since the founding of #BLM. The memoir of #BLM co-founder Patrisse Khan-Cullors, co-authored with asha bandele, is a perfect example of how contemporary black activism and African American literature are influencing one another. The text, published in January 2018, is titled *When They Call You a Terrorist* and chronicles the life of Khan-Cullors from her childhood to the most recent initiatives she promoted through #BLM. The title refers not only to the fact that #BLM activists have been listed by FBI Counterterrorism Division as “black identity extremists,” but also to the actual charges of terrorism brought against Khan-Cullors’s brother Monte, jailed and repeatedly tortured as a consequence of a schizoaffective disorder that was never properly diagnosed nor treated.

Significantly, the book opens with an account of one of Dr. Neil de Grasse

Tyson's talks, in which the renowned African American astrophysicist argues that human beings are literally made out of stardust, in that the atoms and molecules that form our bodies are directly traceable to stars that exploded into gas clouds. This almost mythical account of the origins of all lives is nevertheless immediately contradicted by a statement that denounces the precariousness of black lives and the ineffectiveness of the rhetoric of personal liability in counteracting such a hostile environment. In describing the neighborhood in which she used to live as a child, plagued by poverty, drugs, and routine episodes of police brutality, Khan-Cullors recalls that she and her family

lived a precarious life on the tightrope of poverty bordered at each end with the politics of personal responsibility that Black pastors and then the first Black president preached – they preached that more than they preached a commitment to collective responsibility. (5)

The failure of the logic of “pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps” is a leitmotif of the text, as is the incapacity of politics and religion to respond to the needs of the black community and effectively support its more vulnerable members. Both the tradition of black male clergy-based leadership and the first black president are represented as inadequate to remove the barriers created by institutional racism and classism, and prone to blame black people for the very forces that oppress them and let them know on a daily basis that their lives do not matter. The criticism of the rhetoric of personal responsibility is reiterated in the author's disapproval of rehab programs that focus exclusively on the patients' accountability, without considering the external factors that push people in disadvantaged communities to substance abuse. In reviewing the Salvation Army program in which her biological father Gabriel Brignac had been enrolled before dying of a heart attack, Khan-Cullors states:

As I grow older I will come to question 12-step programs, see their failures, all the ways they do not reduce the harms of addiction by making their harms accrue to the individual, alone. They do not account for all the external factors that exacerbate chaotic drug use, send people into hell . . . Why are only



individuals held accountable? Where were the supports these men needed? (37-41)

The author experiences therefore from a very young age the pain of seeing her father fall victim to drug abuse with no significant support to fight his addiction, while institutions not only failed to provide help, but also blamed him for a lifestyle that was the direct consequence of a chronic lack of opportunities. Indeed, the emotional closeness between the protagonist and her father contradicts the dominant narrative of his lack of responsibility and respectability and casts him as a positive figure in Khan-Cullors' childhood and adolescence. Moreover, the fact that Gabriel Brignac, despite his personal problems, manages to be a constant and loving presence in her life counteracts widespread stereotypical accounts of absent black fatherhood supported by studies such as the infamous Moynihan report,<sup>15</sup> which blames black men's unreliability as the main cause of the social evils that affect African American communities. Khan-Cullors engages the reader in a different kind of narrative, one in which Gabriel Brignac embodies an alternative kind of respectability, based on his devotion to his daughter and to the other members of his large family. From the moment he enters her life, her father is described as "immediately and continually present" (38), and his sudden disappearance for days or weeks at a time when he slips back into his addiction are reconsidered in light of the fact that he has no real access to structures that might effectively help him. In this context, personal responsibility is mitigated, as the author ascribes the reasons of Gabriel's self-destructive behavior not so much to the impact of several years of substance abuse, but to that of decades of humiliations and unmitigated racism. As Gabriel blames himself for failing at rehab, Khan-Cullors tries to show him a different reality: "I try continually to talk to my father about structural realities, policies and decisions as being even more decisive in the outcomes of his life than any choice he personally made" she remarks, "I talk about the politics of personal responsibility, how it's mostly a lie meant to keep us from challenging real-world legislative decisions that chart people's paths, that undo people's lives" (93).

The "undoing" of people's lives and the sense of extreme vulnerability

of black bodies, especially in impoverished communities, is shown in all its brutality in the interactions between the authors' brothers and the police. In one of the first scenes of the memoir, the protagonist watches as her two older brothers, Paul and Monte, who are eleven and thirteen respectively, are stopped and frisked by the police for no other reason than standing on a street corner. The experience is described as particularly humiliating in that the officers touch the boys' bodies all over while yelling slurs at them. The author, then a small child, watches powerlessly, frustrated by her inability to do or say anything that might help her brothers. The scene clearly conveys the idea that the boys are being trained from a young age to accept their helplessness and to get used to the fact that no justice is to be expected for the wrongs done to them. As the author points out, by then her brothers have internalized the idea that complaining is pointless, in that their parents and the other adults of the community are as vulnerable as themselves:

Neither Paul nor Monte will say a word about what happened to them . . . they will not be outraged. They will not say that they do not deserve such treatment. Because by the time they hit puberty, neither will my brothers have expected that things could be another way. They will be silent in the way we often hear of the silence of rape victims. (15)

In other words, Paul and Monte have already internalized the notion that their life does not matter. The scene, and the peculiar position of the author/protagonist in it, begs comparison with the by now canonic scene of the beating of Aunt Hester in Douglass's *Narrative* (1845). The sense of powerlessness and paralyzing fear described by Khan-Cullors immediately reminds readers who are familiar with the famous slave narrative of the emotions experienced by young Douglass as he hides in a closet and witnesses the atrocious whipping of his young aunt by her master:

I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was

about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it. (16)

In both Douglass's and Khan-Cullors's cases, the act of witnessing the cruelties inflicted on the body of a beloved person is described as a rite of passage for the young protagonists, who understand their position in the world as that of silent witnesses. The shock that follows the spectacle of violence against a loved one actually robs the protagonists of their voices, so that their witnessing cannot be successfully translated into testimony: even the famously articulate Douglass admits that he cannot effectively elaborate on paper the feelings he experienced on that occasion. Khan-Cullors on the other hand declares that she erased the episode from her memory altogether, and never tried to recall it or testify to it until the reports on Michael Brown's death started to circulate in Ferguson, bringing back her traumatic memory.

Several recent texts frame the young African American protagonists as silent witnesses, who are initiated to the evils of institutional racism by witnessing an episode of police brutality against a loved one while being unable to intervene. MK Asante, Jr., for example, begins his compelling memoir *Buck* (2014) with a scene of his brother being arrested with unnecessary and disproportionate violence, while the young author/protagonist is restrained by another officer and therefore incapable of helping him. As young MK watches, his brother is mercilessly beaten by one of the officers long after having been apprehended, which makes the beating not only pointless but especially vicious in that the victim is unable to defend himself. In this scenario, the author can do nothing but freeze and watch in silence:

I'm stuck. Can't move. Guns glaring at me, steely-eyed. Pee shots down my leg. . . . I make out [my brother] Uzi kneeling at the top of the steps, elbows over face, nightsticks marching on his head, hands, ribs, neck, back, everywhere. I feel every blow like they're beating me too. (8-9)

Throughout the scene, the officers are compared to disastrous natural elements, such as earthquakes and floods, that neither the young protagonist

nor his older brother have any chance to survive: “an earthquake hits the house” as the light of the patrol cars project a “tsunami of blue” in the kitchen and the officers “flood the house” (8). Significantly, Asante’s telling use of colors in describing the episode conveys the idea that these disastrous elements are embedded in the very fabric of American society: the red and blue lights of the police cars and the white faces of the officers bring to mind the American flag, and reinforce the idea that white supremacy is an integral part of American national identity. The blackness that marks the protagonists’ bodies, on the contrary, is not represented in this color palette, which symbolically puts black subjects in a liminal position, reinforcing the idea of their second-class citizenship.

The leitmotif of voiceless witnesses also pervades Angie Thomas’ acclaimed debut novel *The Hate U Give* (2017). After the young protagonist Starr watches her friend Khalil being shot to death by a police officer, who had ordered him to pull over for no apparent reason, she is unable to provide a direct testimony of the traumatic scene she witnessed: “I’ve seen it happen over and over again: a black person gets killed just for being black . . . I always said that if I saw it happen to somebody, I would have the loudest voice, making sure the world knew what went down. Now I am that person, and I’m too afraid to speak” (38). Even after she is forced by the police to testify, her words do not convey the feelings experienced by her most authentic self, in that respectability politics and an almost atavic, paralyzing fear contribute to distorting her voice. Upon entering the police station, Starr notices: “My voice is changing already. It always happens around ‘other’ people . . . I choose every word carefully and make sure to pronounce them well. I can never, ever let anyone think I’m ghetto” (97). The violence witnessed in the “ghetto”, consequently, is never voiced, or is voiced in a way that makes her words inauthentic and therefore easy to twist. In fact, the police readily distort Starr’s testimony, manipulating her interview to draw attention not so much to the gratuitous murder of her friend, but to his possible involvement in drug dealing and gang membership. Respectability politics and institutional racism are therefore portrayed as complicit in reducing black people to silence and in systematically devaluing their lives.

As is clear from the examples offered by Khan-Cullors, Asante Jr. and Thomas, the resurgence of the trope of the silent witness in contemporary

African American literature and particularly in life writing is symptomatic of the ongoing necessity to articulate the vulnerability of black bodies, and of the difficulty of finding a voice to speak against racist and classist institutions, a condition that authors frame as a direct and painful legacy of the peculiar institution. In this context, the re-emergence of one of the most characteristic tropes of slave narratives can be interpreted as a denunciation of the denouncement that anti-black violence has never been effectively eradicated from American institutions. The figure of the silent witness not only confirms the necessity to re-affirm the fact that black lives matter, but also demonstrates the urgency of reclaiming basic human rights such as freedom of speech. In this context, we can state that the insistence of #BLM on advocating humane treatment for black people and on ensuring that basic human rights are actually granted is mirrored in the literature produced not only by the members of the movement but also by a whole generation of young black writers who are aware of the urgency of speaking up against systematic injustice.

In all of these works, the only way for the silent witness to claim his/her voice back is through community-based activism. As Khan-Cullors, Asante and Starr educate themselves on the history and legacy of racial oppression, they become empowered to share their knowledge and transform it into real initiatives for the achievement of social justice through an approach to activism that does not cast them as leaders, but as community healers and caregivers. For a whole generation of young Black Americans, witnessing in silence is no longer an option: strong in the tradition of black militancy, young activists are convinced of the power of grassroots movements to reshape America's race relations. Reminding readers that "real leadership must be earned, not appointed" (250), Khan-Cullors ends her memoir with a message of hope and an encouragement to future generations of community organizers:

I know that it was organizers who pulled us out of chattel slavery and Jim Crow, and it is organizers who are pulling us out of their twenty-first-century progeny, including racist and deadly policing practices. And I know that if we do what we are called to do, curate events and conversations that lead to actions that lead to decisions about how we should and would live, we will win. (249)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The title quotes Fredrick Harris' article "The Next Civil Rights Movement?" published in *Dissent Magazine* in 2015. Harris, in turn, is quoting St. Louis rapper Tef Poe who, at a rally in Ferguson to protest the murder of Michael Brown, took the stage and declared that "This ain't your grandparents' Civil Rights Movement," arguing that older African American leaders should step aside and make room for younger community organizers.

<sup>2</sup> The first reported use of "post-racial" was in the article "Compact Set Up for Post-Racial South" by James T. Wooten, published in *The New York Times* October 5, 1971. The article describes the establishment of the Southern Growth Policy Board in the town of Durham, North Carolina by scholars and politicians who believed that the South had entered a new historical phase in which racial tensions were substituted by different and more pressing concerns, such as sudden population increase and growing economic instability.

<sup>3</sup> There are scholars, however, like Ramón Saldívar in his interesting reflection on the new transracial imaginary, who use "post-racial" to designate not the extinction of racism, but a new way of reflecting on race in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Saldívar uses "post-racial" as an umbrella-term that encompasses concepts such as "post-blackness" and points out that a new way of approaching racial issues is present in the contemporary literature produced by all minorities in the United States. See Saldívar 2012.

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough report of the several surveys that documented the shift of public opinion regarding racial relations after Obama's first term, see Tesler 2012, 208, note 15.

<sup>5</sup> As mentioned in the following paragraphs, #BlackLivesMatter has been founded by three women: Opal Tometi, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, and Alicia Garza. The latter two openly identify as queer women.

<sup>6</sup> See Alexander and Stevenson.

<sup>7</sup> The phrase "politics of respectability" was first used by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham with reference to the activism of black women in the Baptist Church in post-Emancipation years. The women Higginbotham describes were trying to improve their communities by providing basic social services such as schools and job training centers. At the same time they promoted cleanliness, polite manners, religiousness and secrecy about one's private life to counteract negative stereotypes that depicted black people – and especially black women – as lazy and immoral. From Higginbotham's book, the expression "politics of respectability" spread and started to be used in different contexts to refer to the idea that better treatment is to be expected when one conforms to the ideals and aesthetics of the mainstream.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase "culture of dissemblance" was coined by historian Darlene Clark Hine in an essay that investigated the lives of black maids and servants in the Midwest at the turn of the century, examining their emotional response and their strategies of resistance to

sexual and domestic abuse (912).

<sup>9</sup> The stereotype of the Jezebel represents black women as naturally promiscuous and unable to conform to the values of true womanhood promoted by Victorian society (piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness). The stereotype emerged as a way to justify the sexual exploitation of enslaved women and girls, whose rapes were functional in giving birth to new slaves who would enrich the master's capital. The representation of black women as Jezebels positioned them outside the sacred domain of true womanhood and made their sexual exploitation acceptable in a society of supposedly high moral standards. Representing black women as hypersexual beings always lusting after white men virtually eliminated the idea that rape could occur, since the blame of the sexual encounter was cast on the lascivious nature of the woman and not on the abusive man.

<sup>10</sup> It is important to point out that Burroughs and Wells used the cult of respectability as a means by which they could support mobilization against widespread social evils, such as segregation and lynching. For example, given that respectability demanded great attention to cleanliness, Burroughs campaigned to guarantee that the colored sections of public transportation had bathrooms with soap and cloths, but eventually stated that the only way to achieve this result would be to outlaw segregation altogether (Higginbotham 223). Wells, in her lifelong battle to end lynching, pointed out that behind many lynchings was a consensual relationship between white women and black men, denounced as rape when the liaison was discovered. However, in her autobiography she highlights how only her spotless reputation made it possible for her to make such a statement. (Wells 234). In this sense, I interpret Burroughs' and Wells's use of respectability as a smart strategy to strengthen their respective political campaigns.

<sup>11</sup> The origins of the black bourgeoisie may be traced back to the division between field slaves and house slaves. The latter usually lived in their masters' houses and, despite being frequently subjected to forms of exploitation such as rape and domestic abuse, often had better chances to acquire some form of education. Also, contrary to common belief, house slaves were generally chosen among those considered to be most good looking because of a lighter complexion. After Emancipation, ex house slaves and their descendants had therefore better chances to acquire a higher social status, and several scholars note that many of them internalized white standards (for example the preference for certain physical traits, such as light skin, straight or wavy hair, but also values, such as temperance and respectability) and used them to reinforce intra-racial class distinctions.

<sup>12</sup> "Pound Cake Speech" has become a popular way to refer to the speech given by Bill Cosby during the 2004 NAACP awards ceremony in Washington for the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court decision that outlawed racial segregation in public schools. In his speech, Cosby blamed the black community for widespread social problems, such as high rates of school drop-out, unemployment and mass incarceration. He criticized what he considered bad habits of the black community, such as the use of Black English, African-inspired names, the prevalence of single-parent families, and consumerism. The speech is referred to as the "Pound Cake" speech because

of Cosby's reference to black youth being shot by the police for stealing things such as Coca-Cola and pound cake: notably, the comedian argued that the blame should be on the ones stealing, not the ones shooting. Cosby also maintained that African Americans should not attribute their problems to racism, but to their own culture of poverty.

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting, however, that several ex civil rights activists are recognizing the legitimacy of the #BLM approach, and are acknowledging the necessity of new strategies for the contemporary scene. Attorney and ex civil rights activist Oscar Blayton, for example, has argued that Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson should step back and allow younger leaders to speak. He has aptly commented: "There are those in my generation who look at the way young people dress, tattoo themselves and listen to hip hop music and shake our heads wondering how people filled with such youthful foolishness could effect a serious social movement. But this only reminds me of how our parents and grandparents shook their heads at how 'foolish' our afros and rock and roll were back then" (*Ain't Your Grandparents' Civil Rights Movement*).

<sup>14</sup> See "Geraldo Rivera: Trayvon Martin's Hoodie."

<sup>15</sup> *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965) by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, commonly known as the "Moynihan Report", supported the idea that the prevalence of single-mother families among African Americans is directly related to what are described as "pathological" conditions that affect many black communities (chronic poverty, joblessness, high dropout rates). Moynihan suggests that this peculiar familial structure dates back to the forced disruption of black nuclear families during slavery, which led to the emergence of matriarchal communities led by domineering, "emasculating" black women. Several scholars have criticized the Report as racially and gender biased and as an example of "blaming the victim" for its negative depiction of African Americans (e.g. Hortense Spillers in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe.")



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