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Post-racial America Exploded: #BlackLivesMatter Between Social Activism, Academic Discourse, and Cultural Representation

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John Paul Russo

Giuseppe Lombardo: 1951-2018

Giuseppe Lombardo, linguist and literary scholar, associate professor of Anglo-American Languages and Literatures at the University of Messina, was born in Sant'Eufemia d'Aspromonte on 4 August 1951 and died on 2 May 2018 in Palmi (Reggio Calabria) after a long illness. Many of us knew Giuseppe as the genial board member and treasurer of AISNA, who kept our books in order during some of the most difficult financial years in its history. He was a familiar presence at our biennial conferences and our annual meetings, frequently giving papers and organizing panels, and coediting one of our proceedings. On these occasions, ever so gently, he would tap members for late dues, especially if we wished to vote.

Prof. Lombardo wrote widely on American literature and culture from the eighteenth century to the present. His early interest in the subject was fostered by a Fulbright Fellowship to Northeastern University in Boston (1976-77), which extended for a second year at the University of Tulsa, in Tulsa, Oklahoma (1977-78). His literary breadth was extensive, from the monographs (*"Through Terror and Pity": Saggio su* Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War *di Herman Melville*, 1984; *Ombre sui Pascoli del Cielo: Utopia e Realtà nei Romanzi di John Steinbeck*, 1990) to literary history ("La fortuna di Leopardi in America, 1852-1887"), numerous editions (e.g., Melville, *Il Lillà di Rip Van Winkle e Poesie*; Franklin, *Autobiography*; Erskine Caldwell, *Tragic Ground*), a coedited anthology of the history of instruction in Great Britain and the Unites States, and a coauthored, three-volume *Grammatica della lingua inglese* (2004). Not many of us knew this grammarian side of his career. Unquestionably his favorite form was the close reading of a single work in which he could exercise concentration and depth to an extraordinary degree. Some the figures upon whom he wrote were Poe, Emerson, Hawthorne, Oliver W. Holmes, Pound, and especially Melville. According to Prof. Giuseppe Nori, "Lombardo's pioneering work in Melville's poetry was especially important for Italian Americanists and American Studies."

In his mid-50s, beginning with a contemporary fiction review in *Italian Americana*, Prof. Lombardo turned to the ethnic literature of the Italian Americans. He organized panels at AISNA conferences and wrote insightfully on Pietro di Donato, not only on the classic *Christ in Concrete*, but on the lesser known late novel, *This Woman*, which he rescued from obscurity.

He was proud of his association with the Accademia Peloritana dei Pericolanti and both his scholarly labors and his daily travels illustrate its motto, *Inter utramque viam pericolantes*, taken partly from Virgil on Scylla and Charybdis and very loosely translated "risk-taking either way." Thus, he was not afraid to move across disciplines and into new fields. Moreover, except ferrymen, few have crossed the Straits of Messina more often than Giuseppe Lombardo. When the new transport services opened up, he used them like a New York subway. Starting in Palmi, he would arrive at his office in the Annunziata by 9:30 am, then cross back for lunch at a favorite restaurant in Villa San Giovanni or Reggio Calabria, then back to Messina for the afternoon office hours or administrative duties. One time, as I recall, a group of faculty and students were dining at a seaside trattoria; it was 10:30 pm when "Pino" glanced at his watch, rose abruptly, and hastened to catch one of the late ferries nearby – we went along to see him off. I can still see him standing aft and smiling. He carried every schedule in his head.

The high esteem with which Prof. Lombardo was held by colleagues and students alike is amply attested by the response to his death, and unusual for its personal tone, as if his loss were that of a dear friend or member of the family. "My heart broke when I heard of the passing of Professor Lombardo," writes Maria Elena Alampi, PhD candidate at the University of Birmingham; "He was the first person I met at university when I moved from Bologna to Messina . . . My lifetime love of literature and cinema came from my many years as his student . . . He was a big smile and a positive thought every time you saw him." Dr. Giulio Chiofalo speaks of him "as the wisest man I've ever met. Whenever I needed someone to rely on, he would be there at my side telling me the best thing to do. He taught me to love my job, to be patient, and never to lose faith in people. But, above all, he taught me to believe in myself and to be self-confident, and that's why I loved him so much. He was like a second father to me." Prof. Marco Cicciò writes:

> To Prof. Giuseppe Lombardo I return my deep affection and gratitude. As I was yet uncertain at the outset of my university career, he introduced me to the field of American Studies of which he was the master. And in the course of the years, he was never wanting in either counsel or encouragement. Of Giuseppe, I will always remember his mild character, his smile, and his amiable conversation at a well-laid table whose pleasures he enjoyed and which he knew how to find.

Prof. Maria Serena Marchesi, who teaches literature at the University of Messina, recalls:

> Professor Lombardo was truly beloved by our students. They stood in awe of his great professional qualities but at the same time they were sincerely fond of him as a person, and very often I've heard my own students say: "I hope 'Lombardo' is on the panel on my graduation day: I would be less scared if he came." Many of them have been sharing the sad news of his death on Facebook, with words like "a role model," "a great man," "a champion of us students" and – perhaps the thing he would have liked most – "the man who truly made me love American literature."

Lastly, Prof. Maria Vittoria D'Amico, his colleague in the PhD course in English Studies, the joint venture between the Universities of Catania and Messina that she directed, recalled that "what was quite correct and normal to him has become something quite unusual in this age of ours: as a colleague he was a very gentleman and down to earth, always loyal and ready to be helpful at any moment."

Illness had slowed him down but little in recent years; he never stopped teaching, writing, and planning programs. His small office at the end of the first-floor corridor was located in the former Lettere e Filosofia building, now DICAM (Dipartimento di Civiltà Antiche e Moderne), which rises high on the Annunziata and affords views of the harbor of Messina, the Straits, and the coast of Calabria. When I sat there in conversation with him, he would look out and take inspiration from this grand panorama and grow expansive and hopeful with regard to the future. Then, with a little joke about something or other, he would turn to his work.

Post-racial America Exploded: #BlackLivesMatter Between Social Activism, Academic Discourse, and Cultural Representation

Gianna Fusco and Anna Scacchi

Introduction

"We are unapologetically Black"
Black Lives Matter Global Network

On February 26th, 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was killed by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer in Sanford, Florida. Upon seeing a black kid wearing a hoodie, Zimmerman's immediate thought was "thug," so he called the police reporting suspicious behavior. Despite being told by the police not to leave his car, he eventually decided to take things in his hands and started following the boy. He then entered into physical confrontation with Martin, which resulted in the unarmed boy being fatally shot in the chest. Initially released under Florida's "Stand Your Ground" statute, since he claimed he had acted in self-defence, Zimmerman was later charged with murder following rallies and marches calling for a thorough investigation of the case and Barack Obama's belated support of Martin's parents' search for justice.

The president had been reluctant to make a public comment on the case, well knowing that anything he might say would meet with controversy and criticism, but when almost a month after the event he finally spoke, as Trayvon Martin's mother remarked, he did so "not only as a parent but as an African American parent of African American children in a country where black children are still so vulnerable to violence of all kinds" (Fulton and Martin 154). Obama's words – "You know, if I had a son, he would look like Trayvon" – were met with a storm of controversy because, cautious as they were, by placing the emphasis on Martin's skin color they contested the conservative media's strategy of "blaming the victim" for his suspicious behavior.

By implying that the hypothetical son of the President and a black teenager wearing a hoodie would look alike, Obama's words shifted the focus from class, culture, or age to race: it was not Trayvon's hoodie or his

hip-hop apparel to be responsible for his death, as Fox News host Geraldo Rivera claimed, but rather his blackness. Even more controversial were the president's comment, a few days after Zimmerman's acquittal, that "Trayvon could have been [him] 35 years ago," and his effort to put the outrage of the African American community in the context of their daily experience of racial harassment, in spite of the fact that the rest of his speech encouraged acceptance of the verdict and trust in the legal process.

The implication of Obama's statement seemed to be that Martin's death, like that of the many other blacks who are killed at the hands of police officers and vigilantes, was not a matter of behavior. As poet Claudia Rankine put it, it has to do with the constrictions limiting black life and humanity in the US:

> Though the white liberal imagination likes to feel temporarily bad about black suffering, there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black: no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning onto this street, no entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while black. (145-146)

July 13, 2013, the day of the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killer, when the fact that to the State black lives did not matter like white lives became evident, marked the end of America's dream of postraciality. A dream which had seemed to be about to come true with the election of the first Black president in the history of the US but had soon started to recede. Indeed, when Senator Barack Obama became the presidential candidate of the Democratic Party, and later, when he was elected to the White House, many Americans, both white and black, hoped this would be the dawn of a new era for the country, a new historical time in which, after centuries of racial injustice, race would no longer matter. Others interpreted Obama's victory as proof that the US had indeed become colorblind and rewarded individual talent and hard work, no matter the skin color. As a consequence, corrective practices and laws aiming at fighting racial discrimination such as Affirmative Action were no longer needed and African Americans

were to stop playing the race card and using the past as an excuse for their current failures. Despite the way it was received by many African Americans, Obama's comments on the Trayvon Martin's case seemed to do precisely that to many white Americans.

Neoliberalism appropriated the postracial discourse emerging in the nation through a version of the ideology of colorblindness which claimed that, since slavery and segregation were things of the past and African Americans had acquired full citizenship rights under the law, race did no longer matter and was to be dismissed as an interpretive category for social policies. This narrative reduced racism to a temporary, private issue, a matter of individual prejudice caused by ignorance and the economic crisis – and in part also by blacks' unwillingness to conform to American values – which had no connection with the true fabric of American society. Soon, however, evidence to the fact that the US had overcome neither race nor racism started to grow and it became clear that, as Nicholas Mirzoeff has brilliantly put it, Obama "could be a president while being Black, but he could not be Black while being president" (29).

His presidency was to be colorblind in the neoliberal sense, meaning that he had to support a linear narrative of racial progress culminating in his election, emphasize personal responsibility and America's dedication to equality and democracy, while denying the continuing persistence of systemic racism in spite of the blatant racialization of poverty, incarceration and deprivation of human rights in the country. He was subjected to an unprecedented racial scrutiny and his presidency worked as a catalyst for racial tensions, with vociferous sections of white America questioning his legitimacy both as an American and as a representative of the nation, doubting his wife's and his own loyalty to the country, and leveling charges of bias and incompetence against his acts. As CNN political commentator Van Jones declared in November 2016, in the eyes of the African American community this delegitimation process which culminated in the election of Donald Trump, a candidate openly supported by the alt-right, was a "whitelash against a changing country, . . . a whitelash against a black president" (Ryan n. pag.).

July 13, 2013 also sparked the rise of what is known as Black Lives Matter, the largest protest campaign against anti-black racism and state-

sanctioned violence since the 1960s. Around 10 p.m., the verdict that acquitted Zimmerman of second-degree murder by a jury of six women was announced. Though an acquittal was to be expected, given the country's history of racial profiling and legal decisions in similar cases, the verdict was met with outrage and profound disillusionment about what had been hailed as the advent of colorblind US. On that very night, many blacks in the US turned to black social media to find a community and mourn together. Upon receiving news of the "not guilty" verdict, Alicia Garza, a community organizer based in Oakland, CA, whose work centers on the rights of domestic workers, shared her grief with her friend Patrisse Cullors, a fellow activist advocating for, among many other issues, the reform of the jail system. The following morning Garza went on Facebook and began writing a rant to express her rage at the continuing devaluation of black life. That rant, in a powerful Baldwinian twist, became a love letter to black people, ending with the words that would trigger the movement and name it: "Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter." Cullors replied to the post with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, which after they teamed up with Opal Tometi – a Nigerian American activist whose work focuses on immigrants' rights and a social media expert – became a crucial tool enabling people to locate each other, share information online, found local BLM chapters and organize protests in the streets, conversations on race among students, and conferences.

The movement gained momentum in August 2014, when eighteen-year-old Michael Brown was shot dead by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, and his body was left for hours in the street, sparking outrage among the neighborhood crowd that had gathered at the scene. Since then, BLM has continued to grow, with more than 40 chapters and many ally organizations, such as Black Youth Project 100, Blackout, and the Black Liberation Collective, all over the US. Despite rising as a response to the state-sanctioned violence affecting black Americans, since its inaugural moment the BLM movement has adopted a transnational perspective on the issue of anti-black racism and its global social and economic consequences. BLM activists have proved very active in building international solidarity with other bottom-up insurgencies around the globe, which, in their turn, have been ready to perceive affinity between their fights. The Movement for Black Lives, a coalition created in 2016 which includes the BLM network and more than 50 other groups fighting for black liberation, issued a

political platform, available on their website in Spanish, French, Chinese and Arabic, which explicitly states their awareness that "patriarchy, exploitative capitalism, militarism, and white supremacy know no borders" as well as their willingness to "stand in solidarity with our international family against the ravages of global capitalism and anti-Black racism, human-made climate change, war, and exploitation" (n. pag.).

While BLM militants contest the colorblind universalism of the slogan "All Lives Matter," through which conservatives have criticized the movement reducing the fight against anti-black violence to racial particularism, they maintain that black liberation will translate into truer freedom for all social subjects, because, as Alicia Garza wrote, "#BlackLivesMatter doesn't mean your life isn't important – it means that Black lives, which are seen as without value within White supremacy, are important to your liberation. . . . When Black people get free, everybody gets free" (n. pag.). The concept owes much to James Baldwin and his notion of racism as an ideology that, while constricting the lives of black people, affects the humanity of whites. Baldwin's visionary analysis of white supremacy's dehumanization through the creation of the "nigger" has certainly inspired the BLM movement's notion of the fight against anti-blackness as a prerequisite for the construction of a better world.

Current black insurgencies in the US have been triggered by the unprecedented visibility of black pain, documented in the images and videos taken by militant witnesses that inundate the social media on a daily basis, showing that black bodies are as vulnerable today as they were under plantation slavery, and that the progressive, redemptive narrative of American racial history is a myth. BLM looks back to the Civil Rights era for strategies and tactics, especially in the staging of protests which create "spaces of appearance" for black activism (Mirzoeff) and the use of photography and the visual media as tools to claim a new visibility for black people in the public space. However, it is also remarkably different in its leadership, radical inclusivity, communicating methods and policies, which are of course profoundly inflected by both the structural changes which have transformed our globalized societies since the 1960 and decades of black theoretical reflections on the nature of race, the role of white suprematism and antiblackness in the making of Western modernity, and the need for an intersectional approach to oppression so

as to make the exclusion and subordination of certain subjects, black women in particular, visible.[1]

While Garza, Cullors and Tometi are considered the co-founders of the BLM movement, they have often qualified their role as simply that of giving a voice to and helping to connect people who were already working for social justice and against systemic racism. Social media, indeed, have proved a powerful influence on the movement, characterizing its distance from the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and allowing a strategic refusal of traditional centralized forms of leadership. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have facilitated grassroot organizing and a multi-voiced activism where subjects who had been marginalized in previous antiracist movements, such as women, LGBTQ and disabled people, and the young can contribute their experiences and visions. While the image of a heterosexual, adult, male activism dominated by a few powerful figures may have more to do with how the Civil Rights Movement has been represented and memorialized than with objective facts, the BLM movement is openly challenging past narratives of black activism focused on authenticity and homogeneity, and placing emphasis on the value of diversity within the black community and inclusivity. BLM activists believe that, as bell hooks put it in 1989, choosing the margin as political location is the only move that can create true sites of resistance (149). As a movement for social change, BLM is also characterized by a remarkable resurgence of scholar-activism, which believes in decolonized education, as bell hooks wrote, as a practice of freedom and sees in the classroom "a location of possibility" (207).

BLM is a radical movement that aims not merely at corrective legal measures, such as reforming the police by adopting body cameras, or the judiciary so that police misconduct is prosecuted, but also at a thorough transformative work on the US system centered on the elimination of antiblackness as the foundation upon which to create a just society for all. Central in this vision is the focus on race as crucially at the heart of Western capitalism and imperialism, on the historical specificity of antiblackness, and on the continuing legacy of slavery. The BLM's take on the issue of racism is indeed influenced by contemporary Black Studies, where race has re-emerged as a powerful and crucial tool of inquiry in a number of critical approaches, such as Black Feminisms, Critical Race Theory and Afro-Pessimism. Contrary to the mainstream progressive narrative of the racial

history of the US, these approaches analyze our present as the "afterlife of slavery," which Saidiya Hartman in *Lose Your Mother* describes as a time when "black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" (6). Mass incarceration, according to Michelle Alexander and other scholars, has taken the place of slavery as a tool for black subordination. The codes that in plantation slavery allowed the creation of blackness as non-humanity and social death continue to operate.

Antiblackness is seen, as Jared Sexton argues in *Amalgamation Schemes*, as the matrix of all forms of racism. Therefore, anti-antiblackness, as James Baldwin would say, is a fight for humanism: "We are unapologetically Black in our positioning. In affirming that Black Lives Matter, we need not qualify our position. To love and desire freedom and justice for ourselves is a prerequisite for wanting the same for others," as the movement states on its website ("What We Believe" n. pag.). Such stance evidences a move away from the respectability politics and integrationist logic of Civil Rights discourse, which leave in place the fundamental economic, political, and social structures of the country, to situate Black liberation within the realm of human rights, thus embracing a radical positioning from which to expose how the very national order is dependent for its functioning and existence on the oppression and marginalization of Black people. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor put it, "we do know that there will be relentless efforts to subvert, redirect, and unravel the movement for Black lives, because when the Black movement goes into motion, it throws the entire mythology of the United States – freedom, democracy, and endless opportunity – into chaos" (218).

This issue of *RSAJournal* seeks to tackle the highly complex questions of the genealogy and impact of the BLM from a variety of perspectives and disciplinary fields, also moving beyond the academic essay form. The section is opened by Vincenzo Bavaro's reading of recent Netflix series *Dear White People*, in which he looks at a representation of African American youth that cannot but be informed by the rhetorical efficacy of BLM campaigns. Set in today's US and centering the lives of a group of self-aware black students at a predominantly white Ivy League college, the series develops a complex discourse of racial and cultural belonging, which Bavaro investigates with specific attention to its treatment of cultural appropriation and the power of narratives. The series renders with stylistic and political finesse the

complexity of one's positioning vis-à-vis issues such as cultural sensitivity, micro-aggressions, and racial integration, which constitute the cultural landscape that enables police abuse of power as well. The resulting analysis highlights the many points of contact between the way in which *Dear White People* "provokes more questions than it can afford to answer," thus resisting closure, and the contemporary debate around issues of racial authenticity and narrative appropriateness within the realm of intellectual freedom.

In "A New Take on Black Activism", Monia Dal Checco offers a detailed overview of the BLM's tactics and strategies which are marked by an explicit rejection of key aspects of previous black activism, such as a centralized male leadership and the insistence of politics of respectability. Drawing on the recent scholarship that reads current police brutality against black people as a re-instantiation of plantation overseeing and the criminal justice system as a new form of black unpaid labor, Dal Checco elaborates on both the connections and the differences between present-day activism and its predecessors, identifying the grassroots character of the former as one of its most defining features, and then moves on to an analysis of the figure of the "silent witness" in recent literature, especially in the form of memoir (such as *When the Call You a Terrorist*, by Patrisse Khan-Cullors and asha bandele, and *Buck* by MK Asante Jr.), which contributes to spreading the movement's ideas and awareness that for the new generation of young Black Americans "witnessing in silence is no longer an option."

The following article, "Black Lives Matter in Wartime" by Patrick Deer, explores the BLM's powerful stance on the current pervasive militarization of US culture and society aiming at exposing its connection to the country's long history of racism and white supremacy. Through an analysis of both documentaries (*Whose Streets?*, *Do Not Resist*, and *Stay Woke*) and reports on BLM's protests in the US news cycle, Deer shows how, by "appropriating gestures and imagery that represent their neighborhoods as occupied war zones," the movement has been able to produce a counter-narrative of militarized occupation that simultaneously indicts the antiblack war waged at home and questions the racial dimension of the wars abroad. In this sense, the BLM is itself an antiwar movement whose adroit use of visual spectacle resists the blurring of "the crucial distinction between war and peace" that characterizes today's wide circulation of war rhetoric.

The last article in this section, Stefano Luconi's "Black Lives and the First African American President," connects the movement's strategies to the

legacy of the Black Panther Party and understands it as a response not only to police brutality, but also to Obama's reluctance in making racial justice a central point in his administration by deploying his executive authority and fully exploiting his "opportunities to speak up and exert a moral suasion." Focusing in particular on BLM campaigns against antiblack police violence during the Obama's second term and the president's partial shift in policy as a reaction to them (from resisting expectations of his addressing specific cases to the implementation of police reforms involving the use of body cameras and a stop to the progressive militarization of law enforcement), Luconi highlights how these measures were received by the BLM activists as a mere "palliative to defuse tension" that did not however deflect them from calling attention to the vulnerability of Black people in today US.

Following the articles, the monographic section comprises an extended interview to four prominent academics in Black and American Studies – Derrais Carter, Ronald A. Judy, Donald Pease, and Hortense Spillers – who share their views about the BLM and its relevance to both political and academic discourse. The scholarly investigation of current Black activism is further pursued in the "Inedito" section through a short story authored by Noni Carter that brings together many of the themes and preoccupations of BLM campaigns, from racial justice to the prison-industrial complex, from police brutality to community and kinship.

The variety of voices on and approaches to the BLM movement featured in this issue witness to the rapid rise of this new generation of radical Black activists to political and cultural prominence against the background of the critical passage from the Obama to the Trump presidency.

Notes

[1] Kimberlé Crenshaw, who introduced the concept of intersectionality in 1989, recently addressed the invisibility of black women as victims of state-sanctioned violence in a TEDWomen 2016 talk, titled "The Urgency of Intersectionality." She began her lecture with a list of black people killed by state violence, asking the audience to stand up and then sit down when they didn't know the names she mentioned. When she started listing black women only a handful of people remained standing: dominant narratives even within the movement erase the fact that women are victims of police brutality too.

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Vincenzo Bavaro

Taking Back One's Narrative: *Dear White People*, Cultural Appropriation, and the Challenge of Anti-essentialism.[1]

> "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced," a James Baldwin quote Reggie Green's father often imparted to his son. Reggie heard the message loud and clear. (S01E05)

In April 2017, the TV series *Dear White People* premiered on Netflix. It was created by director and screenwriter Justin Simien, and based on his critically acclaimed 2014 homonymous film. *Dear White People,* currently in its second season, is set in a fictional, and predominantly white, Ivy League College, Winchester University, and it focuses almost exclusively on the life and experiences of a group of African American undergraduates. Despite the title, which the protagonist defines as "a misnomer" in the very first episode, the series does not speak primarily, and certainly not solely, to a white audience. It rather investigates both intra-racial and interracial dynamics, dramatizing, among other things, how the group of black students at Winchester (like any community that is assumed to be homogeneous and monolithic anywhere) is made up of diverse subjectivities, both as individuals and as sub-cultures, with often irreconcilable agendas and sensibilities.[2]

At the center of the series is a commitment to interrogate, challenge, and rethink identity, which also characterizes some of the most interesting varsity fiction (a subgenre of the campus narrative that focuses on students rather than on faculty). It relies on a strong, fast-paced script, rich in inter-textual pop-culture and sophisticated meta-narrative references, which function primarily to produce a community of viewers who share a common cultural background and can laugh or cringe at the cryptic pop

references between the lines. The characters borrow or evoke lines from songs, TV series, and films (from Kendrick Lamar to *The Cosby Show*, from the groundbreaking film *Get Out* to the series *Big Little Lies,* from James Baldwin to Ta-Nehisi Coates). To give a couple of examples, in the first episode, the voice-over narrator, played by an exceptional Giancarlo Esposito, declares that "the writers of this program are depending on my ethnic but nonthreatening voice to explain things they are too lazy to set up traditionally," and in another episode (S02E01) characters discuss "visually interesting ways to deliver exposition" (while they are delivering it in a visually interesting way). This and many other instances confer a unique style on the series, both in its script and in Simien's directorial signature style (as is now the norm, several directors alternate throughout the series). One such distinctive directorial gesture that gives stylistic coherence to the whole series is the fact that the actors systematically stare back straight at the viewer. As Poniewozik, the critic for the *New York Times*, notes:

> One of Mr. Simien's signatures is to have actors stare into the camera directly, both in group shots and in cutaways during one-on-one conversations. The device underlines the show's mission: to intrude on your safe space, to demand engagement, to make clear that, yes – whoever you are – *Dear White People* is talking to you. (n. pag.)

The Ivy League setting makes it possible (and, indeed, plausible) to have a group of characters that are capable of alternating multiple – otherwise improbable – registers. They are clearly elite students, self-aware, articulate, and their dialogues reflect "the way that a lot of hyperverbal college kids talk to each other, endlessly speechifying on pet subjects and announcing exactly who they are five minutes after you've met them. (This is the kind of environment where 'I don't subscribe to heteronormative labels' is a pickup line)," as the otherwise enthusiastic critic Matt Zoller Seitz wrote for *Vulture* (n. pag.).

The protagonist, Samantha White, played by Logan Browning, is a media studies major and the voice – and creator – of the campus radio program that gives its name to the series. Browning powerfully articulates the subjectivity of a young woman, combining both the bold

and uncompromising public persona of her radio show, and the fragile interiority and self-doubt of a young student committed to speaking the truth.

What I find most compelling in the series is the way in which it provokes more questions than it can afford to answer, engaging with some of the most pressing issues around African American identity and activism today. Namely: systemic racism, cultural appropriation, police brutality and subsequent impunity, the pervasiveness of micro-aggressions, cultural sensitivity (one of the posters of the original movie had a white hand inquisitively reaching for a character's afro), and the issue of how unaware white people are of their privilege, how invisible it is for those who have it – all issues that are potentially magnified on a popular, transnational online platform like Netflix.

Dear White People continues, and complicates, a conversation initiated by the cultural and political impact of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which is referred to and evoked, sometimes explicitly, throughout the Netflix series. While exploring the ambiguities of these issues and refusing easy dramatic solutions on screen, *Dear White People* reveals and explores a web of racial tensions that are not only still relevant, but newly crucial to an understanding of the United States in the Trump era.

On campus

As a way of contextualizing the experiences of the students at the fictional Winchester College, and before diving in a discussion of the series, I intend to take a few steps back and reflect on the choice of the setting, and the appeal it may have for the viewers, especially international ones for whom the experiences associated with US campuses may seem utterly exotic.

To talk about campus life from my position – an academic, foreign by birth but partially trained in US universities – may risk being overly self-referential, leaning towards some form of academia-centrism, which too often characterizes those who work at the university, or some degree of insularity that sometimes constitutes one of the deepest problems of our

institution (the well-known image of the ivory tower is self-explanatory). And this would happen exactly at a moment when the centrality, the relevance, the very mission of the university in social and political life, and, paradoxically, precisely in the cultural arena, seem to be under profound scrutiny.

On the contrary, the university (especially the spatial configuration of the traditional US campus) ignites the interest of cultural critics precisely for its capacity to produce a self-sufficient microcosm, a community with its own social structure, dynamics, and rules. Its own history. As an object of critical inquiry, it has become a favorite arena wherein to investigate processes of subject formation, ideological interpellation, dynamics of assimilation, negotiation, and resistance of young students seeking to find their identity and place in the "adult" world.

The American campus functions as an autonomous universe, removed from the chaos, the distractions, and the seductions of urban life, especially if we think of the historical role of the prestigious Ivy League universities, tucked away in what were formerly rural settings, where traditionally the powerful sent their scions to get a solid education, and to establish long-lasting social connections with fellow members of the elite. The "Houses" scattered across campus, as well as the fraternities or sororities, are an integral element in the production and distribution of social capital. When student housing is not assigned by the administration, the "selection" process to become affiliated to some of the most exclusive houses, and the initiation ceremonies (including "pledging" and "hazing") that this entails can be particularly tough and unpleasant: exotic pledging rituals are a favorite topic of both campus and varsity genre.[3] The emphasis given – both in real-life campuses and within the representational realm – to the Houses and their pledging rituals foreshadows and mirrors the anxiety related to the job market: accommodation on campus becomes an instrument of social networking and a means for creating social capital and connections. But it also bespeaks the anxiety of belonging to a group, a community, to assert, or cling to, one's identity.

In a typical Ivy League college, and Winchester is no exception, there are traditionally "Greek Letter" Houses, which often accommodate legacy students, i.e. sons and daughters of alumni, and/or houses that gather

more easily identifiable groups of students: football players, cheerleaders, the "theater people," LGBT students, Asian American students and so forth. This identitarian anxiety, the need to label others but also to find a powerful and readable label for one's self, in short the need to belong, is both thematized and questioned by *Dear White People*. The second episode of the first season focuses on Lionel, a journalist in training who is coming to terms with his homosexuality. In a scene which is both hilarious and poignant, his boss Silvio, who directs the newspaper (and who identifies as a Mexican-Italian, gay, vers-top, otter pup . . .) urges him: "Trust me. Find your label. . . . Labels keep people in Florida from drinking Windex."

The Houses thus provide the background to the series. In one episode (S01E07) we are taken around campus from house to house, as the protagonists attempt to gather support for a forthcoming rally by literally knocking at the doors of the various Houses, thus displaying, in the process, the diversity (and the compartmentalization) of the campus. The central setting, the very house where the protagonists live, is the Armstrong-Parker House, the AP House. The ironically self-styled "ethnic but non-threatening" voice-over narrator informs the viewer, at the opening of the second season, that the AP House was founded in 1837 when two former slave quarters were knocked together to accommodate the influx of ethnic students, which at the time meant students of Irish and Italian origin. When these minorities "graduated" to "whiteness," in other words, when they effectively became "white" within the American racial discourse, "sometime after the 1920s," the Armstrong-Parker House became the "residence of choice" for African American students, especially after the mid-1960s.

The AP House, throughout the first season, hosts various groups of black students and diverse student associations: CORE, AAS, BAF, BSU. Very early on during the first episode, the protagonists gather in the living room of the AP House to discuss a major event that is at the basis of the entire series: a blackface party organized by white students on campus. As a way of narrative exposition, Samantha White introduces the various groups to Lionel who is reporting on the event, and it is clear that despite their transitory coalition, each group has very different backgrounds, sensibilities, and agendas.

There are three major conflicts around which the first season develops, all of which call into question some of the basic assumptions about the myth of post-racial America, or what is left of it after 2016 and the Trump backlash. The first episode revolves around an incendiary blackface party; the fifth episode presents a scene which painfully stages police abuse of power against black citizens; finally, the last episode, the tenth, introduces the third conflict which arises at the intersection between the controversial issues of "the corporate university" and a strategic threat to racially "integrate" the AP House.

On blackface

The plot begins when the satirical campus paper *Pastiche* starts organizing a blackface party to protest what they perceive as the confrontational and divisive tone of the radio program created by Samantha White "Dear White People." The blackface party is in fact called "Dear Black People," and allegedly aims at countering White's "reverse racism" and defending the freedom of speech of the white majority, who feel "oppressed" by the climate on campus.

The Dean of the College, an African American man aligned, however, to the establishment and the financial interests of the University, prohibits the party's organization, but somehow a person (whose identity is revealed in the second episode) cracks the Facebook account of the organizers and sends out the invite anyway. As Samantha will boldly say in the dean's office, "that invite should have been met with derision and outrage. Instead, 100 people showed up and showed their asses. And in doing so, showed this supposed post-racial institution exactly where it's at" (S01E02), bringing to the surface the unburied racism of the campus (and of the American society at large).

Minstrel Shows in blackface, or Black Minstrelsy, a popular form of entertainment in America from the 1830s until the early twentieth century, saw white performers paint their face and hands black and impersonate "black" stereotypes. The spectacularization and objectification of the black body for the consumption of a white audience clearly needs to be

understood as the product of a slave-owning society. But as Eric Lott argues in his groundbreaking work *Love and Theft. Black Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993), the expropriation of the "commodity of blackness," perpetuated mostly in northern cities, should not be flattened into an understanding of it as a solely racist practice of mockery and stereotyping born out of loathing and dehumanization. As Lott's title suggests, the theft performed in blackface is the theft of something the white performer longs for, it is a simultaneous construction and *transgression* of racial boundaries (Lott 25).

The blackface party on campus is only apparently an anachronism, and the voice-over narrator encourages us to understand it as a phenomenon whose popularity among white people has never ceased ("google it!" Esposito's voice urges us). This event in the series allows the script to treat instances of racism that most of us thought extinct, and also to evoke a discussion on free speech, hate speech, and censorship (what kind of "speech" can be protected by the First Amendment? What counts as hate speech and what as satire?). The series therefore addresses the issue of racial sensibility, which is not seen as just one more of the questions associated with "political correctness" and therefore to be prematurely dismissed. Samantha Whites gives a list, in her show, of "unacceptable Halloween costumes" (S01E01) which may be seen as both castrating and empowering, since she is starting a debate, and creating through irony a community with a shared sense of respect and a common understanding of what is "acceptable."[4] The white audience (of the radio program as well as of the Netflix series) is invited in. Moreover, the series at once stages and undermines a clear-cut binary opposition in the logic of "*Pastiche* = bad, black kids = good" (this sentence is explicitly repeated, with varying degrees of irony, in Episode 2).

The blackface party, which viewers witness multiple times during the first four episodes through each character's subjective perspective, together with a few other crucial moments in *Dear White People*, allows the characters and the audience to reflect on the complex issues around cultural appropriation at the center of many recent debates in the US, whose contours I would like to outline briefly in the following few pages.

On cultural appropriation

In 2015, the issue reached the headlines of most American papers with the scandal surrounding Rachel Dolezal. The latter, who was then the president of the Spokane, Washington branch of the NAACP, resigned after the controversy following a series of events (her declaration of having been the victim of hate speech, the ensuing police investigations, and her parents' letter to the media), which revealed that she had been lying about her racial identity for decades. She claimed to be African American but was, in fact, born Caucasian to Caucasian parents. Dolezal's case is entangled in a series of complex implications, and legitimate doubts. Can someone be born in a white body but identify as black, the way we have come to understand the transgender issue? Or rather, is her "impersonation" to be understood as one aspect of a more nuanced mental disorder? What is the "black" experience that Dolezal was faking? Would any other "authentic" black person necessarily "own" that experience? Who owns black culture, and what does it mean to steal it? And would that make any difference in relation to her job as a civil rights activist? These are some of the questions one may ask and which do not seem to come with easy, straightforward answers.

This highly debated issue of cultural appropriation ranges from the appropriation of a minority "outfit" to a music or dance genre, from the use of a subgroup's language to literary practice, among other things. Kjerstin Johnson has written that, when this is done, the imitator, "who does not experience that oppression is able to 'play', temporarily, an 'exotic' other, without experiencing any of the daily discriminations faced by other cultures" (n. pag). This hierarchical "borrowing" along the last few decades of minority tropes, elements, and cultural commodities (to quote Lott) by a majority group needs to be contextualized within neoliberal multicultural practices and postmodern aesthetics, but also within a certain objectifying appreciation of diversity. Diversity, at least some versions of it such as certain sanctioned performances of blackness, has acquired a high value in the cultural sphere and especially in the entertainment business, a certain currency that those in the majority group aspire to "own." From hip-hop stars, to wannabe Beyoncé clones, where do we draw the line between

appropriation and appreciation, between theft and tribute, in a postmodern society that is inherently hybridized and rapacious?[5]

Within the field of literary theory, there was a time, between the 1980s and the 1990s, when African American poststructuralists were accused of *appropriating* a hegemonic "white discourse": this accusation of appropriation as referred to black intellectuals was, in short, an attempt to portray them as selling out their cultural specificity in order to achieve success within a white-dominated, Eurocentric academic field. Michael Awkward wrote one of the seminal responses to these accusations, titled "Appropriative Gestures: Theory and Afro-American Literary Criticism," in which he defended the right to appropriate, insisting on the usefulness of crossing boundaries and on the significance that a poststructuralist critique could add to an understanding of African American culture and identity. Awkward quotes Zora Neale Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression" stressing that the African American is an appropriative creature, that "while he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything he touches is re-interpreted for his own use" (28).

In 2016, Lionel Shriver, the admired author of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, gave a controversial speech at the Brisbane Writers Festival (then published in *The Guardian*) in defense of cultural appropriation, of the right – and what seemed to be an intellectual imperative – to wear "other people's hats," arguing in favor of imagination and intellectual freedom. She stated that writers "should be seeking to push beyond the constraining categories into which we have been arbitrarily dropped by birth. If we embrace narrow group-based identities too fiercely, we cling to the very cages in which others would seek to trap us" (n. pag). Her point is most convincing when she addresses the freedom of a writer to choose a story to tell, and a voice to tell it (a voice, I would add, which is always already that of an "other"), regardless of the author's own racial, national, class, and gender identification.[6]

Her speech was problematic for a number of reasons, but I read it as a paradoxical response to the very myth of essentialism that the same critics of "cultural appropriation" seem to embrace and perform, and a loud recognition that our culture (any culture, always) is already fundamentally the product of multiple, stratified, overlapping, decontextualized

appropriations, and that this "mixture" is the best thing that can ever happen to any culture. I would indeed argue that purity, and the policing of a culture's boundaries, is a much more pervasive and toxic practice.

One of the crucial problems with Shriver's speech is that she does not seem to acknowledge fully the difference between cultural exchange/traffic, and cultural theft and mockery, and the latter's ensuing reduction of the other into a stereotype or one-dimensional commodity. She underestimates the power imbalance and hierarchical structures integral to the act of taking something from an underrepresented group and re-circulating it, of ventriloquizing, so to speak, an already silenced community. For example, she starts by describing as a "tempest in a tea-cup" the events of a group of Bowdoin College (Maine) students throwing a tequila party, where they handed out tiny sombreros to the participants (apparently a scandal on campus, for which many people had to publicly apologize). She compares this to her favorite Mexican restaurant decorating the dining rooms with sombreros and painted skulls, and again to her childhood memory of a trip to Mexico where her parents bought their kids sombreros to protect them from the scorching sun. These are all fascinating life stories, but only one of them is rooted in white privilege and the stereotyping of the Other (she also suggests that maybe soon Mexican restaurants will remove sombreros from their decor). She eventually reverses the discourse, as most defenders of cultural appropriation would do, with the "you can appropriate *my* culture anytime you want" rhetoric: "my culture" being in her case German-American, which clearly has not undergone quite the same forms of discrimination as blacks, Native Americans, Latinx, or Asians, at least not in recent times.

Yassmin Abdel-Magied, a Sudanese-Australian activist who walked out on Shriver's lecture, responded in the pages of *The Guardian* engaging in particular with the lecturer's appeal to writers:

> It's not always OK if a white guy writes the story of a Nigerian woman because the actual Nigerian woman can't get published or reviewed to begin with. It's not always OK if a straight white woman writes the story of a queer Indigenous man, because when was the last time you heard a queer Indigenous man tell his own story? How is it that said straight white woman will profit from an experience that is not hers, and those with the actual experience never be

> provided the opportunity? It's not always OK for a person with the privilege of education and wealth to write the story of a young Indigenous man, filtering the experience of the latter through their own skewed and biased lens, telling a story that likely reinforces an existing narrative which only serves to entrench a disadvantage they need never experience. (n. pag.)

Abdel-Magied's focus on the conditions of production of "other narratives" is enlightening and necessary. And the anaphoric "not always" allows room for debate, ambiguity and complexity, and avoids the essentialist binary opposition us/them, or the flimsy belief that a minority's own narrative is always necessarily liberating and "authentic," whereas the majority's narrative is always oppressive and deceptive.

I would add, however, that much of the rhetoric against cultural appropriation evokes a zero-sum-game, whereby culture is a given quantity, and if someone is taking it from one side, another one will be left without. Obviously, the cultural field is a more complex arena: on the one hand, it is true that it can be saturated by powerful single narratives (the passive woman, the inassimilable Asian, the violent African American, the degenerate homosexual). In the article the character of Lionel from *Dear White People* writes in the campus paper after the blackface party, the student acknowledges the power of narratives, arguing that: "While endless depictions of white men in particular exist, there aren't that many versions of us in the culture. Culture has a powerful way of telling people what they can and can't be. For people of color, the options are rather limited" (S01E02).

However, in the contemporary cultural scene, the power imbalances embedded in the production and circulation of narratives rarely approach the exclusivity and total ambition of a monopoly of representation, and certainly do not *per se* prevent, and indeed have rarely prevented, other counter-narratives from circulating and eventually questioning and subverting the established representational patterns and structures of domination. In 2009, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie delivered an influential TED talk precisely on the "Dangers of a Single Story," in which she examines the causes and the consequences of the

domination of one single narrative, generally a simplifying, essentializing, objectifying one, through a racial, national, and gender lens.

In *Dear White People* a similar challenge to essentialism and binary oppositions is articulated not only through the focus on the heterogeneity within the black student population (issues of intersectionality, black privilege, homophobia, class, and colorism take center-stage in various episodes),[7] but also by creating a mixed-race protagonist (Samantha's blue eyes bespeak the fact that her father is in fact Caucasian), who is for most of the first season dating a white classmate (and their relationship does not come without its own conflicts). Moreover, Samantha's own biracial identity is presented crucially as a bi-cultural one: in the first episode, we see her listening to commercial "white" romantic pop, only to switch it to hip-hop when she approaches a group of black classmates. This comedic effect however, far from being a reference to the conflicted "tragic mulatto" type of a century ago, also reflects a different split in her personality: the confrontational public (radio) persona and the young woman who is engaged in a process of self-discovery. This partial "closetization" of her white heritage is itself an instrument of strategic essentialism, but is never loaded with the nuances of secrecy or shame: at one point she plays Italian opera – unapologetically, one might say, mimicking a certain essentialist rhetoric – during her radio show. In another episode, the narrator informs us, at the beginning of the second season, when Samantha is pouring sugar on her grits in an eventually (albeit painfully) integrated AP House, that she "has never felt more at home," in a montage that shows Sam as a child in her kitchen, eating grits in front of her white dad.

Taking back one's narrative

Another instance of cultural appropriation, albeit a decidedly more ambiguous one, is at the root of the second climactic moment that takes place in the fifth episode, directed by Oscar winning Berry Jenkins of *Moonlight* fame. During a house party in a fraternity, a confrontation arises between Reggie, one of the protagonists, and Addison, one of his white

friends, who was singing along to a hip-hop song, rapping the lyrics of the hit, including the N-word.

ADDISON. (*singing and dancing, like the crowd of students around him*) . . . *Shootin' craps, nigga – Fuck what you heard – Hey bustin' all the trap niggas . . .*
REGGIE. – Man, don't say that.
ADDISON. – What? You know I don't really use that word.
REGGIE. Yeah, man, I know, but, uh. I just really heard you say it, though . . .
ADDISON. Wait, so it's bad if I'm just repeating what's in the song? . . . But it's not like I'm a racist.
REGGIE. Never said you were a racist. Just don't say "nigga." Like, you didn't have to say it just then.
ADDISON. I guess it just feels kind of weird to censor myself.
REGGIE. It felt kind of weird to hear you say it. I mean, how would you feel if I started rapping to songs, you know, that say "honky" and "cracker"?
ADDISON. [chuckles] I wouldn't care at all.
REGGIE. Exactly, that's the difference. The fact that you don't care and I do. . . .
ADDISON. I just don't like being called a racist.
JOELLE. Again, he never said you were a racist. He said "don't say that word."
ADDISON. I'm not some redneck. Is that what you think of me, Reggie? . . .
REGGIE. We're friends, but suddenly, I'm supposed to give you nigga dispensation?
ADDISON. Dude, I didn't do anything wrong. It's a song. Hell, it's in the title. What am I supposed to do? Hum?
REGGIE. Yes, nigga.
KURT. Come on, Reggie. You don't want him using his "white privilege" to rewrite black art, do you?
ADDISON. You're at a party at my house, drinking my booze, and now you attack me? Can nobody just have fun anymore?
REGGIE. Oh, I sorry, massa. We didn't mean to ruin your fun, now.
ADDISON. Sure, back to slavery. It always comes back to slavery.
REGGIE. Okay, now I'm calling you a racist.
ADDISON. Yeah?

As other analogously loaded words born out of a history of murderous violence and discrimination, the *N-word* has been appropriated by the minority community to which it originally referred as empowering (think *fag*, *dyke*, or *queer*), but has become an acknowledged taboo for the majoritarian community that traditionally employed it. The confrontation between the two young men is portrayed once again in all its ambiguity: the white student guilty of using the *N*-word was in fact just "singing along" like anyone else at the party would and did, while dancing with some of his black friends. Unlike the blackface party, which is represented by the narrator as well as by the entirety of the characters, blacks and whites, as something unequivocally "unacceptable," this scene is infinitely more troublesome. Addison is actually surrounded by several black friends, who are all in various degrees of tipsiness, and who are all dancing and singing along to the same song. Is Addison incapable of seeing his own offensiveness? Is Reggie overreacting and over-politicizing? Sam, whose opinion could polarize at least the audience's perspective of this event, is carefully observing the scene from afar, frowning in silence.

Precisely at the moment when their argument turns into a physical altercation, the campus police officer enters, and with little hesitation identifies Reggie, the black student, as the culprit, and, after immediately letting his white friend go, even questions his status as a student, ordering the young man, at gun point, to provide his university ID. Reggie is surrounded by terrified friends, both black and white, who first try to reason with the white officer, but then, shocked by his reaction, are petrified at the thought of the possible consequences.

Reggie is caught in a double bind: his ID is obviously in his pocket, but he would not dare to reach for it at gunpoint. The entire climax, from the argument with his friend to its eventual peaceful resolution (the ID is shown, the cop leaves, and Reggie and a few friends break into tears, out of terror and relief) takes about five long minutes to unfold, but the talent of the actors, and the mastery of the direction, make this a disturbingly intense and violent scene to witness. The tangible perception that to some officers a black life "does not matter," the belief that had Reggie been a white student he would never have elicited the drawing of a gun by the officer, is clearly reminiscent of the various smartphone-videos recording

police brutality and murderous racism against black citizens, which initiated the Black Lives Matter movement.

The last issue I would like to discuss comes up in the last episode of the first season, and highlights the capitalist structure and the corporate nature of the university. One of the big donors of Winchester University is the Hancock family, which is incidentally the sole financer of the campus paper named (ironically) "The Independent." The Hancocks are worried about the latest wave of protests organized by the African American students' organizations, and they threaten to withhold their annual donation of $10 million to the school, unless these protests cease. An alternative, the Hancocks propose, could be to "integrate" the Armstrong Parker House.

Even in a case like this, the issue brought to the fore by the series has anything but an easy and unequivocal resolution. Integration, of course, is a rather desirable goal, and what many generations of civil rights activists fought for. But as Martin Luther King states in the original footage presented at the beginning of the second season, James Baldwin once told him "what vantage is there in being integrated into a burning house?" The fact that the Hancocks, who we will later discover have long been a white supremacist family, see integration as a form of retaliation against Black activism reveals repressive motives in making that move. Their real objective is in fact to limit the spaces of racial solidarity, and to deprive the AP House of its status as a refuge where various cultural and social activities had been taking place, managed by the black students.

By staging "integration," this episode thus foreshadows the entrance of white students into the AP House, and it constitutes the premise of the second season. As the closing episode of the first season, it brings together in an uneasy dialogue the corporate world of big capitals, which is at the very heart of the survival of the contemporary campus, with a more intimate dimension of safe spaces and the possibility of cultural and political activism.

The three major events of the first season see the characters cornered by oppressive forces that are institutionalized and structural (widespread racial stereotyping, the police force, the corporate backbone of the University). As a community, and as individual students and activists, the protagonists need to react, discuss, elaborate a plan, and push back, with an urgency

that gives strength to the series, as the *IndieWire* reviewer Ben Travers points out:

> By tracking characters confident enough to challenge the status quo but young enough to adapt when challenged, the series never feels self-righteous. Moreover, Simien's focus on the party as a game-changing event for everyone on campus grounds the characters' responses in immediacy: they have to act now, and they do. They *all* do, which gives *Dear White People* an inclusive voice even as it shouts harsh truths. (n. pag.)

At the same time, with all its nuances, ambiguities, and unanswered questions, this is certainly not a simple piece of activist propaganda: the big issues coexist and collide with the intimate ones, the personal and the political are intertwined. In the dialogue below, Samantha and her best friend Joelle are discussing the aftermath of an important march on campus (mostly about abuse of power by campus police), which sparked a disturbing wave of hate speech and threats to Samantha on her various social media accounts. Joelle realizes that Sam has lost herself in the reaction to this backlash and has in turn fallen into a state of silence, overwhelmed by the racist non-sense and by a bundle of accusations entangled in various types of logical flaws and prejudices.

> SAM: – Um, are you giving me advice, or . . .
> JO: I've had to speed-read a lot of evolutionary psych. I can't always control how and when the information's synthesized, – okay? –
> SAM: Copy that.
> JO: So the world isn't acting the way you thought it would. But we don't see things the way they are. We see them the way we are . . . Fuck, I'm about to ace this exam! Yes!
> SAM: Sooo . . . I need to take back my narrative. But how do you argue with nonsense?
> JO: Sam, you are articulate to a fault, but real talk, who have you ever convinced out of their opinion? This conversation isn't about you or them. It's about us. To make sense out of the chaos, to give us a reason to keep persisting. (S02E01)

Joelle, who is ironically prepping for an exam, after debating the non-

existence of the color blue, is telling her friend in undergraduate jargon that our perception is not a transparent reception of an external objective reality, but it is in itself the production of that reality. To this arguably postmodern statement, Sam reacts, appropriately, not with the realization that she needs to take back "herself" or even just her "voice", but her "narrative." A narrative can be both understood as the powerful "discourse" of ideology, and also as the capacity of the individual to connect the dots, the events of an experience, into a (sometimes) coherent line, producing, in fact, a story. To take back one's own narrative then means to claim agency, to become the author of one's own story, in a defiant stance against an outside world which is trying to monopolize the narrative, that is trying to tell your story for you.

What *Dear White People* seems to do most convincingly, in fact, is to take control of, to "appropriate," the narrative of black identity in Trump's America, not so much in an attempt to "argue with nonsense," but as a way of starting a conversation that is not about a speaker (you) intent on persuading, convincing an audience (them). But it is a conversation about "us," about a community that is whole, that shares a common sense of dignity and respect, that believes in dialogue and in progress, and that refuses to submit to a dichotomist logic. An "us" that looks at the mess within, and tries to make sense of it.

Notes

[1] I would like to thank Rabbi Igael Gurin-Malous for recommending that I watch the series *Dear White People*, when I was looking for inspiring representations of the University campus. His initial suggestion led to my participation in a conference on campus fiction at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" (in May 2018), and then to this contribution in a very different format.

[2] See Jensen and Framke.

[3] Even a cursory list of movies and TV series set on campus would be inevitably limited (even if we exclude the iconic genre of high school drama). Among many possible titles, see for example the critically acclaimed film *Goat* (2016), directed by Andrew Neel and based on the homonymous memoir by Brad Land (2004).

[4] A few months after the show premiered on Netflix, on October 27, 2017, the Daily

Show hosted Roy Wood and Eric Lott to discuss appropriate and inappropriate Halloween costumes.

[5] See McFarland.

[6] The history of world literature is obviously rich in instances when a writer "appropriated" a narrative beyond his or her own "cultural identity", from long before Shakespeare appropriated the narrative of two Italian teenagers in love.

[7] See Poniewozik.

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Monia Dal Checco

"Not Your Grandmamma's Civil Rights Movement":[1] 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,[2] the idea itself has a much longer history and has resurfaced cyclically in the United States' past.[3] 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,[4] 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,[5] 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 were 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 uncapable 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. 18th- and 19th-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?* 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.[6]

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,[7] 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,[8] 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[9] 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.[10]

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.[11] 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,[12] 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.[13]

#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.[14] 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,[15] 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 wipping 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

[1] 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.

[2] 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.

[3] 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 21st 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.

[4] 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.

[5] 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.

[6] See Alexander and Stevenson.

[7] 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.

[8] 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).

[9] 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.

[10] 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 Borough's and Wells's use of respectability as a smart strategy to strengthen their respective political campaigns.

[11] 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.

[12] "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.

[13] 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*).

[14] See "Geraldo Rivera: Trayvon Martin's Hoodie."

[15] *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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Patrick Deer

Black Lives Matter in Wartime

One of the most striking moments in the media coverage of the April 2015 protests in Baltimore following Freddie Gray's death in police custody came from an unnamed demonstrator who was recorded on BBC radio. In the midst of a riot escalated by police and National Guard troops in armored vehicles and combat gear firing tear gas at locals and Black Lives Matter demonstrators, the unnamed man pushed back against the pervasive war rhetoric surrounding the protests:

> First of all, this is not a war. It's not a war. We want peace. But y'all got to give us that. And if y'all keep coming and taking everything we got, we gonna take what y'all got. We're not playing out here. This is not a war. But we want our rights. ("Newshour" n. pag.)

Invoking peace, not war, he demands attention to the underlying links between a militarized police force, economic inequality, and structural racism. In a fleeting but unforgettable moment of protest, we can hear an anonymous citizen of Baltimore, whom the reporter calls an "unnamed rioter," eloquently displacing the rhetoric of militarism in favor of a discourse of rights and economic inequality. This is a moment where the racialized narrative and spectacle of militarized policing is interrupted and a space for reflection can be briefly glimpsed. It reminds us that Black Lives Matter can be understood as an anti-war movement, and that to protest unchecked police brutality on American citizens of color means that we must challenge the logic of militarization that would make a war of everything.

One of the remarkable achievements of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has been to render visible and interrupt the pervasive reach of militarization in American society and to expose its intimate relationship

to longer histories of structural racism and white supremacy. To do so BLM has both intervened in the historical memory of America's wars, and challenged US citizens to question the logic of the war paradigm in the name of a demand for peaceful existence beyond the reach of unlawful police killings and state violence.

Black Lives Matter has drawn attention for its seemingly leaderless loose network structure, its leveraging of the potential of social media and viral circulation of cellphone videos, and its savvy use of hashtag activism and consciousness raising. The movement – and its spin-off activist projects, Campaign Zero, Stay Woke, and the Wikipedia based Resistance Manual – has also proved extraordinarily adept at manipulating visual culture. Its campaign against police brutality has moved into public policy debates in Campaign Zero's proposed agenda to reduce police killings of people of color. It has intervened in the tangled relationship between sports and the military in the "I Can't Breathe" protests by high profile NBA players like LeBron James and the NFL team protests against police brutality sparked by San Francisco 49er quarterback Colin Kaepernick's decision to "Take A Knee" during the National Anthem. BLM also took a leading role in the campaign to remove Confederate Memorials after the 2015 Charleston church massacre prompted Virginia's state government to take down monuments celebrating white supremacy (Lowery 180-184). The movement's explicit attention to LGBT issues has also had clear commonalities with the recent rise of the #MeToo movement. As Jared Sexton has argued in his Afro-pessimist meditation, "Unbearable Blackness,"

> 'Black Lives Matter' is, from its inception, a feminist and queer proposition. It does not require modification or specification or expansion against a presumptively male and heterosexual victim of anti-black violence. It *is* that modification and specification and expansion, the collective enunciation of black feminist and queer activist intervention and leadership (162).

The movement's focus on militarized policing helped lay the ground for the high school student #NeverAgain movement that followed the Parkland shootings at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School, protesting

the widespread availability of AR-15 style semi-automatic assault rifles as "weapons of war." Most recently its legacy has informed the "Occupy ICE" protests against the Trump administration's policy of forcibly separating and detaining the children of illegal immigrants from their parents. The movement's ongoing relevance has been heightened by the election of President Donald Trump in November 2016 and by the seemingly endless series of police killings of young black men.

Challenging the war paradigm has been particularly important for Black Lives Matter, especially given that a persistent refrain at protests has been to appropriate war discourse to frame a pattern of structural racism that includes police brutality, a racist criminal justice system, mass incarceration, discrimination against LGBT people of color, persistent economic inequality, and the resurgence of white supremacist groups into public discourse in the wake of President Trump's election. Unlike previous antiwar movements, they are not protesting a distant war, but one seemingly being waged at home. Interviewed by CNN's Wolf Blitzer in August 2015, Julius Jones, founder of the Black Lives Matter chapter in Worcester, Massachusetts declared,

> some people live in a world where it's just a pressing issue in politics and some people live in a world where it's actually our kids' dying. And so if folks want to inform their own perspective on Black Lives Matter, it's the urgency that we see in the video of Sam Dubose who got shot in the head point blank range in a car just for driving. It's the urgency of Tamir Rice, who was 12 years old, who was shot literally for playing. And it's the urgency of Sandra Bland, the case that everybody knows. So temper – I would say temper your perspective with the urgency that black lives are actively under attack and we are in a terrible war with our own country, African-Americans are Americans and we're not treated like that. We're not treated as if black lives matter. (Blitzer n. pag.)

By asking CNN viewers to "temper your perspective," Jones evokes the various meanings of the verb to temper, which can mean both to harden a metal, to make more resilient through hardship, and also to moderate by diluting or qualifying. This is a strikingly nuanced use of war discourse, which would subsequently be lost in the FBI's labeling of BLM organizers as terrorists or later controversies about a "war on cops."

Yet, invoking war discourse, especially during wartime, can be a risky strategy, given its violent connotations and expansive tendencies in an era when wars have been declared on drugs, poverty, terror, cancer and a host of other social ills. Despite the absence of a clearly defined war culture emerging from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as I have argued elsewhere, war discourse and militarization proliferates in our everyday lives (*Mapping Contemporary War Culture* 54). Militarized uses of language permeate a staggering array of fields: in medicine and health, where patients are routinely in a "battle" against obesity or depression, or can find themselves locked into "losing the battle" against cancer; in business, where the *Harvard Business Review* recently urged corporate leaders to scale back on their use of war metaphors (Cespedes; Freedman 505–12); in policing, where the War on Drugs rages on; in sports, where the routine use of war metaphors converged with the battlefield as the NFL and the US military recently joined forces to "combat" the scourge of concussion and Traumatic Brain Injury; or in politics, where "embedded" campaign reporters follow candidates from their "war rooms" to "take the fight" to their political "foes." This banal circulation of war rhetoric in the body politic can result in confusion between a dominant militarism and more plural and diffuse social processes of militarization.

For anti-war activists, this blurring of boundaries has two main risks: first it can ascribe a kind of totalizing inevitability to the war machine that undercuts individual and collective agency; second, this expansion of war discourse across civil society risks blurring the crucial distinction between war and peace, making harder the struggle to imagine and achieve a demilitarized world. Taking up this challenge – "First of all, this is not a war . . . We want peace" – I would like to explore what it might mean to think about Black Lives Matter as an anti-war movement that emerged in the aftermath of the invasion and occupation of Iraq (2003-2011), the ongoing war in Afghanistan (2001-present) and the seemingly endless "Long War" against terror waged by drone warfare in six countries and by Special Forces operating in 149 nations in 2017 (Chatterjee and Turse). What would it mean to connect this critique, "that black lives are actively under attack and we are in a terrible war with our own country," with these ongoing US wars in the Global South?

Considering Black Lives Matter as an anti-war movement also reminds us that the US antiwar movement has been from its origins historically intertwined with anti-racist movements: from the protests against the Mexican War of 1846 as an attempt to expand slavery, the Abolitionist struggle against slavery and debates about military violence in the US Civil War, campaigns to desegregate the military in WWI and WWII and advocacy for veterans' rights, to the powerful connections between the non-violent tactics of the 1960s Civil Rights movement and the anti-war movement against the Vietnam war.[1] As Dr. Martin Luther King argued in May 1967, a month after his breakthrough speech "Beyond Vietnam": "Somehow these three evils are tied together. The triple evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism. The great problem and the great challenge facing mankind today is to get rid of war" (5). Black Lives Matter, as Wesley Lowery has noted in his influential history, *They Can't Kill Us All*, has a complex but profound relationship with this tradition: "Every social movement must grapple with the generational and tactical divides that arise between varying groups and factions that comprise the ground troops" (98-99). As Lowery notes of Cleveland's allied group, Movement for Black Lives:

> Cleveland is built from a proud activist and civil rights tradition, with locals quick to note that it was here – partially in response to the civil right movement – that the first black mayor of a major American city was elected. That legacy left a mosaic of community organizing groups – from those focused on black-on-black crime, to those left over from Occupy Wall Street, to those who have for years worked on police brutality issues. (92)

To these local legacies can be added a longstanding tradition of critiques of American militarism and racism by William Lloyd Garrison, Henry David Thoreau, William James, Bayard Rustin, Juanita Lopez, Barbara Deming, Dr King or Cornel West. The US antiwar movement, as their voices and struggles make clear, has often doubled as a movement for social justice demanding a society free from the plague of racism and racialized poverty.

I will argue here that one of Black Lives Matter's crucial interventions has been to challenge and interrupt a much wider logic of the ongoing

low intensity militarization of American society, culture and economy. By intervening in the embedding of policing within military agendas and a permanent war economy, Black Lives Matter has denaturalized the spectacle of police violence against black bodies by re-embedding the stories of the young black men killed by police in a counter-narrative of outrage and protest. Despite the anxiety of advocates of policing reform that symbolism may distract and detract from policy proposals (Bearfield, Maranto, and Kingsbury), this symbolic politics both interrupts an institutionalized logic of structural racism and opens up a space for alternative debate and reform. It can do so because contemporary militarization is heavily invested in both symbolic and material forms of embedding military agendas within institutions and civil society.

Police Murders and Extraheavy Equipment: Resisting the Spectacle of Militarism

The most explicit policy proposal to emerge from Black Lives Matter movement to date has been Campaign Zero, a set of ten policy reforms launched in August 2015 designed to reduce the number of police shootings to zero. The focus of much media attention has been on the spectacle of paramilitary tactics and military hardware deployed by local police forces against communities of color. Although Black Lives Matter was started in 2013 to protest the vigilante killing of Trayvon Martin in Florida by George Zimmerman, and his subsequent acquittal, it was the heavy handed policing of the protests in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 following the police killing of Michael Brown and the Grand Jury's decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson which drew national media attention.[2] The spectacle of militarized policing of protestors in American suburbs became a familiar feature of the media reporting. As Robin D.G. Kelley has observed:

> it wasn't the mere existence of protesters that made Ferguson an international story; it was the fact that the people who took to the streets faced down police with riot gear, rubber bullets, armored personnel carriers, semiautomatic

> weapons, and a dehumanizing policy designed to contain and silence. To the world at large, Ferguson looked like a war zone because the police looked like the military. (Kelley 26)

Against racist narratives that represent communities of color as predisposed by culture and poverty to crime and thus requiring higher levels of aggressive paramilitary policing, Black Lives Matter has helped create a counter-narrative. Their protest movement has called attention to police forces deploying military tactics and weaponry against citizens of color to enforce a structurally racist criminal justice system that has disturbing commonalities with the experience of occupation.

The success of Black Lives Matter in the realm of political symbolism has led to anxieties about their politics of representation. A number of critics of the police killings of people of color have warned, for example, that focusing on the spectacle of military hardware deployed by police forces against communities of color may divert attention from the underlying logic of structural racism and the place of police departments in a larger neo-liberal logic of subjectification and "capitalization" that also includes profound economic inequality, a highly racialized criminal justice system and mass incarceration directed against people of color. Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore have argued: "The righteous outrage against police murders and extraheavy equipment enables a strange displacement (often unintended, yet also often cynically co-opted) of political focus from the necessarily systemic character of organized violence" (147). In their work connecting the vast budgetary expansion in manpower, equipment and resources or "capitalization" of the LAPD's racialized policing since the 1960s to recent "Broken Windows" policing pioneered by NYPD Chief William Bratton, Gilmore and Gilmore contend:

> Any focus on military-police interdependence might usefully drill down through both equipment and ideology to reveal the underlying strategies and practices that rebuild rather than weaken legitimacy . . . in a long moment of crisis. If the principal use of tanks and armor is to deliver a visual message via news and social media that those who demonstrate against police killing and other outrages are dangerous, then what is obscured behind that implicit

> narrative? What, in other words, do police organizations do to secure their foundational role?. . . Whether the equipment was first designed for or acquired from the military or not, this process is capitalization. (147-48)

The community organizer Hamid Kahn has argued for the importance of focusing on more insidiously militarized tactics: "When we talk about militarized policing we often are talking about police use of military weapons. We also need to think about how police increasingly describe the people they monitor as insurgents or enemy forces" (Kahn 132).

In his recent work, Nikhil Singh has argued that we also need to situate such critiques in a longer history of settler colonialism at home and US "police actions" abroad that predates the current crisis around policing of communities of color: "The framing of what we now think of as war by police historically precedes what we often now describe as the militarization of policing, or the conditioning of police by war, which includes both the real and the metaphorical inflations of the term *war* to define battles against various domestic ills: poverty, crime, drugs, terror and the like" (Singh 53-54). As Singh reminds us, one of the corrosive effects of colonial and racial violence, like war discourse, is to blur boundaries and muddy thinking: "If the US era of continental settlement progressively translated war into policing and frontiers into borders, the globalization of the US realm translated policing into war and it became possible to think of war at home and police in the world. Crucially, colonial and racial precedents, institutions and practices remained instrumental to the blurring of these boundaries" (55-56). Drawing parallels between the simultaneous media reporting on the military presence in Ferguson and the Israeli invasion of Gaza in 2015, Robin Kelley has argued:

> the consequences for the ruled ought not to be measured merely by the destructive force of American-made F-15s, cluster bombs, and white phosphorous, but also by the everyday routine of occupation: unemployment, poverty, insecurity, precarity, illegal settlements, state-sanctioned theft of water and land, destruction of local economies and agriculture, a racially defined security regime, the effects of permanent refugee existence. (26)

The Israeli assault on Gaza was predated, of course, by the US invasion and occupation of Iraq between 2003 and the official end of active combat missions in November 2011.

These cautions about the potentially distracting effects of focusing on police displays of military hardware parallel the intense debate about the circulation of civilian videos of police killings of young black men. There is also a long history of the embedding and normalization of racist images of killing and mutilation of black bodies within everyday life, which goes back to the photographs and mementos of lynching from the Gilded Age to the 1930s. In more aestheticized forms, these are a staple of popular entertainment in police dramas and films. Given this long and disturbing history of spectacular violence directed against black people, there has been an intense and illuminating debate amongst African-American journalists and scholars about the circulation of videos of police killings since the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012. Arguing against the circulation of videos of the police killings as "Spectacles of Black Death and White Impunity," Kelly Hayes has asked, for example, "Have 'the people' not already seen what police terror looks like?" (Hayes n.pag; see also Balthaser).

Militarism, Militarization and Embedding

These concerns about political symbolism and the politics of representation not only reflect on the social media echo chamber in which Black Lives Matter has emerged as a protest movement. They also register the intense effort to embed militarized images and narratives within culture and everyday life which has escalated drastically since 9/11, the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the ongoing US global "Long War" on terror.

This is where it is crucial to distinguish between militarism and militarization. The greatest challenge for cultural critics, writers or activists seeking to understand this slippery terrain, as I have argued elsewhere, comes with equating war culture with a dominant culture defined by militarism, rather than as a more uneven process of militarization of culture and everyday life (*Mapping Contemporary War Culture* 52). Seen in this light, focusing on militaristic displays of police armored cars,

camouflage uniforms, helmets and gas masks, or paramilitary SWAT weaponry and tactics, can distract from the social impact of less overt forms of militarization like electronic surveillance or covert infiltration of activist groups or the use of Fusion Centers that combine military, FBI and police forces. Police militarism can also draw attention away from the brutal effects of criminalization and mass incarceration.

Militarism, as the historian John Gillis has observed, is an older concept typically "defined as either the dominance of the military over civilian authority, or, more generally, as the prevalence of warlike values in a society" (1). For this reason, militarism is a word that tends to be directed as a term of abuse towards enemies in wartime, becoming a convenient "way of displacing responsibility and blame" (1-2). To understand America's recent war culture and the environment within which BLM has been waging its symbolic struggles, we are better served by thinking in terms of the messier concept of militarization, which has been influentially defined by Michael Geyer as "the contradictory and tense social process in which civil society organizes itself for the production of violence" (79).

The advantage of the idea of militarization is that it challenges our conventional ideas about the relationship between the state, its military institutions, and civil society. In liberal ideology these are seen as separate spheres into which war erupts from the outside from particular sources or at particular moments. For this reason, Geyer argues, "in order to avoid these mystifications we must move from the delineation of the 'sites' of militarization to the analytic recovery of the 'process' of militarization" (78). As Catherine Lutz has argued, as a social process this has far-reaching implications:

> Militarization is intimately connected not only to the obvious – the increasing size of armies and the resurgence of militant nationalisms and militant fundamentalisms – but also to the less visible deformation of human potentials into the hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and to the shaping of national histories in ways that glorify and legitimate military action. ("Militarization" 320)

As Lutz persuasively argued in *Homefront,* her study of Fayetteville, NC, and its vast US Army base Fort Bragg, militarization also depends on the masking and censoring of longer historical continuities:

> Much of the history and contemporary reality of war and war preparation has been invisible . . . to people both inside and outside the military – because it has been shrouded behind simplified histories or propaganda, cordoned off by secrecy laws, or been difficult to assess because so many consequences of running our military institutions are not obviously war-related. And so we have looked away from the costs of being a country ever ready for battle. The international costs are even more invisible as Americans have looked away from the face of empire and been taught to think of war with a distancing focus – "freedom assured" or "aggressors deterred" – rather than the melted, exploded, raped and lacerated bodies and destroyed social world at its center. (*Homefront* 2)

Because of its voracious claims upon us as citizens and its struggle to monopolize the cultural field, tracing the logic of militarization and war culture inextricably involves us in wider questions of politics and economics, of biopolitics and neoliberalism. As Matt Davies and Simon Philpott have argued:

> Militarization impacts every aspect of daily life, enriching and rewarding some individuals, interests, regions and nations, immiserating and punishing others. It reconfigures relations of class, gender and sex, and is profoundly racist. However, it is also highly productive of abstract notions of citizenship and patriotism and is a powerful producer of historical narratives, particularly those that serve to justify and legitimize not just the use of violence in global affairs but also the economic and social organization of the polity required to produce the capability for such violence. (49)

One of the dominant strategies of militarization that has shaped contemporary US war culture since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 is that of embedding. Taking its name from the Department of Defense Public Affairs program launched in early 2003 that embedded over 600 journalists with military units during the invasion of Iraq, embedding is associated with

journalists' unprecedented, intimate access to front line military experience that generated vivid and compelling combat footage. Considered as a trope, embedding also helps reveal the particular forms militarization has taken since the end of the Cold War and the 1991 Gulf War in the era of mediatized high tech "shock and awe" warfare waged at a distance by an all-volunteer military. This logic extends to the appropriation of the aesthetic within war reportage, what I have called the embedded sublime, as well as in film, conflict photography, literary narratives and memoir ("Despicable Beauty").

This tendency reinforces the ideological framing of war powerfully challenged by critics like Judith Butler, Susan Sontag, Ariella Azoulay, Alan Feldman, Sylvia Shin Huey Chong or Sinan Antoon, which typically focuses on violent visual images. The militarized logic of embedding that has sought to capture the hearts and minds of US citizens since 2003, however, is both more generalized and more insidious since its power does not depend either on being positioned within the official war narrative or on explicitly reproducing its ideological framing, what Judith Butler calls its "regulation of perspective." It also goes beyond the visual. Like embedded reporting, which blurs the boundaries between the military's framing of the conflict and the "embed" reporter's perspective, the embedding of militarized narratives and images is both seductive and potentially confusing, often producing ethical and political hesitation in readers and audiences.

The embedding of military equipment, strategy and tactics into American policing has a long history that goes back to the 1960s when counterinsurgency tactics and weaponry like tear gas developed to combat guerilla warfare in Vietnam were deployed domestically to counter urban unrest and inner city rioting across US cities (see Schrader and Singh). Police departments have also proved adept at embedding media in offering ride-alongs for journalists, circulating police-camera and CCTV footage, and cooperating in reality TV shows like COPS and America's Most Wanted. Racialized images of young black men positioned as criminal, with facial features blurred for anonymity, are a constant feature. This police-friendly media environment was occasionally interrupted by amateur video, as in the case of the video of LAPD officers beating Rodney King in 1991. The

advent of high definition cellphone camera video and the call for police body cameras has vastly expanded the visual documentation of police activity.

Black Lives Matter and the Limits of War Discourse

The recent protests by the Black Lives Matter movement of the police shootings and deaths in custody of African Americans, have been often referred to as a "war" waged against urban black communities. The journalist Wesley Lowery reported on the unrest that followed the shooting of Michael Brown in August 2014:

> While many residents of Ferguson had been deeply outraged by the violence and looting of the previous night, what upset them even more was the nightly militarized response of law enforcement. These suburban families weren't used to seeing officers in riot gear, which further ingrained the image of a hostile occupying force in the minds of residents whose support would have been vital for the police to maintain order. (57)

This war rhetoric had emerged prominently after the police shooting of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014, as media images circulated of armored vehicles and heavily armed police in combat gear confronting street protests in Ferguson, Missouri (Bosman; Apuzzo). This tense standoff culminated in the deployment of the National Guard in November 2014, after the Grand Jury's decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson. Investigative reporting in Ferguson by CNN uncovered National Guard internal documents that referred to protestors as "enemy forces" and used highly militarized language, intelligence gathering, and paramilitary tactics to prepare for their deployment against civilian protestors (Starr and Bruer n.pag.).

The language and techniques of war also came to the fore in both the reporting and the policing of demonstrations and riots in Baltimore, Maryland, following the death in police custody of yet another African-American man, Freddie Gray, in April 2015. Media reported on the

deployment of the National Guard and declaration of a curfew as local authorities struggled, somewhat clumsily, to manage perceptions of the images of militarism writ large in the civil authorities' response to the disturbances. After the Mayor of Baltimore closed the high schools on Tuesday, April 28, 2015, which resulted in large numbers of teenagers out on the Baltimore streets, one local resident, Donetta Dixon, was quoted by the *Guardian* as saying, "The police wanted a war, and now they have a war" (Swaine, Lewis, and Laughland n. pag.).

The authorities struggled to manage the undeniable spectacle of military force mobilized in the face of Black Lives Matter protests, which had turned the media narrative away through largely non-violent protests from lawless inner city people of color needing harsh policing to out of control police turning the streets into a war zone.

> "This is not martial law," General Linda Singh, the commander of the Maryland National Guard, said at a press conference as troops arrived in armored vehicles. "Martial law means that at that point the military fully takes over, so we have not reached that point." (Swaine, Lewis, and Laughland n. pag.)

As General Singh's observation ironically suggested, the authorities did not need to declare martial law, given the heavy militarization of the police. Nor did they wish to provoke further national outrage.

War discourse is by its nature risky and hard to control. After the shooting of five police officers in Dallas by a lone gunman during a demonstration against police brutality in July 2016, and ambushes against police in Baton Rouge and Des Moines, a "war on cops" narrative circulated especially in right wing media. Despite the tragic shootings and inflamed rhetoric, a criminologist concluded that "the hard data suggest that policing was no more dangerous in 2016 than it has ever been" (Wing n. pag.).

War Comes Home

The rhetoric of a war on black bodies understandably conflates militarism and militarization. This is hardly surprising given the vast asymmetry between

the scale and relentlessness of the use of force by police departments against a largely nonviolent protest movement operating through social media and street protests. The Black Lives Matter movement has responded creatively to this discursive fluidity and blurring of boundaries by attempting to displace war discourse in the name of demilitarization in its Campaign Zero policy proposals. Campaign Zero draws on well-established critiques of the routine use of paramilitary tactics in the War on Drugs since the 1980s, when the Reagan Administration escalated federal funding, the transfer of military hardware and training to police departments, and the forfeiture of seized property (Alexander; Egan; Tierney). As Michelle Alexander has argued in *The New Jim Crow*, the current combination of racialized and militarized policing had its origin in the War on Drugs: "numerous paths were available to us as a nation, in the wake of the crack crisis, yet for reasons traceable largely to racial politics and fear mongering we chose war. Conservatives found they could finally justify an all-out war on an 'enemy' that had been racially defined years before" (52). These practices escalated with the end of the Cold War and have been further expanded in the domestic War on Terror and the policing of the anti-globalization and Occupy movements (Alexander 74-7; Baker; Schrader; Apuzzo).

In the wake of Ferguson, the *New York Times* reported that as "the nation's wars abroad wind down, many of the military's surplus tools of combat have ended up in the hands of state and local law enforcement" (Apuzzo n.pag). The article noted that small town police departments like Neenah, Wisconsin (pop. 25,000) had received Mine Resistant MRAP vehicles costing around $700,000 from the Department of Defense's 1033 program started in 1997: "During the Obama administration, according to Pentagon data, police departments have received tens of thousands of machine guns; nearly 200,000 ammunition magazines; thousands of pieces of camouflage and night-vision equipment; and hundreds of silencers, armored cars and aircraft." *The Marshall Project* reported that since 1990 "Pentagon largesse included tactical military equipment worth more than $1.4 billion, disseminated in 203,000 transfers to about 7,500 agencies" (Musgrave, Meager and Dance n. pag.).

These offers of hardware and funding proved irresistible to suburban police departments with strained budgets and already checkered histories of racial

profiling. These policies have also resulted in a proliferation of paramilitary SWAT teams whose use expanded drastically from about 3,000 raids in 1980 to an estimated 45,000 per year by 2000. In its 2014 report, *War Comes Home*, the ACLU noted that the majority of "no-knock raids" are for search warrants for suspected drug possession (62%) and disproportionately targeted people of color: "The use of paramilitary weapons and tactics primarily impacted people of color; when paramilitary tactics were used in drug searches, the primary targets were people of color, whereas when paramilitary tactics were used in hostage or barricade scenarios, the primary targets were white" (ACLU n. pag.). But their use shows no sign of abating and statistics on SWAT raids remain a closely guarded secret since there is no federal requirement to report them (Sack n. pag.).

The outcry about the policing of the Ferguson protests propelled the issue into national politics resulting in President Obama's Executive Order suspending many domestic arms transfers in May 2015, adopting the recommendations of a federal working group. He observed in a speech in a Camden, NJ community center to an audience including local police officers: "We've seen how militarized gear can sometimes give people a feeling like they're an occupying force, as opposed to a force that's part of the community that's protecting them and serving them" (Davis and Shear n. pag.). Obama drew applause when he declared, "So we're going to prohibit some equipment made for the battlefield that is not appropriate for local police departments." He closed his speech by noting, "If we as a society aren't willing to deal honestly with issues of race, then we can't just expect police departments to solve these problems."

But the demilitarization was short lived. These limits on the Pentagon's 1033 program were rescinded by President Trump in August 2018, which Attorney General Jeff Sessions described as providing "life saving gear" (Goldman). The paramilitary SWAT tactics and military gear are fully evident in the widespread ICE house raids enforcing the Trump administration's controversial anti-illegal immigrant campaign.

Here we need a much fuller exploration of the links between militarization at home and the waging of seemingly distant wars abroad. The links between the "warrior mindset" of paramilitary police forces and SWAT teams across the United States and the strategy, tactics, and

personnel deployed in the military Occupation of Iraq or counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan need further exploration. These connections were briefly glimpsed during the Abu Ghraib torture scandal when it emerged that the military police who supervised the abuse of Iraqi prisoners were placed in charge because they had previously worked as correctional officers in the US prison industrial complex and may have been using violent techniques they had learned in domestic jails (Hersh; Puar 79-86).

In striking contrast, and a demonstration of the ways in which militarization can create unintended counter-narratives and possibilities for resistance by bridging the "civilian-military divide," some of the more incisive critiques of the use of the "warrior mentality," racialized policing, and the blurring of boundaries between police and soldiers, for example, have come from veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, some with experience in policing those war zones (Rizer and Hartman; Ahmed; Bello and Alcindor; Weichselbaum and Schwartzapfel).

How far does the reach of Black Lives Matter's ethical and political demands extend? Their focus on demilitarization challenges us to ask how the racial dimension of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or the Global War on Terror, intersects with the long history of white supremacy or the colonial frontier myth of "regeneration through violence," which has so often targeted communities of color (Slotkin; Puar; Mirzoeff). The links being forged between Black Lives Matter and the burgeoning high school students #NeverAgain movement for gun reform since the Parkland school massacre have focused attention on US firearms manufacturers, who are marketing AR-15 style assault "weapons of war" to a domestic market. These arms manufacturers depend both on sales to the police and military (fifteen percent and twenty-five percent respectively of $11.7 billion in domestic sales in 2012) and on exports abroad, often to foreign police forces with $4.4 billion in total exports in 2012 (Plumer n. pag.). Finally, and more broadly, there is the "elephant in the room" of the US permanent war economy and the vast half trillion dollar annual US military budgets (that continue even after the supposed end of the wars), which entail reductions in spending on social welfare programs, education, or infrastructure renewal, which often disproportionately affect communities of color (Melman; Lutz, *Homefront*; Lutz, "Militarization").

Disembedding the "Long War"

This sense of the violent palimpsest of American wars coming home through militarized policing and police violence is powerfully visible in Black Lives Matter protests themselves. The constant historical reference point in the protests is not the War on Drugs, but the war in Iraq and the occupation of cities like Fallujah. In the documentary, *Whose Streets?,* for example, a Marine Corps veteran, Dave, comments over scenes of police in army gear using tear gas and armored trucks in Ferguson in August 2014:

> It was obvious military tactics. Come in, cut off they communications. Round them up, you know what I'm saying . . . Then, once we got them under control, have the news people, have a combat photographer come in and say like, hey, look they going crazy. Yeah, they going crazy because we just cut off they communications and shot a couple of them . . . And then, later on, everything calm and all that and then everybody home like, oh, hey, they rounded up the insurgents. We in they country, how are they insurgents? You know what I'm saying? That's what was going on in Ferguson, man. (34'07"-34'49")

More recently the movement also extended its reach into the arena of sports and the military in the NFL protests sparked by Colin Kaepernick's refusal to stand during the National Anthem before games. Kaepernick adopted the military gesture of "taking a knee" at the suggestion of a Special Forces veteran, who met with him and subsequently defended his right to protest in the national media. Black Lives Matter has also intervened in the historical memory of the US Civil War in the campaign to remove Confederate memorials that followed the massacre at the Emanuel AME Church, in Charleston, South Carolina.

Beginning with the Ferguson protestors' use of "Hands Up Don't Shoot" chants, calling attention to Brown's shooting by Officer Darren Wilson, the movement has proved remarkably adept at appropriating gestures and imagery that represent their neighborhoods as occupied war zones. That this is done with wit, energy, anger and defiance under the gaze of police officers wearing paramilitary gear, gas masks and riot shields and atop armored cars and US Army MRAP vehicles still painted in desert colors

is all the more moving and remarkable. This is powerfully demonstrated in recent documentaries about the Ferguson protests made by activists, like *Stay Woke: The Black Lives Matter Movement* (dir. Laurens Grant, 2016), *Whose Streets?* (dir. Sabaah Folayan, 2017) and *Do Not Resist* (dir. Craig Atkinson, 2016).

One powerful tool, as the declaration of the "unnamed rioter" in Baltimore in 2015 I began with suggests – "We're not playing out here. This is not a war. But we want our rights" – is their ability to intervene in and interrupt conventional racialized and aestheticized narratives around the police killings of young black men and women by inserting vocal commentary into the powerful images and visual culture of street protests. Benjamin Balthaser makes this crucial point about the narration of onlooker Ramsey Orta whose words were captured in the cellphone video of police officers putting Eric Garner in a fatal choke hold on Staten Island while arresting him for selling smuggled cigarettes. Orta can clearly be heard at the beginning of the video as the police force Garner to the ground, leading him to say repeatedly and terribly, "I can't breathe":

> Once again police beating up on people . . . He didn't do shit; he didn't do nothing . . . you all just gonna keep piling up; that's all he did was break up a fight; you gonna lock him up for nothing; all he did was break up a fight . . . (Balthaser n. pag)

Here Orta's narration, Balthaser argues, serves a crucial purpose that prevents the cellphone video from becoming part of a naturalized spectacle of violence against black bodies: "Orta also states repeatedly that he 'lives right here' and that 'this is my house,' staking his right to video Garner's murder as well as to stand on the sidewalk . . . His commentary makes it impossible for the viewer to regard Garner's death merely as spectacle or to remove Garner from a community of people for whom his life matters" (Balthaser n. pag.). This inserted commentary, as Balthaser argues, has the effect of politicizing and humanizing the horrifying images of the videos of police killings, like the NAACP captions on photographs of lynchings which circulated as mementoes of white supremacy in the 1920s and 30s. Invoking Walter Benjamin's reflections on the neutralization and

depoliticizing power of the liberal media on images of violence in "The Author as Producer," he argues:

> Perhaps what is required is a set of practices for critical documentation and radical recirculation. As Benjamin insists, "we must demand from the photographer . . . the ability to put such a caption beneath his picture . . . as will confer upon it a revolutionary use value." We must acknowledge, as Orta does, that images of violence against African Americans do not speak for themselves. To prevent the national media's naturalization of violence – its annulment of the radical content of these images – one must articulate both a subject position as well as a counter-narrative to white supremacy (Balthaser n. pag.).

The inclusion of the reflections, commentaries and declarations of protestors can help disembed aestheticized images of violent protest. This is strongly evident in the use of the genres of autobiography and confessional by activists like Patrisse Khan-Cullors in *When They Call You A Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*, or the impassioned first person narrative which frames Washington Post journalist's Wesley Lowery's reportage, *They Can't Kill Us All: Ferguson, Baltimore, and a New Era in America's Racial Justice Movement*. There has been a tendency to aestheticize some of the highly dramatic scenes from the protest movement, as evident for example in the documentary *Stay Woke: The Black Lives Matter Movement* or in still photographs, like the iconic Antigone-like image of Iesha Evans being arrested, Baton Rouge, July 2016 at a Black Lives Matter Protest about the police shooting of Alton Sterling, a lone black woman in the middle of the street in summer dress and sunglasses being cuffed and arrested by two riot policemen in body armor in front of a phalanx of army uniforms. Although the organizers and activists have insisted on distinguishing themselves as "not your grandfather's Civil Rights movement," the iconography of the Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X era has proved a durable visual frame for this new generation of protestors.

The terrifying spectacle of militarized police on the streets of Ferguson is also powerfully represented in Craig Atkinson's haunting documentary, *Do Not Resist*, which provides invaluable glimpses into the secretive world of SWAT teams, warrior police training culture, and paramilitary raids to

enforce routine drug search warrants. Atkinson's film offers a brilliant and highly informative critique, motivated in part by his family history as the son of a former police officer and SWAT team member, who like many other police officers and military veterans is critical of the turn to a warrior mentality. Yet, in its ride along sequences with suburban SWAT teams, *Do Not Resist* deliberately resembles embedded reportage from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in the ways that offers viewers what I have called the "embedded sublime" of military violence against a racialized other. This risks turning its action sequences into spectacle. The film's frequent lack of commentary and menacing electronic soundtrack often leaves the viewer feeling both informed and overwhelmed by this Orwellian spectacle. This disturbing logic is interrupted, however, by scenes which include overheard voices of protestors on the streets of Ferguson, such as two young women on cellphones who declare amidst the heavily armed officers and their armored vehicles: "They need to stop giving these boys these toys 'cause they don't know how to handle it. Hello?" (9'07"-9'15"). The everyday gesture of saying "hello?" into a cellphone further punctures the display of military style macho swagger. The young woman's also seems for a moment to directly address to the viewer, asking us if we are there and paying attention. In a more melancholy register, the film presents moving scenes of a family dealing with the aftermath of a SWAT raid that has literally broken their windows and left them reeling but seemingly resilient, at least in front of the camera.

This kind of interruptive commentary is brilliantly captured in activist film maker Sabaah Folayan's documentary, *Whose Streets?*, following a group of local Ferguson activists in the year after Michael Brown's shooting. It offers perhaps the most moving and useful entry point into an understanding of the social conditions in a community of color that allowed for Black Lives Matter to capture national attention. By presenting a vibrant and tangled series of personal relationships amongst its protagonists that cut across gender and family lines, *Whose Streets?* also offers a sense of emotional intimacy that offsets its focus on public violence and protest. While the film does include an aestheticized montage riot sequence with a sympathetic and tragic musical soundtrack following the announcement that Officer Darren Wilson will not be indicted, *Whose*

Streets? generally avoids such cinematic strategies in favor of close camera shots of the everyday life of protestors in living rooms, cars and out on the streets facing highly armed police officers. From the first sequences of police on the scene of Michael Brown's shooting, where they left his body in the August heat for four and a half hours, local residents face police carrying M-16 assault rifles as a matter of routine.

In an unforgettable scene on the second day of police occupation, a middle-aged African-American woman with a sign under her arm shouts at a policeman in military gear occupying a gas station after the Police Captain Ron Johnson has announced a midnight curfew and promised an end to the heavy handed police tactics of August 9th 2014, only to use more armored vehicles and tear gas:

> WOMAN: This ain't fucking Iraq. This is not Iraq.
> OFFICER: Well you guys are treating it like it's Iraq.
> WOMAN: This is St. Louis. So, don't tell us you're going to fucking shoot us, okay.
> OFFICER: Go on the other side!
> WOMAN: Don't fucking tell us you're going to shoot us. We are not in fucking Iraq. This is fucking North County. You guys are the aggressors. You guys are the ones that pushed us. There was a 12 o'clock curfew. There was a fucking 12 o'clock curfew. It is 10:33. What the fuck happened? (30'05"-30'45")

After checking the time on her cellphone she walks off undaunted into the night.

In a later interlude, the rapper and activist Tef Poe addresses a group of protestors in the street as if onstage through a mic: "You ain't gon' out shoot them. It sound good, it feel good, it look good, but you ain't gon' out shoot them. They got more jails, they got more guns, they got more bullets. So, you not gon' win that battle, man."

He captures the sense of urgency and collective agency, of a world watching Ferguson.

"Let's do it the right way, man. Let's influence the world right now. We got the stage, so let's do it. This is it. You want to know what it look like, what it sound like, what it feel like? This is it."

What *Whose Streets?* also makes clear throughout, like Claudia Rankine's ever expanding memorial page listing the victims of police killings in her best-selling book, *Citizen*, is that the Ferguson protests originate in and are sustained by public rituals of mourning and memorialization. As one interviewee comments, "we're trying to mourn and you came here with 300 cop cars, in riot gear and K-9 units. This is the same thing that pretty much got us here."

Towards the end of the film, another activist, Aurellia, riding in a minivan with her daughter, strikes a more hopeful note by reaching beyond the present state of war:

> Some people grow up in what they think is like a . . . what we would call like a real war with, like, planes and bombs and guns and stuff . . . but this like a unseen war. Where they wage war on the people without anybody else knowing. This era or generation we are raising activists. You know, we have to create a generation of activists. If there's going to be any change, it starts with our children. (1:29'54" - 1:30'29")

In American culture since 2001, militarization has been remarkably plural and uneven, disorganizing, dividing, and compartmentalizing society to facilitate the projection of violence onto far off nations in the Global South and onto communities of color at home. War discourse proliferates in our everyday lives, but violence is doubly distanced from the majority of American society: socially and geographically. This is the distancing and silencing logic of war culture that the Black Lives Matter movement has defied and interrupted.

Notes

[1] My thanks to this essay's anonymous reviewer for emphasizing this point. For connections between antiwar movements and antiracism, see, for example, Mariani, Singh, Mann, and Rosenwald, ed.

[2] There were three waves of Ferguson protest: after the August 9th 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown, November 2014 after the Grand Jury refused to indict, and in March 2015 when the Department of Justice's federal investigation resulted in a second decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson.

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Stefano Luconi

Black Lives and the First African American President

In 2015 *Atlantic* staff writer Ta-Nehisi Coates argued that, even after the beginning of the first African American president's administration, dark skin still put at risk the physical safety and lives of harmless blacks, making them highly vulnerable to the destruction of their bodies by state-sanctioned police attacks (Coates, *Between the World and Me*). To corroborate his thesis that Barack Obama's election had signaled no coming of a post-racial era and that white supremacy continued to shape US society, Coates referred to a few outstanding cases of inoffensive African Americans whom law enforcement officers had recently killed. The victims ranged from Eric Garner, suffocated to death in a banned chokehold while being arrested for selling cigarettes illegally on 17 July 2014, to twelve-year-old Tamir Rice, who was shot the following 22 November because his toy gun had been mistaken for a real one.

Coates's overview awkwardly mixed the killings of unarmed blacks by the police resulting in the officers' exoneration with the homicides of African Americans by white civilians in alleged self-defense that had conversely ended in the murderers' conviction, as in the case of Renisha McBride's shooter (*Between the Word and Me* 9). However, an investigation by *The Guardian* documented the revealing extent of the phenomenon Coates had denounced. According to the British daily, about 25 percent of the African Americans killed by law enforcement officers in 2015 carried no weapon and young black males were roughly nine times more likely to fall victims to police use of lethal force than any other group (Swaine et al.).

The growing awareness among African Americans of their helplessness in the face of such brutality inspired the birth of several movements that aimed at organizing blacks against deadly police tactics and racial injustice. #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) soon took the lead among these groups, which

also included Dream Defenders, Ferguson Action, Hands Up United, Million Hoodies, and Black Youth Project 100. This article examines the formation and development of BLM against the backdrop of the rise and fall of African Americans' expectations about Obama's presidency.

From the Black Freedom Struggle to BLM

On 29 April 1992, a jury found four white officers of the Los Angeles Police Department not guilty of severely beating an African American motorist, Rodney King, during his arrest for driving while intoxicated the previous year. In response to the verdict, the city's black community exploded in a five-day racial riot that claimed some sixty victims as well as provoking arsons and lootings that caused damages of over one billion dollars. To African Americans, there was no justification for King's mistreatment because his only offense was, as astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson put it sarcastically, "driving while black" (134).

Twenty-one years later, George Zimmerman – a Hispanic crime watch volunteer in Sanford, Florida – was acquitted of second-degree murder on self-defense grounds in the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed seventeen-year-old black. The gunfire occurred in the wake of a quarrel resulting from the vigilante's misperception of the victim as a thug and his presence as a threat to the neighborhood, apparently because the teenager was wearing a hoodie. But Zimmerman could walk free of court pursuant to Florida's stand-your ground law, a measure providing wide leeway in the use of lethal force without retreating for physically threatened people (Coates, "How Stand Your Ground").

In the eyes of numerous African Americans racial prejudice had shaped the case from the very beginning. "Trayvon was judged guilty of walking while Black and breathing while Black," former independent African American journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal, currently serving a prison term for the alleged murder of a police officer, has maintained (90). Indeed, Zimmerman's targeting of Martin as suspicious smacked of racial profiling, an attitude that *Washington Post* white columnist Richard Cohen even justified in retrospect by contending that "young black males commit a

disproportionate amount of crimes" (n. pag.). The fact that it took forty-five days after Martin's death for the police to arrest Zimmerman, although not only local and national peaceful rallies but also the international press had stigmatized the delay, hinted at double-standard justice (Bloom 40-47). Conventional wisdom suggested that, if the suspected murderer had been black, the prosecutors would have taken him into custody straight away (Pitts). After all, Florida's stand-your-ground law had a history of racial disparity in application. One year earlier, in May 2012, the provision was ignored in a case against Marissa Alexander, an African American woman who received a twenty-year prison sentence for firing a warning shot into the ceiling, which did not hurt anybody, during a strife with her abusive and estranged husband, who had threatened to murder her (Franks 234).

All the more reason why the Zimmerman verdict came as a shock to a nation which had deluded itself into believing that the election of the first black US president had marked the end of white privilege and the demise of racial discrimination.[1] In this connection, according to a nationwide survey by the Pew Research Center, Zimmerman's acquittal dissatisfied 86 percent of African Americans, as opposed to 30 percent of whites, while 78 percent of the former, in contrast to 28 percent of the latter, thought that racial issues influenced the outcome of the trial (Neubauer and Fradella 7). Yet, contrary to what happened in 1992, black protesters did not resort to street violence and bloodshed in 2013.

Against all odds, African Americans seemed confident that peaceful mass demonstrations would make their complaints against discrimination heard in Washington. Indeed, the major outcome of the Zimmerman affair was the birth of BLM, a loose movement of primarily black community activists, students as well as a few educators and academicians, such as Jalane Schmidt, a professor at the University of Virginia, who established its Charlottesville chapter (McClain). Three African American women – Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi – initiated BLM in 2013 by means of social media to prompt action against racial injustice. As such, BLM has not confined itself to a call for the ending of police brutality and profiling, but it has also addressed the issue of mass incarceration and other kinds of institutional racism that influential voices such as Michelle

Alexander's had already brought to public attention. As Garza has argued, BLM

> is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression. . . . It is an acknowledgement [that] Black poverty and genocide is state violence. It is an acknowledgment that 1 million Black people are locked in cages in this country – one half of all people in prisons or jails – is an act of state violence. (n. pag.)

Columnists have often made a comparison between BLM and the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Specifically, the former's emphasis on participatory democracy, grassroots network organization, and decentered management have suggested the approach that Ella Baker – the interim executive director of Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK)'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and a key promoter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) – endeavored to implement for the black freedom struggle roughly half a century earlier (Shor). Likewise, BLM's tactics of street protests, traffic blockades, and disruption of political rallies have seemed similar to the sit-ins, freedom rides, and marches of the civil rights movement (Izadi). Even after a few initially peaceful demonstrations evolved into riots, some commentators have held that MLK, too, drew criticism because his aggressive strategy of civil disobedience was disruptive and caused violent turmoil (Tognotti).

Although *Washington Post* black editorialist Simone Sebastian has aptly remarked that "violence was critical to the success of the 1960 civil rights movement" (n. pag), MLK and his fellow activists exploited and even welcomed white supremacists' brutality to win sympathy for their cause and to achieve legislative integration. Yet, they were victims, not perpetrators, of violence. For this reason, as protests occasionally escalated to turmoil in the mid 2010s, it has not been infrequent to see former civil rights militants who shared BLM's goals while distancing themselves from its allegedly "confrontational and divisive" methods (Reynolds).

Although some present-day observers have tended to emphasize the analogies between BLM and the civil rights movement, previous academic research has suggested that the former is less inclusive than the latter was (Clayton). Indeed, BLM seems closer to more radical components of the black freedom struggle in the 1960s such as the Black Panther Party (BPP), as a few scholars have pointed out. For example, historian Curtis Austin has stressed that BLM's militants see the BPP "as a template for their own mass-based efforts" (194). Likewise, Robyn C. Spencer has highlighted how "contemporary activists' insistence that 'Black Lives Matter'" replicates BPP's commitment against African Americans' downturn (4). Lindsey Dillon and Julie Sze have also argued that BLM "is, at least in part, a legacy of the Black Panther Party" (247). In particular, according to Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., BLM has drawn upon the BPP's strategy while pairing "confrontational tactics with community organizing" in the struggle to curb law enforcement officers' roughness against African Americans (xv).

Actually, even though BLM does not legitimize the use of force for self-defense and lacks an overtly revolutionary program, both this new movement and the BPP arose from blacks' response to police brutality and built on this issue to elaborate a larger blueprint for the advocacy of African American humanity. BLM's group-centered network bears fewer similarities to the MLK-dominated hierarchical structure of the SCLC than it does to the BPP, which eventually succumbed to an inner feud between the Oakland headquarters and its Harlem chapter. Furthermore, following in the footsteps of the BPP, which established an international section in Algeria in 1970 and developed relations with the governments of Cuba, North Korea, North Vietnam and the People's Republic of China (Malloy), BLM has grown from a US-centered movement into a global network. It spreads from Great Britain, where activists blocked main routes to Heathrow and Birmingham airports to raise awareness of racism in the United Kingdom (Siddique), to Australia, where it stood in solidarity with indigenous people (Lattimore). Specifically, after the BPP had sided with the Palestine Liberation Organization in the 1960s and 1970s (Lubin 119-30), a delegation of BLM visited the West Bank in early 2015 as a gesture of solidarity towards the Palestinians living under Israeli occupation (Bailey).

BLM and the BPP have other features in common. The latter's cofounder, Huey P. Newton, endorsed gay rights and endeavored to eradicate sexism (Jones and Jeffries 32-35). The BPP's minister of Information, Eldridge Cleaver, regarded women as "our half . . ., not our weaker half" (qtd. in Ogbar 102). When Newton had to flee the United States in 1974 in order to avoid criminal prosecution for murder, he entrusted one of them, Elaine Brown, with the leadership of the BPP, which she headed until 1977 (Brown 3-16). Such attitudes foreran, albeit to a limited extent, the prominent role of queer and female activists within the BLM network. Conversely, male chauvinism and homophobic prejudices were endemic to the BPP's civil rights counterparts. The SCLC, for instance, relegated effective female organizers such as Ella Baker and Septima P. Clark to the sidelines, eventually pushing the former to part from MLK's association (Ling 102-8). It also marginalized gay activist Bayard Rustin (D'Emilio). It is hardly by chance that Rustin was the only man Garza listed among the "elders" whose "tactics" and "lessons" had inspired her movement (qtd. in Chatelain).

The BPP and BLM also share their self-perception as the vanguard of a broader liberation movement. To Newton, the BPP should fight for "millions and millions of oppressed people" who were not confined to African Americans alone (Newton 145). In Garza's view, BLM is the advocate of civil rights for women, queer and trans folks, undocumented immigrants, and people with disabilities, too. As Cullors has clarified, BLM is "about valuing black trans lives, blacks that have been incarcerated, black folks who are disabled, black folks who are women, black folks who are queer" (qtd. in Carpentier n. pag.). It even looks like as if Garza and her fellow activists took a leaf from the BPP's program when BLM listed its "guiding principles" under the heading "What We Believe," an obvious echo of a section by the same title in the Panthers' 1966 ten-point platform (Foner 2-4).

The President and the Movement

Institutional politics is the sphere that has initially enabled most BLM activists to refrain from replicating the violent reaction to the Rodney King ruling in the wake of Zimmerman's discharge. Obama's rise helped reverse blacks' discontent with federal institutions as the proper arena to overcome racial injustice. The tangible opportunity to snatch the White House from Caucasian hands marked a significant increase in African Americans' participation in the electoral process. Their turnout rose from 60 percent of the eligible voters in 2004 to 65 percent in 2008 and reached 66 percent in 2012, when blacks even went to the polls at a higher rate than whites (Frey 222). Racial pride did undoubtedly contribute to such a large mobilization for Obama. But, as Ta-Nehisi Coates has argued, "Presumably, all those black people who voted for Obama supported him because they thought he would advance policies that advanced them" (*We Were Eight Years in Power* 115). More specifically, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has observed that "it would be naïve to think that African Americans were not considering the destructive impact of policing and incarceration when they turned out in droves to elect him" (143).

The election of a black president apparently implied that the federal administration would be responsive to calls for racial justice. So did the presence of the first African American attorney general, Eric Holder, at the helm of the Department of Justice. For instance, relatives and friends thought that justice would eventually come to Sean Bell, an unarmed African American whom undercover New York Police Department (NYPD) officers had shot fifty times in 2006, "with a new presidential administration and news of an investigation by the US attorney's office" (Barker n. pag.). After all, during the transition, Obama committed himself to the enforcement of a blueprint by vice-president-elect Joseph Biden to interdict racial profiling (Moore 131). Moreover, in his capacity as chief executive, he specifically revealed his sensitivity to Trayvon Martin's plight. Obama not only called his death a "tragedy," but he also argued that "If I had a son, he would look like Trayvon" (qtd. in Thompson and Wilson n. pag.). After the Zimmerman verdict, the president added that the young

victim "could have been me 35 years ago" and went on to censure racial profiling procedures (qtd. in Hennesey n. pag.).

Conversely, in 1992, following his unsuccessful 1984 and 1988 campaigns for the presidency, black leader Jesse Jackson decided that he would not run again for the White House because he thought that there was no room any longer for a progressive platform on race issues within the Democratic party. In addition, the only African American contender, Virginia's Governor Douglas Wilder, had withdrawn from the field of the Democratic hopefuls for want of funds even before voters cast a single ballot in the primaries. As a consequence, by the time the Rodney King verdict was pronounced, Los Angeles' blacks had no political representative they could identify with. The feeling of powerlessness resulting from that lack made it therefore easier to express one's hatred of racial discrimination by resorting to violence, instead of relying on the power of the ballot to change the status quo. Blacks' sense of insulation from politics was so widespread that the previous year Rita Walters won election to the city council from the South Los Angeles district, the heart of the turmoil, with as few as 6,251 votes out of a population of roughly 250,000 residents (Chávez 165).

Yet, Obama made his statements about Martin respectively on 23 March 2012, and 19 July 2013, that is, almost a month after Martin's shooting on 26 February, and nearly a week following Zimmerman's exoneration on 13 July. Furthermore, besides carefully avoiding any criticism of the jury's decision, the president uttered his remarks under pressure from black activists and street demonstrations (Landler and Shear).

Obama never rushed to address racial discrimination in the previous years, even when the mistreatment of blacks came with the face of police brutality or capital punishment because of unfairness in the criminal justice system. For instance, while campaigning for the White House in St. Petersburg, Florida, in August 2008, he declined to bring up the case of Javon Dawson, an African American teenager who had been fatally shot twice in the back by white police officers a few weeks earlier (Allen). Similarly, in 2011, in his capacity as president, Obama refused to take a stand on the case of Troy Davis, the alleged African American murderer of an off-duty police officer, and did not interfere with his execution, notwithstanding an international campaign for clemency, or at least a new

trial, on the grounds that he had been the victim of a miscarriage of justice (Freeman-Coulbary). The White House press secretary confined himself to stating that it would not be "appropriate" for the head of the federal administration "to weigh in on specific cases like this one, which is a state prosecution" (Bluestein n. pag.).

The latter statement implicitly referred to the limits of executive authority, which obviously contributed to influencing Obama's dealing with racial issues and controversies. Regardless of their actual Constitutional powers, however, US presidents usually enjoy a prominent position that per se offers them opportunities to speak up and to exert a moral suasion. But, as sociologist Michael Eric Dyson has suggested, Obama tended to refrain from exploiting Teddy Roosevelt's renowned bully pulpit and was often "slow to command the rostrum to address race" (155).

Obama's post-racial and color-blind approach also affected other dimensions of his public discourse. For example, the president embraced a narrative of black improvement in the United States that conflicted with the vision of persisting ravages of racism and discrimination. In 2009, speaking at Cape Coast Castle, the fortress on the shoreline of present-day Ghana where European traders had used to amass African slaves before shipping them to North America, Obama made a point of celebrating "the extraordinary progress that we've made because of the courage of so many, black and white, to abolish slavery and ultimately win civil rights for all people . . . . It reminds us that as bad as history can be, it's also possible to overcome" ("Remarks by the President at Cape Coast").

Prior to the Martin affair, Obama dealt with race matters only when he could not reasonably abstain from speaking up. Therefore, after being associated with preacher Jeremiah Wright, an advocate of Afrocentrism who contended that US society had been founded and governed on racism, Obama made his only speech devoted to racial issues in the whole 2008 presidential campaign. But he discussed those topics with the primary purpose of denying that they were central to US politics as opposed to such real problems as deindustrialization, the war in Iraq, and the inadequacy of health care ("A More Perfect Union"). A similar example was Obama's reaction to the arrest of African American academician Henry Louis Gates, Jr. A white police officer took the black scholar into custody after a few

misunderstandings: while Gates was trying to break into his own house because the front door was jammed shut, the agent thought he was a burglar. On this occasion, Obama came out against racial profiling and stated that "the Cambridge police acted stupidly" (qtd. in Seelye n. pag.). Yet, no actual blueprint against this practice followed his words. Under pressure from law enforcement officers' associations, which had accused the president of inappropriateness, and with less than one third of Americans approving how he had handled the controversy, Obama ended up drinking beer with both the protagonists of the incidents at the White House to defuse the dispute (Williams).

A Turning Point in Ferguson

The BLM movement gained momentum and reached a mass level in the wake of the killing of Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri, on 9 August 2014. An eighteen-year-old black male, Brown was shot dead by Darren Wilson, a white police officer who was pursuing the teenager in connection with the theft of a box of cigars from a local shop. Brown was unarmed and his bleeding corpse was left in the middle of a street for more than four hours. The circumstances of the killing and the apparent disrespect for Brown's body ignited a wave of mass protests. As Umi Selah, the executive director of Dream Defenders, has recalled about Brown lying on the ground, "That was particularly barbaric. It just showed the value they placed on his body even in death" (qtd. in Carpentier n. pag.).

Although the means to summon campaigners relied on state-of-the-art social media technology, African Americans' response to the Ferguson incident resumed civil rights movement tactics for a new generation of activists whose parents had been born after the mid-1960s achievements of the black freedom struggle. Street demonstrations enjoyed a new springtime. In addition, Cullors, along with Darnell L. Moore, was instrumental in bringing more than five hundred militants from roughly twenty cities across the country to Ferguson over the 2014 Labor Day weekend to support the local mobilization. Travel was by bus, in the spirit of the 1961 "freedom rides" to call for the enforcement of desegregation

in interstate transportations (Khan-Cullors and bandele 211-22). An additional echo of the civil rights movement era was the BLM's effort to suggest that Brown's killing was tantamount to an early 21st-century version of lynching, as participants in rallies chanted: "How many black kids will you kill? Michael Brown, Emmett Till," with reference to the fourteen-year-old African American who had been abducted and murdered in Mississippi in 1955 because he had allegedly whistled at a white woman (Tyson 213).

A grand jury's decision not to charge Wilson for Brown's death rekindled demonstrations in late November. In Ferguson, however, protests turned violent and degenerated into looting and the burning of police cars in what was neither a replica of the civil rights rallies in the early 1960s nor a duplication of the response to the Zimmerman verdict of the previous year ("We Don't Belong Here"). As the police resorted to the use of force, tear gas, and arrests against rioters and peaceful protesters alike – not to mention reporters and television crews (Lowery 3-7, 11-12) – the raging behavior of a few African Americans once again resembled an attitude à la BPP. It is hardly by chance that, to black historian Donna Murch, the mobilization "in the name of Michael Brown" echoed "Stokeley Carmichael's 'Organize, Organize, Organize'" (133), namely the rallying call of the African American leader who was responsible for the shift of the SNCC "from nonviolence to violence" (Pride and Woodward 61) and subsequently served as the BPP's prime minister. In Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's opinion, however, the turmoil and uproar in Ferguson were also "the flames of resignation and exhaustion" (169). Indeed, it seems that African Americans' angry frustration resulted, at least in part, from the gap between their great expectations of the Obama administration and the reality of persisting police brutality and discrimination well into his second term.

The Response to Obama's shortcomings

One more time the violence in Ferguson forced the president to talk about a racial incident and its political fallout. Obama acknowledged that what had happened in this city demonstrated that "there are still problems

and communities of color aren't just making these problems up." Nevertheless, it looked as if he was interested less in addressing African Americans' concerns than in appearing presidential by condemning violence and stating that "progress . . . won't be [made] by throwing bottles. That won't be done by smashing car windows. That won't be done by using . . . an excuse to vandalize property. And it certainly won't be done by hurting anybody." Obama's immediate plan was to instruct "Attorney General Holder to work with cities across the country to help build better relations between communities and law enforcement" ("Remarks by the President after Announcement").

Obama had already dispatched Holder to Ferguson in August after the fatal shooting of Brown. On this occasion, many African Americans would have preferred to see the president and had wanted him to be their spokesperson. To them, it was about time for Obama "to be 'the black president,' not just a president who happens to be black" (Bates n. pag.). Dissatisfaction similarly grew out of Obama's response to Wilson's discharge. From prominent intellectuals to activists on the field criticism of the president focused on his failure to exploit his powers and clout to end police brutality against African Americans. "Ferguson signifies the end of the age of Obama," stated Cornel West on CNN. He also added that "We began with tremendous hope and we end with great despair. . . . We have a black president and a black attorney general . . ., but not one federal prosecution of a case against a policeman killing a black youth under the five-and-a-half years where we've had all black folk in place" ("Ferguson Signifies End" n. pag.). Of course, West's disapproval of Obama – which started to surface before the events in Ferguson and went beyond the president's stand on race issues – did not meet with unanimous agreement among African Americans (Dennis). But it did not cause widespread dissent, either. According to Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., a professor at Princeton University, West's stand epitomized the "disappointment" of African Americans who expected Obama "to be different" and "to care about black people" (147). For instance, Damien Goodmon – the founder of Crenshaw Subway Coalition, an organization cooperating with BLM in transportation projects in the Los Angeles region – argued that "Black people were dying, and he failed to do anything of substance" (qtd. in Kaplan 199). By the

same token, West's statement that Obama was a "Rockefeller Republican in blackface" (qtd. in Lott 5) found an echo in the hip-hop duo Dead Prez, who criticized Obama as "white power in a black face" in its 2015 "Real Revolutionaries" (qtd. in Dagbovie 127). Significantly, the rappers – who joined BLM's campaigns (Gordon) – had experienced police brutality and excessive force, as they were illegitimately detained for thirty-six hours in 2003 following a photo shoot in Brooklyn, an incident for which they subsequently won a lawsuit (Asante 142-43). Fellow hip-hop artist Kareem Jackson, alias Tef Poe, who was arrested during the protest in Ferguson, charged that "Obama has forsaken us" and asked himself why he had voted for him twice.[2] Likewise, Alvin Herring – a black pastor who had followed the demonstrations since Brown's death – complained that "the president is much too careful, much too hesitant. . . . The president should be here in Ferguson tonight. He should demonstrate more commitment" (qtd. in Feldenkirchen and Stark n. pag.). In 2016 Bree Newsome characterized BLM fellow activists as "an entire generation of political participants that started out very enthusiastic about the process," when Obama ran for president, "and then who, by the time you get to Ferguson, had completely soured on the process" (qtd. in Lowery 168-69).

Obama did eventually offer a plan to counter police brutality. He proposed the allocation of 75 million dollars to help police departments purchase 50,000 body cameras and install them on their officers' equipment to record the events in which law enforcement agents would be involved (Landler A1-11). The president also prohibited the transfer of some surplus military supplies to local police forces. The array of banned material included grenade launchers, tracked armored vehicles, armed aircraft, bayonets, and guns of .50 caliber or higher (Hirschfield and Shear A11). Obama's latter decision accepted a specific demand of the BLM's Labor-Day-weekend "freedom ride," as Moore and Cullors had urged the federal government to "discontinue its supply of military weaponry and equipment to local law enforcement." Yet, all this took three months after the BLM activists had descended on Ferguson and a second riot following Wilson's discharge. In addition, the new policy was primarily a palliative to defuse tension. It would prevent "stunning show of force" by the police – as *The Economist* described Ferguson while law enforcers confronted

demonstrators using "armored cars with snipers on top" ("Overkill" 29) – but it could not avoid per se the killing of unarmed blacks, who had usually fallen victims to standard firearms. The deterring power of body cameras was also dubious on the grounds of the court outcome of previous incidents. For instance, although a video amateur had recoded Rodney King's beating, this visual piece of evidence was not sufficient to convict the four officers. Likewise, a grand jury acquitted Tamir Rice's shooter notwithstanding a surveillance video of the incident. In an even more specific case in point, a couple of months earlier, on 20 October 2014, a law enforcer fatally shot Laquan McDonald, a black teenager who carried a knife but was walking away from the officer, firing sixteen rounds in front of a camera mounted in his police SUV (Sweeney and Meisner). In the latter case, knowing that a device could offer visual evidence to hold the officer accountable for any inappropriate use of lethal force did not avert his overreaction to McDonald's alleged threat.

Furthermore, to BLM, Obama's blueprint seemed somehow short-sighted because it did not attempt to cope with the broader problems of African Americans' social marginality. In 2014 the president launched his "My Brother's Keeper" initiative to help young people of color overcome social challenges and to ensure that they could succeed in developing their full potential (Fakunle et al. 277-78). Still, in Cullors' opinion, Obama should have "lift[ed] up new programming that can divest from law enforcement and reinvest into poor communities, specifically black communities, and he still hasn't really taken a stand around those issues – not a strong stand" (qtd. in Wheaton n. pag.). Similarly, a leader of BLM in Chicago, Aislinn Pulley, refused to join a summit of civil rights activists with Obama because "I could not, with any integrity, participate in such a sham that would only serve to legitimize the false narrative that the government is working to end police brutality and the institutional racism that fuels it" (qtd. in Liptak n. pag). Another outstanding activist of the network, DeRay Mckesson met with Obama in 2016, only to reprimand the president because he "had yet to set a foot in Ferguson" (Lowery 227).

Disillusionment with the president's initiatives also resulted from the fact that Obama's proposals were eventually unable to stop police brutality against unarmed African Americans. Most notably, law enforcers killed

Alton Sterling on 5 July 2016, and Philando Castille two days later. When the president appeared on ABC to discuss these additional fatal shootings, he overstressed African Americans' appropriate behavior, which would prevent blacks from becoming officers' targets, and overlooked the issues of both police reform and changes to a racially-biased criminal justice system. Cullors' blunt comments were that the program had been a "shit show" and Obama's performance "a bunch of fluff" (as qtd. in Craven n. pag.).

In the aftermath of Sterling's and Castille's deaths, not only did BLM start new mobilizations, but frustration about the failure of the first black president to protect black lives led a couple of disturbed African Americans to take justice into their own hands. Micah Xavier Johnson, a veteran of the US intervention in Afghanistan, ambushed a group of white officers, murdering five of them at random, during a BLM protest in Dallas on 7 July. So did Gavin E. Long, slaughtering three more, ten days later in Baton Rouge. They probably took inspiration from Ismaaiyl Abdullah Brinsley, who had assassinated two patrolpersons from NYPD on 20 December 2014, in revenge for Eric Garner's death. When Obama defended law enforcement at the memorial service for the assassinated police officers, he staged "the exact kind of political theater Black Lives Matter demonstrations purposefully sought to repudiate" (Joseph 140).

Conclusion

The 2016 homicides of law enforcers occurred during the presidential campaign. Against the backdrop of the racial polarization of US politics that shaped the response to the Obama administration, the sporadic cases of African Americans' bloody retribution became a political weapon in the effort to delegitimize BLM on the grounds that it encouraged violence against white police officers and was tantamount to a terrorist organization (Khan-Cullors and Bandele 6-8). An online petition urging the federal government to designate BLM as such collected over 140,000 signatures in a couple of weeks (Kenney). Referring to the color of law enforcers' uniforms, a Blue Lives Matter movement soon confronted BLM. David Clarke Jr. – Milwaukee County's African-American sheriff, who had called

BLM a "domestic hate group" – got prime time at the Republican National Convention to stand by the police and to endorse Donald Trump as the ideal "law and order" candidate (Ross).

The 2016 elections, however, were not only a liability but an asset, too. They also offered BLM additional opportunities to have its voice heard. Activists disrupted Democratic candidates' rallies in the effort to force the party's leading contenders for the presidential nomination, Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton, into taking an uncompromising stand against police brutality (Brunner; Bixby). Furthermore, Mckesson entered the Democratic primary for mayor in Baltimore, after winning a nationwide reputation as BLM's most visible activist on Twitter and other social media during the protests at the 2015 death of Freddie Gray because of a severe spinal injury while in police custody in that city (Lowery 132-34, 157-63).

Mckesson's bid for City Hall was not the first time African-American radicals played by the rules of institutional politics. For instance, BPP's co-founder Bobby Seale ran for mayor of Oakland in 1973. After the Black Panthers had become the target of federal repression by President Richard M. Nixon's Counter Intelligence Program, Seale threw his hat into the ring and "exchanged black leather and bullets for ballots" within the BPP's strategy of "survival pending revolution" (Van Deburg 300). Conversely, Mckesson's 2016 candidacy was not a tactical retreat in the face of a governmental authoritarian turn. The mayoral election was held on 26 April, almost three months before the July shootings that spurred the efforts at identifying BLM with terrorism, and Obama eventually refused to yield to such a request (Kenney). Moreover, Mckesson did believe that "the system could be fixed" by casting ballots (Lowery 161). Still, contrary to Seale, who had received 37 percent of the votes and had forced incumbent John H. Reading into a runoff election (Rhomberg 3), Mckesson finished a distant sixth with less than 2 percent of the ballots in the primary (Woods).

A similar failure shaped BLM's attempt to exploit the presidential race in order to turn racial injustice into a paramount political issue. On the one hand, both Clinton and Sanders grudgingly paid only perfunctory and belated attention to the movement's claims, after endorsing tough anti-crime legislation that had contributed to African Americans' mass incarceration (Bordo 97-98). Specifically, at a BLM rally on the occasion of

the Democratic National Convention, Newsome held that, even after the shooting of Sterling and Castille, Clinton had failed to go beyond "some vague statements and tweets" (qtd. in Madhani and Johnson n. pag). On the other hand, Republican nominee Donald Trump, in order to consolidate his electoral following among white supremacists, rushed in to state that BLM instigated the assassination of police officers and cashed in on the backlash at African Americans' violence against law enforcers (Bump).

Khan-Cullors and Bandele have credited BLM's "presence in the streets" with Obama's large use of his presidential clemency powers to decrease significantly the number of blacks within the "federal prison population" (249-50). Indeed, after resorting sparingly to pardons and commutations until 2014, Obama reduced or cancelled prison sentences for more than 6,000 African Americans nonviolent drug offenders in conjunction with BLM's rise in the aftermath of the Ferguson shooting (Fakunle et al. 278). Yet, guidelines for leniency were rather restrictive and the requirement that the felons had no history of violence and had already served at least ten years in prison significantly curbed the number of beneficiaries (Forman 228-30). The president was also unable to soften the draconian laws sanctioning drug possession that had been responsible not only for African Americans' high incarceration rate but also for racial profiling in "stop-and-frisk" policing. As for soft drugs, Obama was even firmer than his Republican predecessor. For instance, federal authorities conducted more raids on marijuana dispensers during his first administration alone than throughout George W. Bush's two terms (Rahtz 85-86). Moreover, in an eleventh-hour display of post-racial politics, Obama declined to make a symbolic concession to black nationalism and did not grant a posthumous pardon to Marcus Garvey, the African American leader who had been convicted of mail fraud in a likely miscarriage of justice case in 1923 (Brown).

One could easily agree with Adrienne Milner that "social justice is unlikely to be achieved when color-blind ideology veils racial injustices" (142). Yet, if the BPP helped highlight racial discrimination after the Civil and Voting Rights of the mid 1960s, BLM has contributed to keeping attention alive to blacks' vulnerability notwithstanding the post-racial approach in Obama's America.

Notes

[1] In the wake of Obama's successful bid for the White House, 96 percent of African Americans trusted that his administration would improve race relations ("Searching for the Promised Land").

[2] Tef Poe's language offers further evidence that BLM has, at least in part, distanced itself from MLK and has drawn upon BPP's main inspirer. In "War Cry," for instance, the refrain is "this ain't your daddy's civil rights movement." He also called Ron Johnson, one of the few African American senior police officials in Ferguson, "a house nigger" (quoted in Bakare), a clear citation of the contrast between "the house Negro" and "the field Negro" in Malcolm X's criticism of the 1963 march on Washington in his "Message to the Grass Roots" speech.

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Gianna Fusco

Questioning Boundaries with/through Black Lives Matter: A Conversation with Derrais Carter, Ronald A. Judy, Donald E. Pease, and Hortense Spillers

The radical claim by which the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) presents itself on its official website is impressive at many levels: "We affirm the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, undocumented folks, folks with records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. Our network centers those who have been marginalized within Black liberation movements." Critically aware of the long tradition of Black liberation movements, BLM immediately marks a distance from such powerful legacy by way of a subtle rhetorical decentering of cis-heterosexual Black men, who are displaced from their typical center-stage position in political and social activism to finally allow the full affirmation and recognition of the life and transformative work of a number of long-marginalized Black identities. The upfront radicalism of this message, together with the movement's undisputed capacity to effectively deploy web-based communication strategies, has rapidly brought the BLM and its take on racial issues to the attention of the general public, the political system, and academic discourse alike (not to mention investigation agencies such as the FBI). In other words, discussing the US today entails considering the new light that the movement has shed on the historical causes, systemic character, and social consequences of racism.

In addition to the scholarship presented in this issue of *RSA Journal*, the following interviews were planned and conducted with the aim to further expand the conversation about the BLM beyond the natural scope of the academic essay form. The ideal context for them was offered by

the 2018 OASIS (Orientale American Studies International School), which gathered prominent scholars of Black Studies and American Studies on the island of Procida for an intense week of lectures and seminars. Derrais Carter (Portland State University), Ronald A. Judy (University of Pittsburgh), Donald E. Pease (Dartmouth College), and Hortense Spillers (Vanderbilt University) accepted to engage a set of questions about some key aspects of the movement from the vantage points of their professional as well as personal background and experience.[1] The resulting polyphonic conversation captures the manifold aspects of the BLM, from its origins to its impact on current politics, from its ideological stance to its intersections with academic discourse and work.

Gianna Fusco: I would start from the emphasis of BLM on the need to build up a transnational/global network of people and movements for black liberation: how is this supranational perspective integrated with actions and preoccupations that stem from the US sociopolitical context and its historical specificity?

Donald Pease: I don't think they're restricted to the United States. The precipitating context for the BLM movement was the murder of Trayvon Martin in a space that can only be described as an enclave of colonial-imperial violence that's otherwise disavowed in the United States. What interconnects the BLM movement with diaspora and decolonization movements all over the planet is precisely the afterlife of colonial-imperial violence that had been disavowed when Barack Obama became president and there was a description of a post-racial, utterly colorblind movement. This is the reason why, as soon as BLM received not only visibility but a lot of circulation, there was an attempt to perform on that movement precisely what the policy of color-blindness did to the Civil Right Movement, that is to create an All Lives Matter movement. This was a way of, again, producing an understanding of violence and discrimination as colorblind, as distributed more or less equally across races and classes, which is of course utterly untrue. Color-blindness produces at the level of procedure and form an understanding of purely formal equivalence, but when color-blindness is not supplemented or accompanied by a redistribution of economic and

social resources, then the color blindness becomes an alibi for much more virulent forms of racism insofar as it can claim to be just the way in which a colorblind world naturally operates.

GF: A certain emphasis in discourses circulating also through social media on the physical reality of being seen as black in the US seems to be in line with what you are saying about color-blindness.

DP: Yes. It follows in the sequence of race matters: BLM is a way of giving content to the notion of race matters because even the term "race matters" can be understood as a pretext for saying "but it no longer can be made to matter in the way that it has." But that race matters is evidenced by the generalized anti-black violence that becomes a constitutive precondition for the organization of the US social order. While Barack Obama was president, this precondition itself was rendered invisible because people could claim "well look! How could the United States be described as a social formation in which race continues to do the work of anti-black violence that had been the historical pretext for the Civil Rights Movement?" And the response of the BLM movement was that the hyper-celebrity of Barack Obama was one pole in the way in which racist stereotyping operates: you produce an over-idealization at the same time as you produce a brutalization; you produce a hyper-conceptualization, and you produce a demonization; those are co-present, co-terminus, and spontaneously mutually constitutive terms. So, in a certain sense, the hyper-celebrity of Barack Obama as the Messiah, as the savior, was also what enabled the hyper-demonization and the radical extinction of black lives. It was as if the election of Barack Obama had been such a violation of the constitutive terms of the US social order – which was constructed out of the violent exclusion of blacks, who are included in the order so as to be violently excluded from it – that in order to overcompensate for the head in that order that operated by way of that constitutive constitutional logic, there had to be a series of episodes of murderous anti-black violence.

Hortense Spillers: While I am happy to see the BLM movement, one thing that I've always had in my mind and that bothers me about it – and

it is probably generational because they're quite young people – is that I don't necessarily get the sense that they're reading their movement in perspective with African American cultural and historical apprenticeship. In other words, movements like BLM are really quite old. And a global network among black people and people of color is really a very old idea that goes all the way back to at least the late 19th century and early 20th century. I would like to see them have a better sense of how they are situated generationally in relationship to that history. Their moment may be unique, but they are not unprecedented. I got the feeling they are thinking that "well, there's never been anything quite like this." I think that's probably not so? I mean, they answer a particular moment in time, in US social and political history. And that they're trying to build an international network, a global network, is a very good thing.

Ronald Judy: The internationalism that you're referring to and Hortense has just spoken of was already there in the initial proposition that Garza and Cullors put forward. In fact, in their initial presentations those women put forward a project that was internationalist and feminist in that it understood that the root causes of the violence had to do with the structures of power in the social formations. So the internationalism is not new but it's foundational. Another thing that makes it difficult to attend to some of the issues is that you have Garza and company who have put forward an idea initially in response to Trayvon Martin's killing, and they wanted to understand why, hence their claim about: "we have to challenge the patriarchal structures, we have to have a different notion of the fundamentals of society," and, paraphrasing their initial statement, "we have to understand it as global." The movement, however, is a set of franchises, it's highly decentralized. So, whether or not any given chapter is going to be cognizant of what Hortense is talking about is going to vary from franchise to franchise. So, for example, in Minneapolis (I'm from Minneapolis), where there's been a very dynamic chapter of BLM and other radical movements, initially there was a big fight between the black ministers and the BLM (this had to do with the organizing of what ended up being almost a three-week protest of the police station in north Minneapolis), and it was along the lines that Hortense was referring to,

because the black ministers said: "why didn't you consult us? We have the experience." The response of the organizers of the BLM chapter in Minneapolis was: "well, no, this is our initiative. We don't need to consult you, and many of your concepts and practices have been moribund." And Reverend Herron of Zion Baptist Church on the north side of the city created an organization called Ministers for Social Justice and did something that I think is very important. He said to the organizers of the Minneapolis chapter: "I'll give you my space to do whatever you want." And he opened his church, gave them his keys the first time, and left. He repeated this three times, when he gave them the space, and left. The fourth time they said: "Reverend Herron, we want your opinion." See? He calls this "attentive listening." Instead of we the elders telling them "listen to us," merely give them our resources and our space, and let them ask. He took that model and in the summer of 2016 convinced his fellow pastors, who were uncomfortable with some of the tactics of the movement, to sit down with the organizers of the BLM. Now, looking at the issue of chapters, and you have to understand we're talking about a rather amorphous movement, the question that Hortense raises about a generational transmission in history can be addressed differently. I just had a private viewing of a film by a colleague of mine, Idrissou Mora-Kpai, a film maker from Benin who now is in Pittsburgh. He was in South Carolina making a film about the Black community when Walter Scott was murdered, a documentary focusing upon a key figure in the community who owns a little shop that is the epicenter of communal activity, and so we see them finding out about Walter Scott. Now, Muhiyidin Moye [aka Muhiyidin d'Baha], young black man who ended up being shot to death mysteriously in New Orleans within three weeks of his featuring in this documentary, was a BLM activist of that chapter and very much aware of the heritage you're talking about, Hortense. So, because the movement is amorphous, we have to be careful when we attend to the specific branches and how they approach this question. The problem, and this goes back to your question about internationalism, is not just with BLM, and it isn't indeed generational, in that internationalism, although it has a long history, has been pushed aside. I don't want to suggest it was ever a majority view, but it was prominent. You have instantiations of it from people like

Martin Delany, W.E.B. Du Bois and the Pan-African movement, things like the Black Panther Party, which was expressively internationalist, and the strong Black internationalism in the 1960s. An important name in this respect is Bill Fletcher, the second president of TransAfrica and a very prominent syndicalist, a unionist, who has always been keen on providing the spirit of internationalism among Black Americans. Bill's agenda, through a number of radio and TV shows, has been an effort to put radical black Americans back in touch with the world. In other words, to revive Third-Worldism. In that context, three years ago he launched an initiative, and it appeared in *The New York Times*, a public letter from Black radical organizations in support of the Intifada in Palestine, which Garza et al. signed, they were all signatories. There have been, to my knowledge, three delegations of Black radicals, Garza is one of them, who've gone to the West Bank in solidarity. And I know she was just in England earlier this year in solidarity, in an effort to help build up the branch of BLM that's trying to start in England. So, I'm making two points: first, here are some concrete instances of actions, and this idea is manifesting itself in any gesture of solidarity as opposed to just being a platform statement; and then the other point, of course, is that that idea has been really there to begin with in at least their conceptualization of the movement.

GF: How does BLM locate itself alongside, or against, other contemporary resistance groups that might share, at least partially, their political projects? I'm thinking, for example, of what Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor says about the conversation between BLM and Occupy Wall Street and how some of their strategies seem to converge, but also of movements originating outside the US, in the spirit of that supranational mobilization we were just talking about.

HS: I don't get the idea, and it's very discouraging, that the left movement in the US at this moment is consistent. My sense of it, and this could be not, by any means, definitive, is that it is sporadic. The OWS movement was a very good sign three or four years ago that there was activity on the left, and it flashed for a moment, then it was gone, and that seems to be followed by BLM. The latter seems to have more continuity at

the moment than Occupy had. There's a movement around what's called in the United States "sensible gun laws" by the young white radicals, and some black ones too, in Florida. But that all seems to be sporadic. And there's been sporadic and massive response to the Trump presidency but there not seems to be any, to my mind, organizing centrality among all these groups except that we're all anti-Trump. We're all broadly left, more or less, and each one has a particular idea in mind, some goal, like changing the gun laws with the group in Florida, OWS has its aims, the BLM has its focus. So those movements are both encouraging and puzzling. I mean, how do you get centrality out of all those porosities and differences and all the divides that people cross: gender, geography, race, class, all of that. So my sense is that we're waiting for some joining thing between these communities or groups that scatter across a broad front of massive energy. The mobilization is there, you can feel the energy in the culture that's fired by this antagonism and the shock and surprise at what happened November 2016. So how do you capitalize on that and get some real change.

DP: The BLM is a platform that permits circulation across so many different platforms that it can give rise to multiple but also converging movements. I think that the articulation between and among these movements has to be consciously specified and it also has to become a real nexus, that is, it has to be a site for the emergence and convergence of formations that would otherwise be understood as utterly separate. There is a shared, let's say, concern, but Occupy differs from BLM in that the Occupy movement was voided of any specific social or political demand. The Occupy movement, I believe, was designed to produce the infrastructural equivalent of a general strike in which you de-operationalize the way in which the political machine is capturing and reproducing itself. So it became, quite literally, in the Agambenian sense, politics as pure means without an end, without a telos. And when politics is sheer means without a telos it is that which has as its medium the de-operationalization, in that sense the defanging of the anthropological machine insofar as it is deployed by the political apparatus of the state.

GF: Whereas the BLM is maybe more open as to how to do things,

but its objective is very clear. For example, when they reject the idea that racism is a glitch in the US system and maintain that the system actually works perfectly.

DP: Yes. It's not only not a glitch, it is that which is presupposed as the precondition: anti-black violence is the constitutive precondition to the organization of the system. But this is also why I think it has precipitated the most important conversation within African American studies, which is the conversation between Black so-called Afropessimists, who believe that there is absolutely no way in which you can transform the existing system without its radical destruction, its complete shattering: you cannot produce an amelioration within the system without justifying allowing the anti-black violence to assume a more and more disguised form; that's one version of the conversation. And another version of the conversation, which I think Lucius Outlaw enunciated quite clearly in his debate with Frank Wilderson, is that you cannot even imagine Afropessimism as a discourse without realizing that the discourse is built upon, teleologically, a series of insights within a movement that includes the Civil Rights Movement and understands Afropessimism and the radical question, the radical imaginary that is generated by the Afropessimism movement, as a moment, as a clear moment that discloses how things have undergone in the formation not only spatial, but temporal transformations.

RJ: The moment of conversation between BLM and OWS has to do with tactics and strategies. In this sense, DeRay Mckesson, young black man who came out of the Minneapolis chapter of BLM to go back to Baltimore to run for mayor, was a moment of considerable contestation, even in the Minneapolis chapter, because it had to do with moving into politics and what that does mean. But what BLM and OWS have in common is Tunisia. Tunisia was the model. It was expressly the immediate model for OWS, although they completely did not understand the Tunisian situation. What they saw that was important in Tunisia was the spontaneity of popular unrest and the way in which it was able to achieve political transformation without following the path of political party. It was a different kind of politics, which they thought they could emulate;

OWS was explicit in this. Now, I'm not talking about why that didn't work, I'm gonna talk about what BLM has been able to do differently, which I think is why, to pick up Hortense's remark, they've been a bit more coherent or continuous. The Tunisian situation had everything to do with the perpetuation of leftist intellectual and artistic cultures within Tunisia that stemmed from an ongoing, viable syndicalism. The existence of the unions was of paramount importance, even though indeed the eruptions in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine were spontaneous and leaderless in a very specific way, because the leadership of the unions was completely compromised by the government. Yet, the ongoing structures of the unions, especially at the rank and file level, made available a whole set of organizational resources and capacities that, when the uprising occurred, were able to lend not only expertise knowledge, but even the tools of the union offices, which they just seized from the leadership. In other words, one of the reasons why the Tunisian situation was so important is that it was one of the first popular rebellions against neoliberalism by unemployed people. But you've got a situation of a kind of viable, continuous leftist politics around syndicalism, none of which exists in the US. This goes to the point that Hortense is making: OWS fails because it doesn't have these mechanisms and can only put forward a sort of nebulous set of things they were against. They were quite amorphous and didn't attend to people's real concerns because there was no pre-existing network and no pre-existing way of knowing. And of course there was tremendous attention between OWS and various leftist Black movements, because OWS was principally a movement of middle-class and quasi-affluent white kids. What has made BLM different was putting forward a project of "we are *for* this, we are for re-imagining why Blacks are being killed." Because the current social structure produces a particular kind of attitude that de-humanizes Blacks, but also sustains a broad kind of violence. The BLM has got an idea that is really a re-articulation of old Third-Worldist notions, of what Fanon called new humanism, so they have in their original platform "we recognize that we need to transform the patriarchal familial structures, we need to achieve economic justice across the board." Those are broad enough propositions for, and they're almost the foundations of a kind of program. While the organization model may not be the political party, those are

propositions that can be sustained, repeated, and can attract, in moments of sporadic spontaneity, tremendous energies. So BLM, in coalition with other movements, was able in Minneapolis-St. Paul to compel the police chief to be removed.

GF: And they're currently pressing for the election of progressive DAs, for example.

RJ: Exactly. So in Minneapolis in 2016 you saw signs for BLM in affluent white neighborhoods. And I had conversations with Trozskyian white leftists who felt the platform resonated with their own ideologies, and they could stand in solidarity with it, in a way that was virtually impossible with OWS. And that approximates somewhat the American landscape, we don't have a viable leftism. I sometimes say there is no Left in the world; if there had been a Left, we would be in solidarity with the Tunisians, who are right now trying to rebuild civil society along leftist lines. I was just in France, and the French Left refuses to acknowledge its imperial history, so can't attend to the ways in which issues of racism in France right now are a consequence of that. So they don't deal with *les gens sans papier* in the most effective ways.

HS: Well, there's something that I think we need to account for. It's amorphous, it may be shapeless, it may be unfocused, but there's an energy to the left of the political spectrum, center-left, that's still there, despite the disappearance of communism and the fall of the wall, and all of that. There's something that's holding a place, if you wanna say that, for a real Left. I like to think there's something of a shadow of a Left in the world.

RJ: We see evidence of that, I agree completely. We see evidence of that in events like Tunisia, Tahrir, the current student uprising in Paris, but also what's been an ongoing movement among the radical population of color in Paris, which doesn't get just as much attention. We see something of that in the movements in England right now, in support of immigrants against Brexit, or in the Parkland movement for gun regulation in Florida. What we lack, which is why I think BLM becomes important, is an

ideology. We've got a world in which there is a sense of alienation – that is associated with globalization, which is associated with neoliberalism – and a social crisis that has been precipitated by increasing economic disparity. We've seen something of that in the election of Trump and the way in which those who elected Obama could elect Trump.

HS: It's been after Davos, for years!

RJ: And it's global. And the reason for it has to do with the nature of Cold War. While there is some energy to the left, the only ideological responses in the sense of "here's how we can fix this and go some place else" are coming from the right. They're coming out of discourses of religion, and there again we find the same problem: neoliberalism has done this to you, because it has a certain notion of society, of humanity, that's not viable, and the solution is to come back to our purity of faith and get rid of it. What's missing in all of that is a leftist response to the crisis, a leftist ideology, precisely because of the discrediting of communism by the Soviet Union, and also because of the repression of Third-Worldism, so there's this ideological vacuum. And BLM gives me some hope because, again, it does have an ideological program. It's not alone, they work with things like Black Peace Alliance, BDS [Boycott Divestment Sanction], and there are a number of radical organizations that are trying to do this. BLM works with them in an effort to try to create some sort of viable ideological program and find its way towards action. And that's where the glitch is, because they reject the old models for action. And rightly so. I agree with you, Hortense, the energy is there, so when I say there is no longer a Left, I mean an ideological Left, a Left that puts forward a vision of the world, that has some sort of, if I can use the word, cosmology. And also in the case of Italy, like in France, it has not yet come to terms with its own part in the imperial colonial history. And because of that, it cannot come to terms with the pressing immediate issues of race, which stem out of that colonial history, here as well. And so, can I have a discourse that explains, well: these Eritreans who are here, who've been here for quite some time, decades! These Libyans who are here, who've been here for quite some time, decades! These Moroccans who are here, who've been here for quite

some time, decades! Who brought them by fiat? 'Cause we needed cheap labor. They didn't just show up all of a sudden, but the Left is amazingly silent about it.

HS: I think none of this was helped by the eight years that progressive forces tended to be silent during the Obama years. I mean, the Obama presidency, as far as I'm concerned, was a kind of Pyrrhic victory. You know, at long last, there's a black president of the United States, but to what end? We don't answer to that question. The point was that getting there was so important for people. I think that's what was important for Barack Obama himself, that the goal is to *become* the president. Whereas it seems to me that's when your job starts. You are now the president, so now what you're gonna do? Why do you want to be president? But what happened is that his feet were not held to the fire, because everybody was so freaking busy apologizing: "oh we can't ask him to do that!" And you say "well, why not?" Because he is black? Then don't let him be President! So why the fuck should he be president? If he can't be president, or if he's gonna be a reluctant president, or a hesitant president, nobody needs that! So I am very upset about those eight years that passed and people kind of got out of practice! And he didn't encourage it himself, and his administration didn't. I mean, they rested on the fact that they had made it to the White House, and that was a big deal, you know. And I say, that's the beginning of the deal, it's not the end of anything.

GF: Looking at the Democratic primaries in 2016, and the race between Hillary Clinton (who had been Obama's opponent eight years before) and Bernie Sanders (who has a long career in US politics), was there any perception of the party politics going back to business as usual after having ticked the box of diversity with the Obama presidency?

DP: I think there were two different ways in which what you call going back to business as usual got articulated: on the one hand, Hillary Clinton said she was going to be the continuation of Barack Obama's policies, and on the other hand, Donald Trump was saying in effect that the election of a black president had produced an unrecognizable America, a Third

World country. It wasn't a matter of going back to business as usual, it was a matter of undoing and annihilating, completing erasing the Obama presidency. His first policy was the destruction of the Obamacare, which president Obama understood to be the signature policy of his presidency. Sanders was not business as usual because he represented a socialism that had absolutely no place in the American political system.

RJ: I was very skeptical, more than skeptical about the Obama administration from the very beginning. In 2007 I wanted to determine whether it was properly a social movement, or merely a political campaign. And it eventually became clear to me that it was politics. He gave three important papers: the Philadelphia paper everyone talks about, where he talked about race; then he gave the paper a week before on his economic policy, and he gave a foreign policy paper afterwards. And you look at those policies, Obama was very clever: initially I thought he was a fruit pop politician, but it was very clear to me by 2009 that he was an inept politician. But in the 2007 campaign Obama did two quite brilliant things. The first, was to take advantage of the state of the art canvassing and distribution technologies to build a political base. He did it with the Internet and social networks. That was brilliant. The other brilliant thing he did was to follow Clinton's mantra: campaign in the media, govern in writing. So there was a bifurcation in his campaign: he had the media image, which we were all paying attention to, including the social networks. No one paid attention to the policy statements in writing. If you paid attention, then you knew right away: here's an individual who's right-of-center neo-liberal, and he was always very upfront about this, he didn't hide it. Part of the problem was people were so caught up with the media image in the prospect of "oh, we're gonna elect a black president" that they paid no attention to the actual politics. Obama was the sort of death of a certain kind of radicalism, he delegitimized it. If you read his two autobiographies, he's not a friend of radicalism, what we're calling leftism, which is why the black people, the black caucus had its qualms about him in 2007. Glenn Loury went to print over and over again, expressing his qualms. We now know it as the Obama Effect. Now that we have elected a black president, we can forget about that radicalism. So it's not even that people got out of practice, but

they found with Obama an excuse to give up and become apathetic in a certain way. The other thing that Obama did that was devastating is, in spite that he had a moment, he didn't do anything with it. What the right would have done with it would have been create think-tanks to mobilize it. What happened in the Obama administration is Rahm Emanuel is made chief of staff and he systematically purges all of the elements of the campaign who had those progressive tendencies. And we don't get any politicization of the social movement out of that administration. So I think this is important in understanding things like BLM because it produces a certain kind of skepticism among many of those young activists who had participated in the project. What Sanders has been doing, it is called "Our Revolution," is precisely what Obama didn't do. They have taken those young people and they've created all kinds of training camps, and they did this during the 2016 campaign, organizing them with an idea of "we need to get over the party, whether or not we win the presidency, we need to infuse the party with viable leftism." And looking at the elections last month, they're winning. I mean, there's this struggle between what had been categorized as leftist elements of the party and mainstream party. You see this in the compromise election of the democratic party leadership where Keith Ellison, Muslim from Minneapolis, was elected with Perez, because Ellison represents that leftist tendency and Perez an old Obama appointee, and there's a tension right there. I'm somewhat hopeful about that tension, somewhat sanguine, because, again, it shows that the energy you were talking about, Hortense, is there, and the effort of the Sanders people to focus it is there, even though BLM was very critical of Bernie Sanders, and they kept challenging him at events.

HS: And that was ridiculous, to me. I didn't see that many of them at the Trump events! Why do you go into the Clinton events and the Sanders events? Why don't you go over here? I thought that was a mistaken strategy. I couldn't understand why they were going to the Sanders events.

RJ: They were going to the Sanders events because it was not simply protest, the point was to take over the party.

HS: Oh well, that was such crap! Because you don't take the microphone out of the hands of someone who has not denied you entry to their house! And here's somebody who, if you come in the house, will very seriously hurt you! I mean, the Trump people were not playing: you go to a Trump event, somebody is going to hurt you if you try to take the microphone from Donald Trump! To my mind, that particular tactic looked bad, I just thought that was very poor public relations on their part.

RJ: The BLM's challenges to Bernie Sanders and to Hillary Clinton were aimed at forcing them as the putative progressive party to include in their platform the agenda and concerns of the BLM. And there they didn't fail. Sanders, within the first two weeks of the protest, began to address the racial issues: he appointed a black woman, Symone Sanders, as one of his prominent spokeswomen; the democratic party leadership, in creating its platform committee, included Cornel West and other people; and there was a great battle precisely over whether or not leftist planks would be included in that platform, and Cornel made a great deal of noise about how he thought that they were abandoning the momentum that things like BLM had put forward for them. I'm trying to say that the strategy of BLM was one of trying to enter into the party and there were disputes among different franchises about "is this the thing to do? Do we want to become political?" I mean, that's a battle, it's not a coherent movement, there was a sort of struggle in it, but as a tactic, I thought it bore some fruit.

HS: Well, it would have been very helpful to have some protestors at Trump's rallies. There were some, but I didn't see them there, and certainly didn't see them there in an aggressive way as in taking the microphone out of somebody's hands. To my mind, that was poor public relations for skeptical members of the public, even members of the public who generally agree with the reason why they were in existence in the first place.

RJ: I like your metaphor about someone who invites you into his house, although in fact he kept talking only about class, and skipping over the issue of race, and doing his usual social kind of move where you solve the class issue and all these other things will fall in place. And they were

insisting "you have to make race on par with as an issue," and he was responsive.

HS: But what was their response about Donald Trump's rallies? What did they think about that?

RJ: You know, I'm not a representative of BLM, and I think nobody is, because it's so amorphous. But there were elements of BLM at Trump rallies: Chicago, LA, you know. Those I would consider Pyrrhic victories because the constituency of the Trump rallies and the so-called independent voters who had to be swayed were ideologically fixed in their positions. The only point of going to the Trump rallies would be to try to expose how vicious Trump is by exposing yourself to the violence and precipitating a scandal in the hope that that would cause the electorate to say "we don't want this man, he's dangerous." That would be naïve, because it would fail to understand the extent to which racism – I know you don't think this way – is completely ingrained within the society. I'm of a different view: I think that the usefulness of attacking the Sanders rallies and the Clinton rallies is an effort to seize the democratic party, to push the democratic party to the Left.

HS: But I think Sanders was already doing that anyway.

RJ: Not hard enough. They just pushed him harder. And again, he was responsive. And I say that to mark both the efficacy of the tactic and also the integrity of the man: he was responsive, in ways Hillary wasn't. And the specific ways he was responsive is he opened up the seats of his campaign committee and brought members of those protestors in. And I know first-hand they were doing this at the grassroots levels as well, at caucus levels. That shows someone can be somewhat sanguine about the prospects of a certain kind of political efficacy, although I'm like BLM, I'm not convinced that the old forms of transformation that exist in political parties are of the order of the day. The question becomes how do you organize enough social momentum and energy to affect a political change, and then the energy can defuse itself and can be organized. What you're calling the sporadic, I don't

think is necessarily an unwelcome word. In fact, I'm increasingly more inclined towards what my friend Ahmed Jdey called anarchy; that is, we see different notions of sovereignty specifically where the embodiment of sovereignty is not in the party, or not even necessarily in the union, in the institution, but that sovereignty becomes a certain activity under specific circumstances, and what sustains its possibility is a set of principles, a set of convictions about justice, dignity, freedom. And then the question becomes: how do you sustain those principles? How do you articulate them?

HS: That's what I'm concerned about most: sustaining them. And making new gains from them. And then what kind of gains are we talking about. It seems to me that a great deal of power has been invested in symbolic victories. Obama's presidency. Hillary's presidency would have been the very same thing: the first black president, and then the first woman president. And the question, the question that is a scandal, is whether it does make a difference. And if it doesn't make a difference, then what the fuck are we doing? If it doesn't make a difference that the woman is the president of the United States, I'm not sure that it would have made a difference! We would have slept better, people would see the world the way we see it, would have been a lot happier with Hillary Clinton, she would have been a better "role model" in the presidency than the person who is in there now, but what difference would it have made? What difference did the Obama presidency make? If you can't answer that question, then I don't know what we've been doing. And I don't know what we're doing anymore because I can't say that it matters to me much now whether or not a woman or a minority gets an office. I wanna know what kind of policy is this person going to push, what are they gonna stand for, once they get to office, if they get to office. Those are the questions that we don't deal with; people want you to shut up when you start saying that. And so, that's why during the Obama years certain people just fell silent. You didn't say anything. I didn't say anything because, you know, my natal community was all for this guy. You can't be a black person against the black president! Just keep your mouth closed. Despite that you think he's ineffective, or he's there at somebody else's behest: powerful forces in Chicago, or somewhere

in the world wanted him to be president. I don't think he had a notion about why he wanted to be president. At all! I don't think he had an idea. I think he got: yeah, it'll be cool! And I'm intelligent enough to do it, I'm handsome enough to do it. I'll be, you know, telegenic, I have a beautiful wife, I have lovely children, it would be great! Yeah, we'll do it. It's not a bad job. I don't think he had a clue.

RJ: We're harsh on Obama. He had, beyond the economic, some progressive ideas. He was trying to put in place policies that would be transformative, and these are policies that Trump is unraveling.

HS: Oh, I would say urinating on and kicking into the sewer!

RJ: Yeah, yeah. On the environment, on international relations, on immigration. There was a piece in *Times* about Obama's reaction when the election results came in, in November 2016. He was out of the country, and he said to his aids "I think we went too far. I think we pushed the people too far and they weren't ready, I think I was ten, twenty years ahead of my time."

HS: Oh Christ! Please! Give me a break! You know, this guy might have had certain policies and initiatives in mind, and he did not stand by one of them! Not one! Not a single solitary one. All of it was exactly like saying to Hassad in Syria "if you drop gas on your people is crossing a red line." The man not only crossed the line, he danced back and forth across it, and he didn't do anything.

RJ: Yeah, yeah. Or even before that: in the early days of his presidency, he was in conversation with important unions like the SEIU. During the campaign he had promised them for their support that he would support their initiative at the time to strengthen labor laws, giving workers the right to unionize, to vote for unions. If you remember, that was a big issue in 2016. In the first two months of his presidency I'm sitting across a New Year's Eve table from one of the leaders of SEIU. The Obama administration had said to them "look, we need you to back off of that because we have a

bigger agenda item. We want to get through the healthcare reform." And I heard this from other quarters who were from the Obama side. And that's the one thing he didn't back off from. Oh well no, I'm being generous.

HS: You *are* being generous!

RJ: Because the way he negotiated that, he gave up the ghost on that. But they would decide that was gonna be his legacy. And so they asked the unions to back off of their agenda and support him in this because that was gonna be the key. Which of course we know they did. So there's not a lot of daylight between our positions on the Obama administration. But back to BLM, I think that I'm not ready to say that what they're going for are symbolic victories. If you remember the debate that went on during the battle for the leadership of the Democratic Party, it was about precisely what you're talking about. Peter Buttigieg and Keith Ellison were, in their own ways, speaking for the need to have something more substantive than symbolic victories and to move beyond the Hillary issue. The problem with Keith was he was too far on the left. And Peter presented himself as the compromise. Pete is interesting because he's in a Red state, Indiana, he's in a city, South Bend that has tremendous racial history and turmoil, and he's done something unprecedented for a mayor of South Bend. One of the first things he did is he went to all of the black churches, and said to them "what do you want us to do? Can we bring you into the table?" His middle way is a nuanced one, but he was still too far to the left. So Perez and Ellison become the compromise. What's my point? It's that there is this effort, which BLM is a party to, to try and push the Democratic Party to the left, and in that they've taken a lesson from the Tea Party. Now, there are those who would say this contributes to the polarization of the politics and we need to get rid of the two party system altogether. It's the system we have, and to have something more than symbolic victories, you have to seize power, you have to be in a position to put in place policies, and there has to be some sort of platform, some sort of idea. So if the issue is to seize power, then by all means take over the Democratic Party. By all means. And we'll see what happens this fall, if they're going to fail or succeed. I don't think if they don't win in the midterms they'll give up,

because Sanderites that I know who are part of Our Revolution understand this is a long struggle. But you know, 50% of the women who ran in their primaries took it! And these are women to the left.

HS: One of the things that deserve being looked at as intently as BLM is the movement called Moral Mondays. Reverend Barber in North Carolina created it and it is at least a "get out to vote" movement. But then it is also a passionate prophetic movement led by a black charismatic preacher in the tradition of Martin Luther King. Mondays last election season where days to register people to vote, to hold campaigns, to get people to vote: it's a voting-centered movement. But Barber is himself a very powerful speaker, a very interesting figure. So you've got look up Moral Mondays.

RJ: Well, the Minneapolis Pastors for Justice is a part of the Moral Monday. That's also interesting in terms of its relationship to the BLM because, again, that speaks to what you called the generational divide, whether or not they are a church-based movement. And we know this is an old, old dispute. You know, I might be on a different page because I belong to that generation of the 60s, those young middle-class black men who rejected that for Black Power. I was with Stokely [Carmichael] in Mississippi.

HS: You see, the thing is that one can actually do both. One can actually love Martin *and* Malcolm. That's possible too, you know. I did.

RJ: Yes, one can, and one did love both Martin and Malcolm. But one can love Martin and march with Malcolm. [Laughs] One can do like Stokely did and stood up before the Arab American Students Association in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1968 and say: there's two categories of the movement: the militants and the revolutionaries. The militants are those who wanted to see the precepts of the Constitution extended to include them. And those are people like Whitney Young Jr. and Martin Luther King. The revolutionaries are those who want to get rid of the Constitution and put something more radical in place. I'm a revolutionary. [Laughs]

HS: Reverend Barber, Reverend Lawson who is now in his eighties . . .

RJ: By the way, both of them had a very important dynamic relationship with James Cone, whom we just lost. So it's coming out of that specific tradition called "black liberation theology," which in relationship to BLM is important as Cone developed black liberation theology because he was concerned about three things happening with the black community: one, the diminished role of preachers; two, the rise of black radicals; and three, the rise of Islam. So he set out to formulate a theology that would capture the more progressive elements of those things and still be church-based.

GF: BLM has elaborated a narrative of placing center-stage identities and groups (e.g. women, queer and transgender people) that had been marginalized in other Black liberation movements, and has contributed enormously to the current popularity of the term "intersectionality." After a few years of campaigning and expanding their sphere of action, what can be said of BLM's efforts at being inclusive and intersectional?

Derrais Carter: One of the beautiful things that we've seen through BLM, but also, in a broader sense, the movement for black lives, is that we've seen both groups, or assemblages of activists and creatives advance a vocabulary for helping us critique some of the very patriarchal ways that black leadership has been framed in the past. I'm thinking specifically about Erica Edwards's book *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* where one of the things that we get to critique are the ways that black men, particularly cis-gender heterosexual black men, are supposed to be historically, and in many ways historically have been the face of Black political mobilization, despite the fact that Black women, femmes, queer folks have done a lot of the underground organizing. So, the implication here is that if you are not cis-gendered, if you are not heterosexual, if you are not a Black man, then you should be behind the scenes, fueling the political machine. One of the things we get from BLM is that power and representational authority when it comes to black leadership do not necessarily need to be centralized. In fact, that's part of the beauty of that we see happening through the BLM: that we have all of these local chapters who are extending and adding layer

upon layer of rich and nuanced meaning on the national platform that BLM has advanced, and that platform isn't supposed to be a top-down kind of mechanism, but instead it allows folks from various communities to think about the specific tensions that they are sitting with on a daily basis, and should they chose to connect that with a larger national platform. So it allows for far more splintering, but also overlapping. And what we see happening is this de-centering of Black men and boys when it comes to thinking about black mobilization. Xhercis Mendez talked a little about this; Treva B. Lindsey, who is this fantastic historian and black cultural studies scholar, is I believe building a project right now writing her second book on state-sanctioned violence against black women and girls. And one of the things we get to see through the work of Mendez, Lindsey, and for me more specifically Sarah Haley out of UCLA, is the ways that a lot of the discourses of violence that we were connecting to black men and boys have been rehearsed and keep being rehearsed on black women and girls for years and years. With Sarah Hailey's book *No Mercy*, we get to see how the state of Georgia has snatched up black women and girls from the streets in order to fold them into a convict labor system. And so it's critically important to me that BLM as a movement has advanced this conversation and allows us to understand that, for those folks who want to center black men and boys, it would do them well to understand what's been happening to black women and girls, precisely because by the time it happens to black men and boys it has already happened to black women and girls. Many times, when I'm asking questions about the role that sexual violence plays in ongoing acts of racialized violence, by centering black men and boys, we get away from thinking specifically about how violence becomes sexualized when it centers black women and girls. To have this conversation necessitates that we think about sexual assault, that we think about rape. These discourses are just as important, if not more important, when we're thinking about state-sanctioned violence, extra-legal violence, anti-black violence. When it comes to thinking about the successes of an intersectional approach for BLM, I'll call it a success in that it has broadened the landscape upon which, and the perspectives or positions from which we can think about gendered expressions of power when it comes to the black public sphere. I think that moving away from a monolithic representational black voice becomes

necessary precisely because we need political discourse and we've had, since black people were engaging in public discourse, multiple locations from which to stake out our politics. One of the problems becomes taking up who needs to hear a statement like "Black Lives Matter." I talk often with my students about how that narrative of black on black violence, which often comes up in my classes, is naturally simply false, but the work that it does ideologically is it pathologizes Black people, such that Americans in general, or folks that are trying to engage in critique of race and racism, begin to take as normal this belief that black life and Black people actually are pathological in our thoughts and in our actions. And so, one of the things that having these various vantage points and this gendered critique allows us to do is pick apart who it is that we need to make the claim that Black lives matter to. For instance, is that claim made to other black people? I don't think that's always the case. Many times it's been made to a dominant racial public, read white, and specifically for the work that I've been doing, it's a white liberal discourse. There's something about the claim that black lives matter – and David Marriott argued this in a piece called "On Decadence" – that feels extra or excessive. To make a claim about black life and to center that in terms of how we approach racial and political discourse seems quite excessive. But that is in part an extension of the logic that blackness is excessive, and so for me having the different vantage point from which to engage this conversation makes it far more difficult to play out this reductive binaristic narratives of race that have so often informed the way that we engage in political address.

DP: I think that the question of intersectionality is a matter of case by case. I don't think you can discuss BLM as a means of producing and accumulating inclusivity without recognizing that, by so doing, intersectionality is utilized in order to legitimate a reformist logic. Intersectionality in its clearest formulation is the recognition of multiple and intersecting structures of oppression; but there's always going to be a structure of oppression in dominance that has to be recognized in a case by case approach, because if you don't, then intersectionality can produce a kind of alibi for a set of generalizations that as soon as you articulate the way in which the intersectional is working in a specific situation, the

articulation has done all the work necessary. When Kimberlé Crenshaw, as a legal scholar, decided on that term in order to allow for differends in the Lyotardian understanding, that is wrongs that lack representation within the legal system, she used intersectionality in order to articulate wrongs that had to be righted but that the courts and the legal discourse at the time couldn't recognize as violations, as wrongs, because of the ways in which the social order and the legal order were unable to recognize how, for example, an African American woman was oppressed as a woman, oppressed as a black woman, oppressed as a lower class or working class black woman, oppressed as an African American lower class woman in a ghetto. So all of these were brought into visible representation by Crenshaw in order to call attention to the way in which this woman was in a certain sense unable to present cases before the court for every one of those wrongs. But if the notion of intersectionality becomes a means of simply demonstrating the way in which oppression can be overdetermined and overdetermining, you can lose recognition of the structure of oppression that dominates, which is also doing the work of sustaining the relations among the intersecting structures of oppression. And without that, I don't think you put yourself into a position that is able to engage the intersecting structures.

GF: There's also a certain debate around white feminism appropriating the concept of intersectionality: if all the intersecting structures of oppression count the same, you lose the political force of that concept.

DP: I agree. And it's another way in which color blindness travels in order to invisibilize. Inclusivity and diversity are liberal markers that are predicated on a reformist logic that is in a strong sense in collision with the BLM movement and not a useful outline, as far as I can see. There are theorists who have argued that the term intersectionality ought to be rethought and perhaps replaced by a theory of assemblage, and I think the clearest articulation of that recommendation was proposed by Jasbir Puar. It would be important, I think, to recognize the shortcomings of that term on strictly political terms.

RJ: Intersectionality, again, is a constitutive aspect of BLM. I don't know what the metrics of its success would be. I would say, yes, indeed, BLM itself is a manifestation of an effort to reimagine the political. And reimagining the political means reimagining the human. So right away, from the jump, they were saying "no, we're a feminist movement; no, we have to reimagine families structures; no, we have to deal with intersectionality," and it's significant that it's a movement initiated by two black lesbian women who don't mirror the old patriarchal structure by saying this should be a movement *led* by . . . When you start getting into the franchise, this is not an issue. The very dynamics that Garza was putting forward are evidence of how they're working. And this is where indeed it's generational. So those platform statements on their part are reflective of what's becoming attitude for a particular generation, in the same way that that generation is on the whole not even accepting, but just less terrified and bothered by things like transgender identities. So when they're thinking in terms of "we've got to get together and lay siege to the 4th Precinct in North Minneapolis," you went there and there were transgender people, white people, Black people, old people, Latinos, Somalis, which is a big deal in Minneapolis, who were next to each other focused on the *task*. And that's part also of the discourse about not wanting to have hierarchical leadership. They work very much like a flash crowd: they come around an issue, they address the issue, and then they disperse. But then, two years later the same dynamics kick up around the capitol building in St. Paul: they're there, they're available, that general energy we were talking about. So, what would be the metric of success? Is BLM a reimagining of the political? Yes, constitutively, that's the interesting thing about them. Is it working? I don't know. Every time they're able to organize such events, I'd say it's working. Every time you can see in Charleston two powerful black women, who've been involved in the community with powerful black men, organizing regular events where, as one of the speakers said, "there were only ten of us last week, three days later they're about 40-50, now we're over a thousand." And you look out on the crowd of the thousand and you see everything. You see everything. And no one is freaking out about their being led by a black man and two black women, that is not even on the table. That's a big change, it's not even on the table.

GF: Maybe that is a metrics of success, the fact that it's not even on the table.

RJ: That's a good point. That's a very good point. Maybe that is the metrics. But when we look at those events that were going on, you don't have the old argument you still have in the Democratic Party, because you don't have what I call the economy of dispensation where, to put it crudely, you have a group of powerful white men with some token white women who are talking about "are we going to include you in the process?" Daisy Thomas, the head of the Utah Democratic Party and one of the candidates for the presidency of the party, in her presidency speech said something great: what is this diversity nonsense? Do you mean you invite people to the table? No, listen to them when they talk! You don't *let* them talk. But you listen when they do talk. And that's her pushing back against the traditional structure of dispensation. BLM is not organized in that way. Do they look like anarchists? Maybe, but that's a new kind of anarchy. That's why I think they pose a question of "is there a new order of sovereignty," a reimagining of the political, at this level of organization.

HS: I would agree with that. I was thinking about this the other day, and precisely about certain difficulties of intersectionality. I was thinking that the United States, for example, is a society of 300 million and counting one-man bands. Everybody has a thing, everybody has an identity that's suffering, and it's difficult to find a common will. What does that mean today? I'm not quite sure what that means. But I'm thinking that the politics of identity has been taken to the limit, it has been taken as far as it can go. And now what do we do? You know, what's the joining thing? And I think, at the same time that there is this glorious recognition – everybody is recognizing everybody else's particular thing – at the same time that we have that, is there any thing that we all want together? And if so, what is that? And I wondered about that, if we can find it, or articulate it, or create it, and I suppose in their own way BLM, OWS, the Parkland kids were all looking for what is it that makes us, that joins us, what's the adhesion, the force of adhesion.

RJ: I think the question is how can we be in common? And that means thinking about the dynamic constitution of commonness. What is it to be in common? and quite frankly, that's the whole point of my work, and whether or not it's possible to articulate fundamental ways of understanding what we are, what is the human, and what is sociality, and what are the dynamics of sociality. I'm a bit skeptical about approaching it in terms of what are we going to articulate that we have in common, cause that's teleological, and that's going to demand some sort of definitive ideological position and some choice of one view, if we accept your metaphor: 300 million and counting one-man bands. You're right, that notion of sovereignty has run its course. The question becomes what takes its place. But to then say that we have to have a particular goal is to reintroduce precisely the engine of the old political structure.

HS: Well, I know. And that's worrisome too, at the same time that . . . ok, that's the dilemma: to have a goal without having a goal, to state a goal without stating it, that we might agree to, because if not, then what are we doing?

RJ: Well, if I may, 'cause I think there's something we're kind of dancing around: that's the dilemma in this moment for us, where "us" connotes those who are committed still to a particular kind of, let's say, enlightenment notion about a time, about a certain kind of humanistic order. And we become concerned when we see that those dynamics of organization and movement can also achieve, well we're seeing it, neofascism. If it's just about being able to be in common, you can be in common possibly following the ideals of what we're now calling populism. So for people like you and me, who would find that abhorrent, here's the dilemma: how can we have an open-ended process, again what my friend Ahmed Jdey called anarchy without sovereignty. How is it possible to have that so that the whole process is one of perpetual collective reinvention, so each one of those band members is playing a kind of combination of tunes and can keep improvising, without arriving at fascism. How can we do this and not end up with – here's where my musical bias strikes – Strauss! {Laughs} Or Sousa, better, 'cause I like Strauss better than Sousa. Without ending up

with the maestro conducting the symphony. That's why things like BLM interest me as perspectives: arriving at a notion about its fundamentals. What is the human? What is community? What is its function? What are we doing, to use your phrase, when we are being together? What are we doing? Not just why, but what?

GF: Queer Theory and Black Feminism are often evoked as crucial discourses informing BLM rhetoric and action. Is there any connection, or site of possible fruitful interaction, between BLM and recent theories elaborated in other fields of research, such as, for example, biopolitics or political philosophy? Can discourses such as that about "bare life" be mobilized to counter attempts to criminalize the victims of police brutality?

DP: I think that reason of the connection with Queer Studies has to do with the radical refusal by Queer Studies of arriving at a specific set of categories that can be understood to stabilize even the notion of intersectionality, because Queer Studies is what could be called a radical resistance to reform without transformation. So queers of color, as figures involved in the founding of the BLM movement, describe a supplement to the BLM platform that could be understood as a co-constitutive formation that enables a set of articulations with related movements, without those articulations and related movements constituting either a totalizing formation, or a formation that can lose sight of – or be understood as being capable of producing the ideological work of losing sight of – the unending responsibility of social transformation. And when it comes to attempts to criminalize the victims, again, if you don't acknowledge case by case the structures that have put in play the justifications for the criminalization, then you have eliminated the political work of both contesting those justifications and, to use an earlier word, de-operationalizing them, once you expose the criteria that have been deployed in order to justify the violence, expose exactly what those criteria are masking and how they're working. Because if you don't, then all of the terms we'd use can do what I would call, again, formal or procedural work, without the necessity for material change, or material transformation: *matter* is the key word.

DC: I center Black Studies in my work, especially when it's about thinking through queerness and queer theory, precisely because in many ways the language that queer theorists use to think about what I read generally as a particular kind of white abjection is informed by the history and political position of black people, which for me is another way of saying queer theory gets its language of abjection from black folks. There's a larger conversation about racial abjection, and in the contemporary context for me it comes from black feminism. I often go back to Hortense Spillers "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" thinking about the un-silencing of black women that becomes necessary in order for all of these identities to come into fruition, to take center stage. But I also think through the work of, again, Sarah Haley, she takes this up; Siobhan Somerville does this in *Queering the Color Line*; and Cathy Cohen has already given us the work that allows us to understand how queer theory has its discursive basis in Black Studies and the experience of black people. There's constantly this claim being made that blackness is always already queer, and so for me there's something about the blackness of queerness that has to be taken up in a more meaningful way. Then, when it comes to black feminism and even discussions of biopolitics in a political present, I often go to Foucault, or I would say, for years I went to Foucault when I was thinking through biopolitics. But after reading [Alexander Weheliye's] *Habeas Viscus*, I was a bit crestfallen because I hadn't spent enough time reading through Sylvia Wynter. This question of the status of black people when it comes to theorizing the human becomes all the more necessary for us to take up precisely because it helps us think through how, for instance (and this is something Sylvia Wynter talks about in "Deciphering Practice"), the question of the human and the positioning of black subjects (or we'll say marginalized and oppressed communities) become integral to how we even think through culture and cultural analysis. So, for instance, with Wynter, when she's working through film practices, there's a way that she weaves us through the idea of the human as reinforced by the construction of a film canon, which is reinforced by the themes and tropes that are taken up in film criticism, which again loop back and reinforce the notions of the human. But even in engaging in a practice of constructing canons and enacting film criticism and deriving a particular kind of pleasure from the

semantic closure that becomes necessary in Western films formulations, we – when I say "we" I mean "we, black folks" – we begin to derive a sense of pleasure via a whole set of filmic and interpretive practices that are arguably fundamentally anti-black. And so, if biopolitics becomes a question about who is deemed fully, not quite, and non-human, if biopolitics is to help us have that conversation, then biopolitics should revisit the question of blackness, the question of race. There are so many times when I'm thinking through political philosophy, or I'm thinking through theory, or I'm thinking through approaches to cultural criticism, and I'm wondering about the extent to which a number of writers are dependent upon not addressing blackness, not addressing anti-blackness in how they construct the subject, or engage in conversations, or engage in political discourse. Patrice Douglass has this explosive, beautiful and relentless essay called "Black feminism for the dead and dying" where she mounts a critique of the racial politics of the Women's March helping parse through the ways that many of the dominant voices in, and the face of the Women's March were decidedly white, and that it's the position of whiteness that allowed many of the participants to march relatively safely in public. But the presence of black bodies, even the presence of black female bodies in public gets coded as extreme, gets coded as extra, and gets coded as, in many respects, in many contexts, masculine, such that there doesn't seem to be a differentiation when it comes to gender in enacting violence against black bodies. One of the things that Douglass helps us understand is that gender becomes a violent formation when it comes to order and Black life, precisely or in part because it presumes or it claims to provide a level of integrity and protection that is simply not afforded to black people. And so I continue to wonder, even as I'm thinking about questions of biopolitics and political philosophy, what exactly is the status of the black subject in this conversation. Personally, that one question for me gets to the heart, gets to the marrow of the conversation that oftentimes some scholars aren't having.

HS: I think academic discourses haven't helped this much in some general sense. And I've just started thinking that over the last few mont**hs**, since Trump's election. And I somehow – it's not rational, it makes

absolutely no sense – I blame the humanities academy for his election. In the sense that we abandoned our role as teachers of literacy to become professional critics and academics. And our careers were more precious and important to us than teaching reading to whoever was in front of us. So I blame the humanities academy for those failures. I think that's our fault, I think we did not help in certain provincial attitudes about languages and other cultures. I mean, we were sitting in rooms in the 80s when history professors recommended getting rid of the language requirements in very good institutions in the US. We've also sat by and watched the corporatization of the university because it was more important for us to keep our jobs and maintain our professional status than to protest and become revolutionaries, and possibly lose your job. But, at least, you would have gone down fighting! So, between the election of Ronald Reagan, which is about the time that my career and the careers of my generation of professionals were getting started, and the election of Donald Trump, we lost every major struggle because we did not recognize ourselves in the mirror of those struggles, or felt above them, or didn't dare to enter them because that wouldn't have been cool, because bla-bla-bla-bla. So, something unbelievable happens in 2016 and a lot of that has to do with, to my mind, a public whose ignorance is so profound, and whose viciousness in relationship to that ignorance is so unmitigated that it would elect a man that it is possible to completely despise, to be despicable in the eyes of the world. And before God and men. We didn't help that. So, I am at the point where I kind of don't wanna hear about academic discourse! I want another language. I want other languages, I want something else, I want to hear something else. I want to hear a truer language, I want to hear something other than what we've done the last 40 years that gave us this presidency. 'Cause we helped that out! Not that we did it alone, but I don't think we did our job. And our job was to do something unsophisticated. As an English professor with a Ph.D., I essentially do something humble, but it's important: I teach people how to read and write. I have to do that, if I don't do some other stuff. But we were over here doing this other stuff saying "oh well, yeah, that will take care of itself!" At the same time that tuition fees are going up and now it costs an obscene amount of money to give a person a good education in the United States: $40, 50, 60,000, and

counting. And a new class of wealth, unprecedented, obscene wealth, has been created in American society. And not one thing that we have stood for as a profession has impeded it, intervened on it, and we've constantly talked about intervention, and interpellation, and bla-bla-bla. And what has it meant? So, I've come to the end of a career that's been fairly productive, and I have mostly enjoyed my work, I'm thrilled to have done it, and to do it as long as I can, but I am at this point kind of tearful about how we have abandoned our places. We were the watchmen on the walls of the society, and we gave that up.

RJ: And we gave it up. I want to go back to this issue about bare life because it is not bare life, at all. But we gave it up in large measure because, to speak in general terms about humanistic studies – literary studies primarily, but also things like history, anthropology, psychology, the human sciences – we stopped believing in the worth of what we were doing and accepted the metrics of the market, and we took a position of being defensive before the sciences. So instead of contesting the grounds of definition, we ceded the grounds. What Hortense refers to as professionalism was professionalism whose metrics are those of the hard sciences, and much of what became recognized as innovative, especially after 2000 (I would even go as far as after 1990, when the Soviet Union collapsed) was the *point d'appui* of metrics. Certain forms of, I might even name them: things like ecocriticism, or Digital Humanities, or Franco Moretti's project of quantification, all of those were an abandonment of reading. The attack on theory – I was formed in the 80s, I was a student of Wlad Godzich, I was trained as a high theorist – the greatest attacks on such things such as semiotics and theory came from the Left, as well as the Right. The Right was very explicit in their attack, they understood something fundamental: after the conservatives lost in 1964, they recognized that they were a marginalized group and set up a 30-year plan. And you've got things like – Philip Mirowsky has written about this extensively – the Mont Pèlerin group, where they recognized that humanistic education is what brought about the (for them, and they're right from a certain historical perspective) hiatus of the 60s. They began to completely dismantle, attack and try to defund those elements, and the Left started to attack those same

elements on the grounds of, you know: that's white man's discourse, that's the man's discourse, so just gave up the very tools for being able to teach people how to read and write, in order to look like pseudo-scientists. Of course, the whole discourse of bare life comes out of the same fundamental ontological project that begins with Plato, so those terms I have problems with. What I'm finding interesting with BLM is not that it's bare life, and I know how it's been used in certain kinds of biocriticism. I do think that academic discourse matters, although I know that in Tunisia, in the first two years after the revolution one of the great fears of those who had led the revolution was that the academics would take over, and would theorize it back into the bourgeois configurations. You know, I always bristle when someone calls me an academic, I always have bristled. {Laug**hs**} Having said that, however, there's a real reality that we have to attend to, and this goes back to Hortense's point about our responsibility. The theorizations of, say, postcolonial studies that take place in the hallways of Columbia University, or at Rutger's Brunswick, or CUNY, Tallahassee, which may look like a sort of conversation between South-Asian minorities in the American academic context – and so it fits into the model of diversity, so we don't have to interrogate what they're saying, we can let them be there – those discourses have an immediate impact back in Pakistan and India. Academic discourse, you're right, does inform, it does circulate, it does give views, and we need to recognize that as a part of the responsibility you're talking about, Hortense: to stand for, to know what we stand for. My term for this is parasemiosis, not bare life. I'm just putting out one of the key points of the book I'm working on: one of the reasons I want to look at what those populations that were designated Negro did and how they did is how they were able to utilize attitudes of thinking and being that simply are not ontological. And by ontology I'm talking about that philosophical discourse about *being qua being* that begins with Plato and is predicated upon a violent act. What's the violent act? You've got the stream of existence, of beings that are related to one another and you go in and you make the tear, as I would call it, the rupture, where you grab one element and call it distinct, and make it transcendent: this is man. Sylvia Wynter takes this up, and she's trying to elaborate what Fanon put forward. By calling it man, and to maintain that, you've got to have the

anti-man, and the gradations in between, and to sustain those requires tremendous power and force, and it's a violence against the fluidity of being, which is what the bare life discourse wants to call that: bare life. But that's precisely what Aristotle called it, thereby with that term you preserve the distinction. There are different ways of thinking that are not just distinctive to Africa – they're found in Africa, we find them in the South Pacific – of divisible personalities. In other words: not this notion that there is an integral subject – I don't care if it's the subject that falls from the sky, so we have souls, or the subject that somehow comes out of the hyperactive imagination, René Girard's notion of mimetic desire: all these discourses say that there are 300 million individual sovereign entities. There are other ways of being human that don't think that way, that understand that each person is multiple persons. You've got a cousin in the bush, you've got a twin in the bush, grandfather is present, in and with you, and all of these different personalities are expressed in very specific discourses, and that's a way in which those different discourses are side by side, parallel without achieving a synthesis. If you look at those cosmologies, those are different ways for imagining what it is to be, fundamentally. Those people who got enslaved from Africa, all of them have this conceptualization in common, whatever may be its particular iterations, its particular instantiations, and this is what they bring. One of the things that Tony Bogues is looking at, for example, is the voodoo initiating ceremony at the Cape in Haiti when the woman, Fatiman, with Boukman, which means Muslim scholar, slaughtered the black pig and began it all. It's not a synthetizing syncretism, there are these parallels and these are ways of being. What did Hurston say? "Tell my horse". We know these things which come out of it, but we've always taken them for granted, 'cause it's just the way things are. And so, they articulate ways of being: you can be like that – not be torn apart – 'cause there's no reaching for the integral subject. I call that parasemiosis, and then it has its very particular kind of poiesis, or modes of creation; they can be from anywhere in the world and doing it that way. I would offer that instead of bare life, even when looking at something like BLM, going back to the way in which they begin by saying "we're involved with all of these things," and those events that one sees, everything is there, and not in synthesis. It's like flash

crowd, and it can de defused, and then come back again and be defused, so those bands can go off and play what they're playing elsewhere, and come back and jam, 'cause when they're playing those things elsewhere they're refining their technique. So like Wynton [Marsalis] says, you can just drop in on any city if you're a jazz musician, practicing your stuff, and you can hang out with a bunch of other jazz musicians and just decide at twelve o'clock to jam. The question goes back to what you were saying before: what's the common thing? What you're going to jam on? That's the real question: what you're going to jam on? [Laughs]

GF: Has the emergence of BLM affected in any way the role of the African American scholar within and outside academia?

DC: This question brings me so much joy precisely because, in a moment when so many scholars are dealing with the impact of anti-blackness and the circulation of images of black pain in news discourse or even in popular culture, in this moment I'm seeing so many scholars that are also pumping the brakes on a conversation insofar as they are pushing us to step back and think about ethics of care. When I say scholars, like African American scholars, I include artists, especially visual artists, because there's so much overlap, or cross-pollination when it comes to Black Studies scholarship, so the production of historical monographs and essays and articles, but also these theorists that are producing work and engaging in public conversation, and, more importantly for me, black artists that are visualizing and making audible in various registers black theory. Folks like Christina Sharpe and her book *In the Wake*, which has been unraveling people's brains in this rich way, but also putting a lot of pressure on the ways that we narrate black life, really giving us permission to experiment with modes of narration. This is something that Sharpe does with *In the Wake*, and something that Saidiya Hartman has been doing since at least the publication of *Lose Your Mother*, giving us approaches for circumventing and undermining a set of narrative practices which in part encourage specifically junior faculty in the context of the academy to produce and reproduce over and over again narratives of black death and ravishment as if that was the same as doing work on black life, and that is absolutely not the case. When I'm talking

with my students about this work, I'm posing a particular problem to them: "Your task through this work is to write a fifteen-chapter biography of black life. If I told you that you can only talk about anti-blackness and white supremacy up to the end of chapter two, what would you write for the rest of the book?" Most times my students are stumped because they are fairly well versed in deeming something problematic, but they haven't been given a broad enough vocabulary, or wide and deep enough archive of historical examples and contemporary texts and debates that allowed them to have an affirming conversation about who they are! That's particularly troublesome precisely because it reveals the extent to which their political and creative imaginations around blackness have been severely stunted and limited. And so they feel like it's far too risky, which in many ways it is, to engage in conversations about how black life is affirmed, primarily because all those conversations don't clearly and neatly inhere to larger conversations about black progress. In fact, these expressions of black self-affirmation are going to counter those larger narratives. And the whole point of my conversations with students and my engagement with black historical work, theory work, and arts is that that's more than fine. What better way to honor black life than to do work that reflects the at times mercurial ways we live and improvise life! Some lives are structured by order, others by chaos, and so to use that very reductive binary, there's an oscillation between the two that I feel we as scholars need to honor in terms of how we take up blackness. I think Kali Gross has done this wonderfully in her latest book *Hannah Mary Tabbs and the Disembodied Torso*. Focusing on artists and the work that has been done about black visual culture specifically, there's an artist based in Portland named Melanie Stevens who has a piece called "(If they come in the) Morning Read." In this piece what she does is she creates her own newspaper, and in this newspaper there's an obituary section where she offers speculative obituaries of black people who have been killed as a result of police violence or extra-legal violence. There are two that stand out: in one, the headline reads "Tamir Rice, Celebrated Technology Entrepreneur, Dies at 89"; the other one reads "Sandra Bland, 96; Wrote 'Francis' Series of Novels." So here, through a visual discourse, Steven gives us an opportunity to mourn long lives of Black people. Now, this is not to say that we have to have either the reality

of what happened to Sandra Bland and Tamir Rice, or we have to have this speculative narration of lives that were never fully lived. But it is to say that black visual artists have been absolutely pushing us to contend with what kind of work can be produced in this moment of enduring anti-black violence. There's something so deeply haunting and also beautiful about what Stevens has created in this project. So in terms of academic discourse – and this is in part a riff on something that I heard Katherine McKittrick say about how we should apply black poetry and literature to black theory – I'm interested in what happens when we apply black visual work to black theory and black history. So, what happens when we have Melanie Stevens's speculative obituaries to Tamir Rice and Sandra Bland and we apply that to the earlier discussion of biopolitics? What happens when long black lives is something that at best can be speculated? What does that mean for the ways that we think about political discourse around even life, or vitality, or biopolitics? For me, it puts a different kind of pressure on what exactly longevity looks like, what constitutes evidence, how that functions in terms of the kind of cases that we're making around blackness and black life.

DP: I think that the BLM movement indicates what has happened within cultural and literary studies in the United States. In so far as the BLM movement calls attention to what is constitutively wrong with the culture, it's the vanguard, in the Gramscian sense, of an organic movement in which crisis is the primary engine. We wouldn't be having the interview if academia didn't have a role to play. And we wouldn't be involved in the work we do unless we believed that academia matters. I think BLM indicates the eminent critique of academia and also indicates a means for its transformation. Academia is no longer a site where what you can call legitimation, or justification, or normalization transpires insofar as, in the work you and I do, academia is in jeopardy of being dismantled.

HS: I think academic discourse is going to have to reimagine itself, and not just for a new century but new terms of order as such, as [Cedric] Robinson entitled a book. I think it's going to have to discover its mission in a world that is no longer paying it very much attention. Capitalism

has been extraordinarily successful in seducing this entire world. The digitalization of life has been extraordinarily successful in seducing people. It seems that human personality is changing: people no longer walk down the street and pay attention to what's around them. They cross the street and they don't even see cars! And you want to say "Why don't you look where you're going? You're not the only person on the planet! What are you doing?" Or you go to the Met and there's *Aida* unfolding on the stage, or you're at the Scala and you've always wanted to go to the Scala, your whole life, and it's unfolding in front of you: what you're watching on your phone! To me there's something wrong with that. I want the academic discourses to deal with that, to have something to say about where we are, because we're not in a good place. I mean, all the environmental criticism has told us that we're not in a good place, that we're losing the planet. I want people and the Humanities to stop arguing about the Enlightenment, or argue about it in a different way, or stop arguing about whether it is all right to be a humanist. I want some responses to where we are in the world because we're in a very critical place. BLM is not looking into any of that, that I see. It's helping with the situation that needs responding to; that situation needs to be placed in the context of the larger disorder that the world is currently in because not only are young black people or old black people worried being shot down: people are hurting everywhere, all over, and I want some response to that. I want black people to go to the polls, to vote for something that they believe in and stop sitting at home saying "oh well you know, there's no black person running, we don't have anything to vote for," or "the ballot is not good because we will never be anything other than . . ." You know, bullshit! I want all of that to stop. And I want something that is going to wake people up to the crisis that we're in right now.

RJ: One thing about BLM and its platform that is worthwhile to look at is its webpage, and some writings that have been coming out, because part of the issue is a continual too close association of BLM with Ferguson, or with Trayvon Martin. But even then, Garza's question was "what world produced this possibility?" The relationship with the academe is a very serious question, I agree with you: should academics at all engage

with BLM and how? Robin Kelly has started a movement that asked us really to stand in solidarity with them, not to tell them what to do but to publicly stand in solidarity. And that's like my friend Reverend Herron's attentive listening: you're there so that you're available for conversation. And that goes back to what we were talking about earlier, about taking seriously what the humanistic agenda is, and not throwing away our tools. Gramsci had a remark that he made in one of his notebooks that has not been translated in English; what he says is that the intellectual is *concime*: manure, fertilizer. And this goes back to what he was doing with the factory movement in Turin, and it's the same thing I'm talking about when I say parasemiosis and the importance of things like Tunisia: there are different ways of thinking, not just the academic way of thinking, and how do you create and sustain conversations across those different ways of thinking. And those of us who were trained in a certain tradition of thinking should not disrespect that tradition and throw it out, but should be able to bring it to the table in conversation with other modes of thinking as a part of creating what we were talking about earlier, a way of being in common that's new and different. So I agree with you, we need to rethink our relationship not just because we're not in a moment of mastery, we never were in a moment of mastery. One of the things that we failed to remember as academics within research universities is that this university emerged out of the revolutions of 1848, and the German model is a very important model there. Von Humboldt knew what he was doing, and so did Bismarck. What was the concern? We know the story, right? It begins here in Italy, from the South, in Sicilia, when all those peasants and banditos rose up and the radical bourgeoisie saw this as a moment to seize power from the monarchy. And that march goes across Europe and it was spontaneous. But once the bourgeoisie consolidated its power, in the figure of Napoleon III, for example, and the emergence of the liberal nation state configuration, they said "we don't know how that happened and we need to have mechanisms to predict it and manage it." And this becomes the research university, in very specific ways, in the emergence of social statistics as a way of management. Simply put: historically, we have been state intellectuals. You look at the philological project with the Brothers Grimm, literary work to constitute an account of an Ur-Germany;

you look at what happens in the Fourth Republic, educational forms that are anticlerical. So we've always had this role that's part of the constitutive elements of our disciplines to serve that function. Now the market doesn't need that function. And the state is supportive of the market, and that's why we're marginalized, because that function of knowledge is no longer there. What you call the corporatization is "only knowledge production that is monetizable is important." So I'm agreeing with you, we need to begin to interact and think differently from the margin, but recognizing that in some sense our being in the margin is liberatory. And it's challenging. It liberates us from that historical agenda and then the question becomes: what do we do? The response academics have had is to become professionals: let's emulate the market. What you call us to do, what BLM calls us to do, or something like the Tunisian revolution calls us to do is to be what Gramsci called "concime." To be horseshit! [Laughs]

GF: And maybe this endangered, marginalized position of academia today can be turned into a resource, intellectual and political.

DP: That's what I meant with BLM being a vanguard: it's not just a social media platform, it is also an eminent critique that calls for a radical imaginary.

Notes

[1] As he could not eventually join the OASIS faculty, Derrais Carter was interviewed over the phone. Due to the school schedule, Donald Pease was interviewed individually, whereas Hortense Spillers and Ronald A. Judy were interviewed together and are in conversation with each other. To avoid repetition of questions, the interviews are here presented as a four-voice conversation that reflects the spirit of ongoing intellectual exchanges characterizing OASIS.

Forum

Teaching American Studies in Europe: Challenges and New Directions for the 21st Century

Lorenzo Costaguta and Virginia Pignagnoli

Introduction

Historically, the role of American Studies has been to strengthen the foundations upon which the American experience is studied, analyzed and discussed in the academic context. Teachers have been invested with the role of explaining America to European students, making it intelligible by unearthing its numerous contradictions and sophistications, and ultimately favoring exchanges and ties between the US and Europe. However, since its inception in the immediate aftermath of World War Two, American Studies has been facing countless challenges, with generations of scholars contesting its theoretical premises. Born as a project of 'cultural imperialism' during the Cold War, American Studies was profoundly transformed by the impact of the radical movements of the Sixties. The proliferation of disciplines such as African American Studies, Native American Studies, Queer Studies and Women's Studies forced American Studies to abandon its normative nationality-defined framework (Radway).

In the highly influential 1979 essay "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement," cultural historian Gene Wise gave a conceptual infrastructure to a discipline that the 1970s cultural developments were rapidly making no longer usable. Wise's concept of "Paradigm Dramas" accommodated conflicting tensions in an organic theoretical framework. Suggesting that historical ideas were "a sequence of dramatic acts – acts which play on wider cultural scenes, or historical stages" (Wise 296, cf. Pease and Wiegman 2), Wise argued that historicisations should be abandoned in favor of a model that reflected the fractured nature of the American experience. With this aim in view, he suggested a loose definition of American Studies that would predict its pluralist, particularistic, and comparativist future. In the landmark essay collection *Futures of American Studies*, Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman started from Wise's essay to offer an updated version of the developments that had occurred in the discipline, dividing the multiple 'futures' of

American Studies into four categories: post-hegemonic, comparativist, differential and counter-hegemonic.

RSA Journal invited leading scholars from across the various disciplines in American Studies to discuss pedagogical trends, methodological approaches, module design, and the challenges faced when teaching the literature, culture and history of the United States. The Forum, edited by Virginia Pignagnoli and Lorenzo Costaguta on behalf of the AISNA Graduate Forum, discusses a topic of special interest for early-career researchers, who start teaching at a time fraught with epochal changes both in academia and in the American political and social world. The Forum sought to answer the following questions: have Americanists across Europe succeeded in teaching the complexity of American Studies? What are the main challenges they encounter? What are the theoretical frameworks that are best suited to teach the multiple histories and the multiple contradictions of American culture? How have the field and the various sub-disciplines composing it evolved in the past ten years? What kind of new directions can we envision for the future as far as teaching pedagogies are concerned?

The Forum's contributors, Joe Merton (University of Nottingham), Anna Pochmara (University of Warsaw), Joshua Parker (University of Salzburg), Marietta Messmer (University of Groningen), and Donatella Izzo ("L'Orientale" University of Naples) emphasize the interdisciplinarity and malleability of American Studies, confirming the importance of Pease and Wiegman's analysis. However, while Wiegman and Pease discuss American Studies from the American perspective, (cf. also Wiegman), the Forum's contributors explore the role of American Studies in Europe. This follows a discussion initiated, among others, by Donatella Izzo ("Outside Where?") and Cornelis A. van Minnen and Sylvia L. Hilton ("Teaching and Studying").

Teaching American Studies in Europe has always presented a specific set of problems, connected with the evolving and interdisciplinary nature of the subject itself. Moreover, differences in curricula, university systems and research programs within European countries have contributed to create a diverse field of studies, in which our understanding of American Studies has fractured into many different sub-national fields. Today, such a complicated situation faces new challenges vis-à-vis the current socio-political situation, both in the US and in Europe, with events such as

Trump's presidency, Brexit, the threat of terrorism, the consequences of global warming, but also developments in the academic world, from the spread of digital technologies to a lack of job security.

The following essays offer a variety of perspectives on these issues. First, they point out how American Studies, as a discipline, shows differences and similarities according to where it is taught. For instance, in Merton's contribution we observe the marketization of British academia to satisfy the need for the discipline to be appealing to students. In Poland, as Pochmara's essay demonstrates, American Studies have been employed to introduce innovative trends in academia, such as whiteness studies, masculinity studies, ecocriticism and posthumanism. Izzo's contribution focuses on the specificities of American Studies in Italy, also highlighting both the (profoundly negative) impact that the current trend to marketize academia has on the Italian public university system and the role American Studies scholars play in the circulation of the theoretical discourses mentioned by Pochmara. A second aspect, discussed by many contributors, insists on the multiple connections between American Studies and the history of the country where it is taught, as is exemplified by Pochmara and Merton with regard to the issue of race in the UK and Poland. Thirdly, American Studies can be employed to reframe US cultural hegemony through innovative methods. For instance, by abandoning well-established narratives and focusing on less debated aspects of US history, we favour a better critical understanding of both its past and present – and we can do this precisely because US history and its mass culture are so popular and American cultural products are already familiar to European students, as stressed by Parker. Just this pervasiveness and appeal of US popular culture is seen by Izzo as crucial for the revival of the humanities in an education system crippled by budget cuts and neoliberal policies. Ultimately, for all their differences, the contributions focus on two key aspects of American Studies in Europe: transnationalism and interdisciplinarity. As evidenced most clearly by Messmer, European American Studies are in fact ideally positioned to cultivate and strengthen these two aspects of the field, and hence guarantee their ability to encapsulate the multiplicity of the American experience in a period rife with cultural, political and social changes.

JOE MERTON

Teaching American Studies in 21st-Century Europe: Three Reflections from Britain

American studies and American culture

The wider perception and popularity of American Studies in Europe has long been tied to political and cultural developments within the United States. Fewer developments have had as much impact as the recent election of Donald Trump. On the one hand, Trump's election has, contrary to the discipline's initial fears, stimulated a degree of interest in and engagement with American history – including historical fields such as conservatism, economic change, or whiteness studies previously ignored or unloved by students – almost unprecedented in my teaching career.[1] Yet the impact of this fascination has also been to initiate what one might describe as "Trump reductionism": the idea that almost every significant trend or phenomenon in contemporary American history can be traced back (or forward) to the 45th President. While this may be wonderful news for his considerable ego, it presents us with considerable pedagogical challenges.

My own final-year undergraduate teaching on narratives of crisis and decline in the 1970s has been significantly affected by this trend. A course which uses the political and cultural transformations of the 1970s to explain or understand our own times cannot escape the shadow of the Donald: topics as diverse as antifeminism, affirmative action or the punitive turn have each ended with the question "How does this get us to Trump?," and writing new weekly lectures has offered tempting opportunities for concluding reflections on this theme. Yet this reductionism is deeply problematic, discouraging students from exploring complexities or discontinuities in recent American history and inhibiting the kinds of transformations of thought or qualities of mind we might hope to develop in our teaching.

So how to disrupt or circumvent this phenomenon while still acknowledging the contemporary, even presentist, connections and

meanings students find in the past; connections and meanings which, as Alan Booth attests, are critical for developing their learning, insight and enthusiasm for their subject? (7-9). The provision and discussion of sources which foreground "ordinary" or "familiar" experiences – personal testimonies of joblessness and de-industrialization, depictions of 1970s discotheques or EST self-help seminars, subway riders' experiences of crime and graffiti – offer one such route. Learning activities which enable students to establish their own connections with the past and thus grow to empathize or understand its complexity or messiness, such as a "solving the 'urban crisis'" role play or a class debate over affirmative action, offer another. I have also found that Jefferson Cowie's *Stayin' Alive* (2010) offers a powerful, compelling and enduringly popular metanarrative or framework for both contemporary American history and, relatedly, our own political and cultural times that can explain Trump without reducing recent American history to him and him alone.[2] The book's powerful exposition of the decline of class – a concept which engages students as they affirm its both increasing *and* diminishing importance to their lives – during the 1970s, its use of an individual Detroit autoworker, Dewey Burton, as a personal vehicle for many of the social, cultural and political changes it explores, its adroit blending of politics with culture, elite and working-class agency, each make it a valuable conceptual (and interdisciplinary) framework for teaching contemporary American history and encouraging critical reflection on both the past and oneself. The fact that Trump rode many of these trends to the White House is testament to its power, significance, and relevance.

The challenges of transnationalism

The transnational turn has had a significant impact on not only the historiography of the 20th-century United States, but also the pedagogical approaches to it.[3] Increasingly, scholars of American Studies are using this theoretical framework to encourage their students to explore the interaction of American histories with those of the wider world, and the ways in which the exchange of ideas, people and movements across borders can help to

reshape our understanding of the United States. My own second-year undergraduate teaching on the contemporary history of race and rights, both within and beyond the United States, has been designed with these intellectual aims in mind, exploring the links between movements for racial reform and equality – and those who resisted them – across the globe, from Detroit to Addis Ababa, Little Rock to Leningrad, Smethwick to Soweto. To do this, we examine a variety of sources, from the art and iconography of the Black Panthers Party or Chicano anti-war movement to the music of Hugh Masekela and Eddy Grant. Taking such an approach allows us to understand the explicitly global nature of racial injustice and the global power of those movements which confronted it, and appreciate the increasingly global quality of American history – and histories of race – in the post-1945 world; a period in which, as Mary Dudziak writes, "an event that is local is at the same time international" (17).

Transnational approaches to teaching American Studies present considerable challenges, however. The breadth and range of transnational histories of race can be unsettling for those students accustomed to the neatly-packaged historical topics and narratives prescribed by the exam-oriented demands of pre-university education. Students must read widely and be willing to independently think, reflect and identify broad themes across diverse topics and regions, but many voice concern that thinking transnationally is difficult or unwieldy, that they lack historical context or knowledge, that they will be underprepared for the end-of-module exam. One must ensure there is a strong theoretical basis to the course, and several recurrent themes which cut across to it, to assuage these fears. It is not only hard work for students; academic staff must demonstrate a dexterity with sources, methods and content from a variety of diverse historical contexts, some of them from outside their own research specialisms or regions. Most importantly, while the transnational turn has been largely successful in questioning, even collapsing, a long-standing scholarly commitment to American exceptionalism, it still runs headlong into a far more entrenched cultural perception of exceptionalism – both American and our own – held deeply by students and the wider public alike. An activity in which students design African American and black British history curricula reveals that while students often possess extensive knowledge of the former, their ability

to conceptualize the latter – at least beyond 1833 – is extremely limited. Racial inequality continues to be perceived by many British students as something which happens in the United States, not here; British histories of migration, anti-colonialism and race-based social movements, each of which were and are distinctly transnational, are barely imagined. Despite the value and import of transnational approaches, these perceptions of exceptionalism are difficult to supplant, especially in a post-Brexit era where government ministers demand history reflect "our island story" and global citizens are purportedly "citizens of nowhere" (Gove n.pag.). While as teachers we must acknowledge these problematic cultural assumptions, for they are what continue to fascinate our students and draw them to American Studies, we must also always work to challenge and unpick them, moving our students on to new and more complex understandings of contemporary American history.

American Studies in an age of uncertainty (and metrics)

The sustained marketization, even neoliberalization, of British universities over the past decade presents a considerable challenge to the future of many academic disciplines, not least American Studies.[4] A vision of universities as competitive entities and "driver[s] of economic growth" and students as economic agents, their degree programs the means to a career-oriented end, has come to predominate over personal and intellectual fulfillment and development (BIS, *Securing a Sustainable Future*). Such a trend is exemplified by the arrival of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), two of whose six metrics of teaching "excellence" measure the percentage of students in full employment six months after graduation. The TEF, and its associated "employability" agenda, presents a considerable challenge to the interdisciplinary quality of American Studies, even though that commitment to inter- or multidisciplinarity is explicitly embedded in the Quality Assurance Agency [QAA]'s subject benchmark statement for area studies (QAA 2016). How can a subject which aims to further core "qualities of mind" such as "a critical awareness of diversity," the ability to make "transnational links" and the development of "intercultural

competences", align itself with that agenda, especially in a context also defined by Trump, Brexit, and the rise of populist nationalism? (ibid.).

This emergent context poses a number of problems for American Studies. Interdisciplinarity can often be daunting for existing students, who have been trained up to university in rigidly-defined subject areas with little opportunity or incentive – in fact, often active discouragement – to cross disciplinary boundaries. Even working in a discrete disciplinary field such as History, but with a diverse range of sources drawn from across different disciplines, from literature and film to art and photography, can be difficult for students, who can look on such approaches with suspicion. "How will this help prepare me for the exam?," I recall one student asking of a series of film clips from 1980s nostalgia cinema (the relative lack of innovation in assessment in Humanities subjects, with an emphasis still placed on the traditional essay-exam model, perhaps does not help matters). Negative sentiments such as these can often manifest themselves in lower SET (Student Evaluation of Teaching) scores, universities' preferred internal measure for teaching "excellence," perhaps discouraging teaching staff from the kind of interdisciplinary innovation intrinsic to American Studies. The difficulty of promoting interdisciplinary programs to prospective students is reflected in the increasing number of discrete American Studies departments now "reorganized" into larger schools or departments, or the shrinking number of American Studies graduates, which has fallen by 40 percent between 2003 and 2015 (Phelps). More broadly, and perhaps most troublingly, the emergence of an environment in which departments and even disciplines actively compete to demonstrate "excellence" and recruit students has often served to inhibit the development of genuine collaboration and exchange between or across disciplines.

Yet by way of conclusion, perhaps there are opportunities for American Studies despite, or even within, this transformative context. Many long-standing American Studies departments in Britain continue to thrive, providing the institutional foundations for scholarly and pedagogical exchange which transcends disciplinary boundaries. Not only this, but Americanists are now expanding into departments previously off-limits to them, a testament to the enduring vitality and popularity of American studies and its potential to reach large groups of students. The discipline

continues to thrive through active subject organizations such as the British Association of American Studies (BAAS) and Historians of the Twentieth Century United States (HOTCUS), both of which have pioneered practice-sharing initiatives in the area of pedagogy and teaching innovation in recent years and are currently collaborating on the first survey of the American Studies profession in Britain in decades. Finally, the case today, both pedagogically and practically, for the interdisciplinarity of American Studies has perhaps never been stronger. The QAA's subject benchmark statement suggests that, through such an approach, "students learn to appreciate and work with diversity, complexity, and change." In an age of global crisis and uncertainty, it is difficult to imagine a more useful set of qualities.

Anna Pochmara-Ryžko

Cultural Studies as a Dominant, Literary Analysis as a Residual: Teaching American Studies in Poland in the Age of Populism

There are 15 institutions listed in the 2016 annual Polish Association for American Studies (PAAS) newsletter, and only two are not part of an English Department or philological studies.[5] Thus, although the field of American Studies in Poland, as I will show, is predominantly interdisciplinary and to a large extent synonymous with cultural studies, at its roots there is the English Department and literary analysis. The majority of today's instructors wrote their dissertations in literary studies, and its residual echoes are visible both in our research and teaching practice, even though many teaching courses are about Hollywood movies rather than modernist poetry.[6]

As a result of the continuing influence of the English Department in American studies, both in our classrooms and at our conferences, literary

research looms large, whereas the purely historical or purely political sciences are almost absent. At the 2017 PAAS conference, whose title "Performing America" encouraged a focus on culture, almost 30 out of 42 papers were devoted to literary analysis, and there was not a single paper on politics or history. Even the keynote lecture that examined the 2016 victory of Donald Trump – "Exclusion, Resistance, and Populism: Interpreting the Presidential Election of 2016 through Southern Literature" – as its title suggests used literature to talk about politics. The previous conference, held at the American Studies Center, which is institutionally unrelated to philology, at the University of Warsaw (ASC, UW) exhibited an analogous tendency. Although there were 6 papers on politics, presentations based on literary analysis constituted more than 60 % of all 63 talks. This generally reflects the make-up of the faculty and their research interests at different American Studies institutions, and it is well exemplified by Warsaw's American Studies centers.[7] In the Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw (IES, UW), 8 out of 14 Americanists are literary scholars, and only 1 out of the remaining 6 declares himself/herself to be a historian, whereas the rest identify with cultural studies. Likewise in the Institute of English Studies, SWPS University, the majority of American scholars were primarily trained and still largely specialize in literary scholarship. Even at the largest and most diverse of the institutions associated in the PAAS, the ASC, literary scholars (though today more often than not they teach film rather than literature) comprise almost half of the faculty. Research interests of the PAAS members in turn translate into the topics of elective courses and MA or BA seminars. At the IA, UW, since January 2016, roughly 130 theses in American studies have been defended; out of these, over 120 carried out cultural and literary analyses, half of which were exclusively devoted to works of American literature. At the more diverse ASC, where students can choose from three thematic clusters – 1) literature, art, media 2) social history and society, and 3) political sciences – almost half of the theses are still devoted to cultural studies and literary analysis.

Such a strong residual influence of literature among Polish American Studies scholars largely stems from the fact that most of us were trained in English Departments in the late twentieth century, when cultural studies was not yet recognized as an independent scholarly discipline in Poland.

This meant that all MA and BA theses as well as doctoral dissertations in American Studies had to include literary analysis until *kulturoznawstwo* (cultural studies) was added to the list of independent disciplines in 2003 (Sójka 98). This, however, is not to say that American studies in Poland became fossilized in the 1950s and have not progressed since then. On the contrary, most literary scholars have welcomed the cultural turn and have embraced many newly emerging critical perspectives. When I was a student in the English Department in the mid-1990s, not only did we read articles from gender studies and critical race studies alongside works by Aristotle and Plato, but in the first-year survey course of American literature, we read Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle" and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* and through these texts, we were introduced to the then emerging queer theory. In the twenty-first century, we, in turn, have familiarized our students with the most recent perspectives and methodologies from whiteness studies to masculinity studies, to affect theory, to new materialism, to ecocriticism, to animal studies, to posthumanism. American studies has emerged as the critical avant-garde of the humanities in Poland.

Outside the classroom, a significant part of our effort has been devoted to translation and popularization of new methodologies. For example, in *Kultura, tekst, ideologia. Dyskursy współczesnej amerykanistyki* (Culture, Text, Ideology: The Discourses of Contemporary American Studies, 2004) edited by Agata Preis-Smith, Polish Americanists translated key texts by authors, such as Edward Said, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Myra Jehlen, Toni Morrison, and bell hooks, thus making them available to Polish scholars and students. Four years later, Karolina Krasuska translated Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (*Uwikłani w Płeć*). In 2015, Julia Fiedorczuk popularized ecocriticism in her *Cyborg w ogrodzie: wprowadzenie do ekokrytyki* (Cyborg in the Garden: An Introduction to Ecocriticism) and Zuzanna Ładyga and Justyna Włodarczyk edited a volume on posthumanism *Po humanizmie. Od technokrytyki do animal studies* (After Humanism: From Technocriticism to Animal Studies). Such publications and our courses on related topics have been instrumental in the introduction of these methodologies into other Polish humanities departments.

Thus, despite the strong residual presence of literary studies in our teaching, American literature scholars were among the first to introduce the

cultural turn and have welcomed the new critical perspectives in the field. As a result, most literary departments in the PAAS offer interdisciplinary studies. In today's Poland, governed by nationalist populists, however, this position is under fire. The critical or political aspect of cultural studies – especially its strong connection to Marxism and gender studies (Sójka 100-101; Włodarczyk 37-38)[8] – have been recognized not only by Polish scholars but also by policymakers. As "leftism" (*lewactwo*) and "gender" have become the public enemies of Polish nationalist rhetoric (Graff and Korolczuk), Cultural Studies has also attracted the government's attention. The Ministry of Science has recently announced that the field is likely to be deleted from the list of scholarly disciplines in Poland ("Gowin"). Such anti-intellectualist and populist gestures are among many parallels between Poland's populist nationalist government and Trump's America. Thus, although an examination of Southern literature can definitely help us better understand the unexpected US election results of 2016, today's Polish public discourse might prove to be similarly eye-opening.

Whereas the dominance of cultural studies and the residual component of literary scholarship are characteristic of most American Studies institutions in Poland, an important part of teaching experience in my case is the juxtaposition of my main academic interest – that is African American studies – and the Polish perspective.[9] At first sight, race may seem to be a completely alien and abstract topic in a country that, according to the last census, is ethnically homogeneous, and where the notion of racial identity is absent from the questionnaires altogether (97,10% citizens have identified their nationality and ethnicity as Polish, and the first two largest national/ethnic minorities are Silesians and Kashubians, ethnicities representing regions in Poland rather than independent foreign states; 98,5% of the people who declare themselves to be religious are Roman Catholic; GUS 29, 93). In practice, however, courses that demonstrate the historically changeable and context-dependent character of racial definitions enable my students to critically view their own identities and understand that these are necessarily racial. Although there do not exist any extensive studies of the historical changes in the perception of Polish Americans – such as the canonical *How the Irish Became White by* Noel Ignatiev, *How Jews Became White* by Karen Brodkin, or *The Wages of Whiteness* by David R. Roediger

– it is easy to find convincing evidence of the analogous situation of Polish immigrants to the US in the late nineteenth century.

Sometimes, when introducing critical race theory, in order to show its relevance to my students, I read a transcript of interviews with late-19th-century black factory workers from the Midwest, who – to the question if there are any white people they work with – answer that there are some Poles, but they are not white. Since students in Poland are educated to identify with Polish 19th-century immigrants (such as, for example, the many Polish Romantic poets who were exiles in Paris), such stories help them reconsider the absence of race and seeming racial transparency in Polish discourse as an element of their white and colonial privilege. These critical self-examinations are especially crucial today in the face of the refugee crisis and the Polish government's total lack of commitment to its relief. The anti-refugee and anti-immigrant attitudes, more or less explicitly supported by the politicians in power, were loudly expressed during the celebrations of the 2017 Independence Day, which made the headlines of international press from *The Daily Mail* to *The Guardian*, from CNN to *The New York* Times, from *Die Zeit* to *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. I strongly hope that the students' identification with their imaginary forefathers and an awareness of their racialization and dehumanization in US anti-immigrant discourse will translate into more critical and more empathic responses to the contemporary situation in Europe. Fortunately, this belief in the power of teaching literature and culture is not only a figment of my optimistic imagination, but it finds support in the findings of social psychologists David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano published in *Science* in 2013, according to which "reading literary fiction temporarily enhances" the "understanding of others' mental state," "a crucial skill that enables the complex social relationships that characterize human societies" (1). Thus, the continuing presence of literature in our teaching practice is far from a fossil of the previous era and, when used critically and combined with new methodologies, it can contribute meaningfully to social change.

JOSHUA PARKER

Historicizing America in Teaching American Studies in Europe

As American Studies proliferated (or was proliferated) in postwar Western Block nations, Austria found itself in a unique position. A former empire with tightly-restricted borders before the First World War, it held few large-scale emigrant connections with the United States from the previous century, as Germany, Russia, Poland, Italy, Ireland, Greece and Scandinavia had, and few longer historical patterns of immigration to North America, as had Spain, Portugal, Africa, England, France, the Netherlands and Scotland. The Austrian Empire was among the last European governments to recognize the United States (in 1797, a full fourteen years after the US War for Independence's conclusion). North America's original populations, its colonization, early governance and social forms often remain a blind spot in Austrians' popular imagination of "America" even today. Here, "America" is still often deeply confounded with notions of modernity, and imagined as a place "without history."

Meanwhile, with Germany, Austria was the country most closely influenced by American media models during the occupation following the Second World War. AP and Reuters were central sources of foreign news. The tone and format of domestic reporting was influenced by the fact that, before US armed forces left the country in 1955, hundreds of Austrian journalists had been trained in American-style journalism. Postwar Austrian press and radio may not always have been direct at telling readers and listeners *what* to think about contemporary US political and social issues, but they were, modeled on US media structures and press conventions, very good at telling listeners and readers *what to think about* (Wagnleitner 100), and specifically what and how to think about the United States and what was going on *there*.

American Studies encourages critical analysis of cultural, artistic, social and political paradigms. American Studies, like America itself, has always

been about shaking up paradigms. Teaching in Europe, you'll find students often all too willing and able to consume the narratives contemporary American media produces through these forms. American narratives are easily enough digested. European students have already been trained from an early age to consume them. University students in Europe often come to the American Studies classroom prepared to see narratives or issues presented as perhaps dramatic and edgy, thought-provoking or upsetting, but – as narratives – ultimately as comedies. It's what American narrative forms are famous for: the moralizing happy ending. As a teacher, perhaps one's best tactic is to render its narratives more uncanny – as Russian Formalists might say, to "make [the familiar] strange." Historicization ("historicize, historicize, historicize") is often called on as one remedy. The "unfamiliar" is found in an almost over-obvious place: history. Specifically, America's long history: early colonial politics and governance, Native American societies, literatures and practices, and the ecological history of the land.

When I started teaching politics and government in a "North American Civilization" lecture several years ago, my default instinct was to begin where my own US-based classrooms had started: the Declaration of Independence (drawn from Enlightenment ideals), and from there moving on to cover the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the formation of the branches of the US federal government. I quickly saw my approach ignored colonial communities, as much as Native ones, largely self-governing for three centuries prior to the first Continental Congress. One prescription I'd give is to focus on unexpected or unknown aspects of American history.

Teaching long history or distant history today may seem like an ostrich sticking its head in the sand, a flight from a flashing, frightening, electrifying political present, the immediate relevancy of daily cascades of falling "norms" in news from the United States. We try to focus on immediate history and contemporary trends, while covering centuries of founding mythologies and policies of "early" America and Americans. We want to find interstices between the two. Classroom time is limited. We hesitate over giving time to one or the other.

American Studies can be criticized as being too interdisciplinary. Its introduction in postwar Europe exposed an intentional (understandable)

attempt to project (and promote) America as a unified, holistic idea. Or as a palette of interconnected, complimentary directions and impulses. In short, a successful state, expert at (and unchallenged in) adapting its various cultural strands to a modernist project. As Lorenzo Costaguta and Virginia Pignagnoli write in their call for papers for this issue, "the perception of American Studies as a discipline, and the way in which scholars approach it, is tightly connected to the image of the United States as a country." Logical enough. True enough. We've been soaking in it. Yet the regions, peoples, and the span of history under our scope of vision, for some 14,000 years (or more), hardly formed one country, much less a nation.

"I have never read, nor will I ever write, an alternate history as creative and thoroughly wrought as the one I read in high school," writes Sarah Gailey. "I studied this particular book for a full year – in a display of singular dedication to an idea, the teacher designed her entire district-approved curriculum around it. The premise of this particular alternate history was 'what if everything was fine?'" It was something, she writes,

> that didn't boil history down to a single pivotal event, but that instead boiled it down to a feeling, to an idea . . . What if, the book supposed, America had been entirely undiscovered prior to 1492? What if the Pilgrims had been a peaceful, God-loving people? What if they had worked together with the Native population, rather than slaughtering them and stealing their land? What if voyages of exploration were driven by a pure, heartfelt desire to expand the map of the world, and nobody had ever been interested in gold or drugs or slaves? What if everything was fine? (n. pag.)

What I suggest as a necessary way of grappling with the contemporary American scene, is not to represent the over-arching narrative of "America" or "Americanness" as tragedy, or farce. But to encourage classrooms to analyze and discuss "America" as it always was: a human experiment, fragile, fallible, itself by turns cynical and hopeful. It offers many "directions." Yet few of them are "new." What Barack Obama said of the United States in his first inaugural speech in 2009 might apply well to our approaches to teaching American Studies today: "Our challenges may be new. The instruments with which we meet them may be new. But those values upon which our success depends – hard work and honesty, courage and fair play,

tolerance and curiosity" – for us, in our classrooms and research, too – "these things are old."

If, comedian Dave Chappelle recently suggested, "Trump is a bad DJ at a good party," does this mean scholars should bury ourselves in our archives? It's "the intellectual's task," regarding "the consensus on group or national identity," Edward Said remarked, "to show how the group is not a natural or god-given object, but is constructed, manufactured, even, in some cases, an invented object, with a history of struggle and conquest behind it, that is sometimes important to represent." (n. pag.)

So, my suggestions for teaching American Studies in Europe in the twenty-first century:

Let's keep abreast of archeology and paleontology, as we're able. Discoveries revamping the ways we imagine human history playing out on the North American continent are being made in these fields almost annually.

We all do it, but I'll say it again: let's watch and study the ways in which American history, and its traditions, are being treated in the media and press today. They often deserve careful rhetorical deconstruction. Let's reflect on American narration – that of the newscaster, the headline, the punch line, the political tragedy presented as high drama. America remains a stage for the world. Let's also keep an eye on how American policy affects things on the ground, where the world feels it. Its ripples and repercussions echo in film, music, literature and reporting from the four corners of the globe.

So many good American novels, short stories, essays and poems have come out in the last year alone. It's hard to keep track of one's favorites. Sherman Alexie's poem "Hymn" was shared millions of times within a few days of appearance on Facebook (that other Netherworld of American narrations). *Harper's* and *The Atlantic*, with (respectively) 167-year-old and 160-year-old archives, still pour out monthly breathtaking lines today (as if a subscription weren't worth it, just for access to their archives). Magazines like *n+1*, *A Public Space*, *The Literary Review* and countless others continue to offer a mix of literature and political reflection. Follow a local weekly. NPR, *Slate* and *The New Yorker* (you may know others) produce high-quality podcasts – perhaps the great verbal form of the early twenty-first century – unless you prefer the tweet.

In visual arts reflecting on American life, ideas and mythologies, Gregory Crewdson, Myra Greene and Matika Wilbur are artists I'm currently following with baited breath. Encourage students to explore internet archives. Diverse, clear historical images are easier than ever to find: portraits, posters, maps, artifacts, diaries – everything from Paul Revere's silver to George Washington's ledgers, to Dred Scott's studio photo, to Harriet Tubman's shawl, to Zelda Fitzgerald's parting gift to F. Scott as he decamped for the First World War (an engraved whiskey flask). Music from the dawn of recording is accessible (and free) as never before. We live, in a sense, in a golden era.

America, it's said, constantly reinvents itself. We Americanists in Europe, as numerous as in any other era, have networks more vast and diverse. We work in a stimulating field. We may, at times, be wary of our object of study, but have no reason to be weary of our task.

MARIETTA MESSMER

Teaching American Studies in the "Age of Trump": How Transnational and Interdisciplinary Paradigms Can Help Us Negotiate Some of the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century

The election of Donald Trump as 45th President of the United States poses a particular challenge to (European) American Studies scholars at this point in time as we are frequently asked to explain developments, such as the intensification of (white) nationalism in the US, the proliferation of openly racist discourses and exclusionary policies (directed, in particular, against undocumented workers and immigrants), or Trump's radical stance on international trade and diplomatic relations. While Trump's positions are no doubt extreme, one should not forget that similar shifts to the

political right can also be noticed throughout Europe. As Sabine Kim and Greg Robinson have observed:

> In some respects, ironically, the Trump administration forms part of a transnational movement. One can see similar trends of hostility over immigration in the Brexit campaign in Great Britain in 2016, as well as in political campaigns across the continent of Europe – with refugees as the chief targets of outrage and suspicion – and in the dismissive attitudes regarding international alliances. (2)

I would argue that the discipline of American Studies is ideally suited to negotiate and explain such highly complex developments due to its critical interdisciplinarity as well as its transnational outlook. Many of the socio-political challenges that we face today, including the threat of terrorism, the consequences of economic globalization and global warming, or the increasing mobility of people and commodities, require an integration of interdisciplinary and transnational perspectives, and the discipline of American Studies can offer us some highly enabling tools in this context. I will use the example of one of my upper-level BA research seminars on the topic of migration and mobility to illustrate the synergy effects that an interplay between critical interdisciplinarity and transnationalism can have on understanding current developments in the US and elsewhere.

Due to its origins as an area studies program during the 1930s, American Studies was from the start characterized by a degree of interdisciplinarity because of its "attempt to focus multiple disciplinary perspectives on a single geographic area" (Lattuca 8). This early form of interdisciplinarity, however, relied heavily on the category of the nation state, which further contributed to naturalizing US notions of exceptionalism. This changed with the opening up of American Studies to a much wider range of (new) disciplines from the 1960s on until today, including ethnic studies, cultural studies, border studies, critical race studies, diaspora studies, gender and LGBT studies, disability studies, film and media studies, environmental studies, critical legal studies, or critical justice studies. While some scholars have expressed concerns about the extent to which this proliferation of sub-fields within American Studies may have led to a fragmentation of

the discipline, I would argue that, during the 1980s and 1990s, this development went hand in hand with a highly productive move towards a much more radical and subversive form of interdisciplinarity under the influence of post-structuralism, postmodernism and post-colonialism. This form of critical interdisciplinarity that shapes many of the topics taught and researched by American Studies scholars today queries "the conditions and consequences of knowledge production" (Parker and Samantrai 1) as it is built on the premise that all knowledge production is inherently political (Lattuca 16). It furthermore acknowledges that Enlightenment conceptualizations of knowledge as neutral, objective, universal, and therefore generalizable (Lattuca 10) had in fact led to systemic (race, class, and gender) biases and inequalities – "inequalities [that were] naturalized by the truth claims of the academy" itself (Parker and Samantrai 7). Critical interdisciplinarity can thus be said to have "returned critique to the center of the educational enterprise" (Parker and Samantrai 6). Ultimately, it can also "assist efforts by members of marginal groups to claim subject status and political agency" (Parker and Samantrai 16). For this reason, Lisa Lattuca sees interdisciplinary approaches as "the only routes to genuine understanding and equality" (Lattuca 16) because they have the power to "transform social relations, broaden access for the disenfranchised, and thereby change the agents and the consequences of knowledge production" (Parker and Samantrai 1).

The form of critical interdisciplinarity that currently shapes much of the teaching and research done in American Studies can thus be described as a means through which "competing academic protocols, standards, and logics, together with the goals and values of social justice movements, are made explicit in order to be debated, interrogated, and reshaped" (Parker and Samantrai 18). For the seminar I teach on migration and mobility, this means, in very concrete terms, that we study Central American and Mexican migratory movements to the US from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives (including their historical, social, political, economic, cultural, legal, and media dimensions) as well as from the points of view of a wide range of actors involved on both sides of the US-Mexican border: government officials (including politicians, border patrol agents and local police officers) who try to justify current immigration policy decisions;

private vigilante groups and neighborhood-watch organizations in US border states that wish to take the protection of their communities into their own hands; US employers who prefer to recruit undocumented migrants to keep their companies afloat; human rights organizations working in Mexico and along the US-Mexican border to help migrants survive their often risky journey; representatives of the Mexican government who criticize the US for systemic human rights violations; Mexican and Central American sociologists who explain the socio-economic push factors that drive migrants to leave their home countries (poverty, drug and gang violence, but also the negative effects of US-induced economic policies such as NAFTA); Mexican villagers who profit substantially from the remittances sent home by family members working in the US; the role of US-funded detention centers in Mexico whose task it is to deport migrants back to their home countries; and of course migrants themselves who talk about the effects of the increasing border militarization, including a heightened exposure to violence, rape, and corrupt officials. Such an attempt to include the voices of as many agents as possible allows us to develop a much more complex and complete picture of the contemporary dynamics of Central American-US migration.

This turn towards a more critical interdisciplinarity has, since the 1990s, also been accompanied by a transnational turn within American Studies. Increasingly harsh critiques of US-American notions of exceptionalism as well as vocal condemnations of some of its neo-imperialist foreign policy decisions, combined with geopolitical shifts such as the end of the Cold War that reduced the US's central role as promoter of American Studies programs in Europe, have, in some of the more radical variants, started to displace the US from the center of the field. Instead, closer attention is being paid to the hemispheric relations between North, Central, and South America, or the US's complex role in international cultural contexts and politico-historical conflicts. Several critics have noted that this transnational turn is not without potential pitfalls as a hemispheric study of the Americas, for example, can also be seen as a form of neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism, especially from the perspective of Latin American or Canadian Studies programs. I would maintain, however, that the advantages of this tectonic shift towards a critical transnationalism

outweigh the potential difficulties in many ways: "[A] US-centric version of American Studies simply tends to foreground certain research paradigms that fall within the interests of the United States while at the same time obscuring at least as many alternative paradigms that concern other American nations' interests" (Messmer, "Introduction" 11).

A critical transnationalist understanding of American Studies, on the other hand, "transcends the limitations inherent in studying one nation in isolation and can successfully address the multifaceted economic, political, and cultural interrelations of the Americas in an age of global interconnectedness and migratory movements" (Messmer, "Introduction" 12). By drawing on a wide range of migration theories in our seminar which focus on transnational interrelations (including classical economic, network, dual labor market, world systems, and cumulative causation theory), we can thus analyze to what extent historical events (the US's military interventions in Mexico and other Latin American countries) as well as contemporary political and economic measures (immigration acts focusing on family reunification, increasing border militarization, the Bracero guest worker program, NAFTA) actually contribute to producing the very streams of migrants that the US so desperately and ineffectively tries to control.

In recent years, transnational American Studies approaches have also started to draw on many of the highly enabling premises of the new field of trans-area studies that can help us understand territorial areas as political, historical and cultural constructs through which a particular community defines its (cultural or national) identity. In this way, spaces (including national spaces) can be more easily recognized as shaped by multiple centers, dialectical interrelations, as well as global transborder processes, i.e. as spaces of interaction without a stable, permanent meaning, which in turn facilitates a critique of the seeming boundedness fixity of traditional categories such as "nation" or "state" (Mielke and Hornidge 5, 12, 14-15). This approach can also further our understanding of boundaries (including political borders) as fluid socio-spatial constructs that constantly undergo renegotiations. Embracing some of these paradigms has allowed American Studies scholars to explain some of the seemingly paradoxical developments that shape our current geopolitical situation: the fact that the sovereignty

of nation states is both infringed upon as well as reaffirmed at the same time; or the fact that boundaries and borders are both weakened and reinforced simultaneously as certain forms of de-bordering inevitably lead to new forms of re-bordering. Moreover, borders themselves (not just borderlands) have become more complex; it is well known that borders do not always coincide with cultures, languages, or religions, but they also do not necessarily always coincide with geopolitical territories anymore either.

Migratory movements across the US-Mexican border constitute a useful case study to illustrate this dynamic as they allow us to challenge some of the US's hegemonic national narratives and discourses of (non-) belonging that have recently been revived so effectively by President Trump. Trump's restrictive definitions of national identity, which are then translated into ever more rigorously exclusionary immigration policies, often evoke images of an autochthonous American nation that prevents migrants' integration into the national imaginary while obscuring the fact that the United States has been an immigrant nation right from its inception. Moreover, a critically interdisciplinary and transnational approach within American Studies can highlight the "larger refusal of United States leaders in recent years to admit any connection between refugee crises and the nation's foreign policy" (Kim and Robinson 4). Kim and Robinson remind us that throughout "the Cold War era, the United States made acceptance of refugees a rhetorical cornerstone of its foreign policy. . . . {It} made a point of opening its doors to people fleeing persecution" (Kim and Robinson 4). The end of the Cold War, however, also marked the end of this humanitarian approach, a development that was further reinforced after 9/11, when foreignness started to be perceived as a threat to national security. This notion, according to Kim and Robinson, "prefigure[s] the current administration's 'America First' sloganeering, wholesale denunciation of Muslims, and rejection of all forms of immigration" (Kim and Robinson 5). Since 2014, this has also had a highly detrimental effect on thousands of families and unaccompanied minors seeking refuge in the US after escaping from the violent conditions prevalent in their home countries Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. Many of them have been placed in immigrant detention centers where they

await deportation back to their home countries without any chance of ever being granted asylum in the US.

To facilitate these deportations, the US administration has also started to outsource many of its migration management measures to Mexico, which has led to what can be termed a southward movement of the US-Mexican border far into Mexican territory as migrants are often apprehended, detained and deported by Mexican authorities long before they have reached the US-Mexican border. This development, as we have been able to observe in our migration seminar, has created a substantial rights vacuum for migrants and refugees because many human rights obligations are not applicable extraterritorially, but it has also started to "redefine the boundaries of state control" as this form of outsourcing simultaneously increases "the US government's legal reach over vulnerable non-citizen populations" even beyond national borders "while at the same time decreasing [its] direct liability and accountability" (Messmer, "Detention" 3, 2). As American Studies teachers and scholars, we are at the forefront of addressing these developments, and the interdisciplinary and transnational orientation of our field – while it can be daunting at times – can provide us with highly enabling tools that will prepare our students in the best possible way to negotiate many of the multifaceted challenges of the 21st century.

DONATELLA IZZO

American Studies in Europe/European American Studies: Local and Global Challenges

Let me start with a not altogether superfluous specification: unlike other participants in this forum, I do *not* teach American Studies – at least nominally – for the excellent reason that there is no such institutional field in the Italian university system. We have teachings of Anglo-American Literature (a somewhat ambiguous label mainly covering the study and

teaching of US literature), hosted in departments and degree programs in foreign languages, and teachings of North-American History, mostly in political sciences departments and programs. There is not a single official American Studies course, or degree, or department in the whole country, and nothing like that comprehensive project integrating literary, historical, theoretical, cultural, visual, anthropological, sociological, and political approaches, and aimed at a multi- and interdisciplinary study of the United States.

That already highlights a distinction: what we understand as American Studies varies from the USA to Europe and from one European country to another. Academic frameworks affect the ways in which we see our work, the institutional space available for doing it, and the scholarly agendas we set ourselves. This in turn conditions the possibility for exchange and collaborative work, which in turn impacts the creation of a shared intellectual pursuit. The diversity of local conditions complicates the possibility of talking about "American Studies" as if it were a stable signifier. But even assuming that a field loosely recognizable as "American Studies" exists everywhere in Europe, is there such a thing as a "European American Studies"? And what would that label designate – a shared scholarly space within Europe, a specific difference between European and American understandings of and practices in the field, or both? And how would it relate to the call for internationalization coming from sectors of US American Studies, and to Transnational American Studies as the now prevalent epistemology of the field?

As I have noted elsewhere, the disciplinary identity of Americanists in Europe is the result of a complex negotiation, involving processes of interpellation from disparate sites – one's local academic culture and traditions, on the one hand; the hegemonic disciplinary paradigms of the field as globally legislated from within US American Studies, on the other. At a historical moment marked by accelerated global flows of cultural and academic no less than financial capital, the homogenizing pressures of "globalization as Americanization" might prove particularly strong in a field whose inherent raison d'être involves an intimate dialogue with US culture, US-produced scholarship, and US institutions of knowledge – especially at a time when many European countries (as is certainly the case

in Italy) have adopted internationalization and marketization as a mantra, and look to the US for models of neoliberal governance and the downsizing of higher education.

Where does that leave us as European Americanists? I see our challenges for the 21st century as manifold. Let me start from the last – but certainly not least – challenge I mentioned above: the onslaught of neo-liberalism on European academia, and its specific impact on Americanist scholarly pursuits. I will briefly focus on Italy – probably a worse case than others, but somewhat representative of the challenges currently faced by at least some of the European countries. In one of those time-travel paradoxes that are so familiar to Americanists, the university "reforms" of the 21st century instantly propelled Italian academia from its tardy but well-ordered 19th century epistemology straight into the middle of academic marketization and neoliberal paucity, without really affording it the time for a critical institutional reconfiguration of its received knowledge, and thus leaving it helpless to defend that knowledge in the face of the ongoing gutting of the public university. How did that affect the field I know best, American Literature? Still widely regarded as an ancillary field carrying less cultural and educational capital than its European competitor, British Literature, American Literature has fallen an easy prey to budget cuts and the replacement of retired professors with contingent faculty. Of twenty-eight full professors of American literature in 2006, only seven were left in 2016; of an overall eighty-one university teachers (professors, associate professors, assistant professors) in 2006, there were fifty-three left in 2016 – as I write, they are reduced to a mere forty-nine (two on non-tenure track jobs): well above the general 20% ratio of downsizing that has affected the Italian university system over the last decade. With its academic and institutional weight thus reduced, it may very well be that the field's most pressing task for the 21st century is simply to survive.

But let's go back to intellectual challenges, and specifically to pedagogical ones. American Studies (where it exists as an integrated interdisciplinary configuration) and American literary studies (as a teaching frequently adept at smuggling historical, cultural, visual, philosophical, political, and theoretical content into courses putatively devoted strictly to literature) have the potential for playing a crucial role in the revival and

strikeback of the humanities. One of the ways in which they can do so is by capitalizing on the pervasiveness of US popular culture. Song lyrics or TV series elicit instant recognition by otherwise disparate groups of students: for many of them, they may provide their prevalent access to cultural narratives about the USA, even creating some of the basic knowledge of the country's history and culture that is usually missing from the nation-centered, Europe-centered syllabi of our high school education. Of course this cultural material may also convey the kind of pseudo-knowledge or self-serving ideological representation whose pre-suppositions we, as scholars and teachers, wish to critically challenge and refine (but so does, after all, much canonical literature). Still, it fosters interest, while offering a great opportunity of working backwards from contemporary popular representation to a more established historical, cultural, and artistic legacy, alerting the students to those textual cruxes, historical nexus, and conceptual ramifications that point beyond the consumption of slick entertainment products, to a more self-aware understanding of their discursive entanglements – and frequently, their actual complexity. Conversely, a complementary smuggling act concerns the way in which American Studies and American literary studies, with the theoretical self-awareness that has been the field's mark for several decades, enable teachers to deploy their titular courses, whatever their ostensible disciplinary content, to expose students to that exciting contemporary intellectual domain that includes not just US popular culture, but also eco-criticism, women and gender studies, queer studies, critical race studies, disability studies, critical finance studies – theoretical discourses whose circulation in European academia is overwhelmingly entrusted to Americanist scholars.

In sum, the constitutive features of American Studies as a disciplinary field might prove precious in the current predicament of European academia. On the one hand, it can contribute to redeeming the humanities – and in particular literary studies – from charges of irrelevance (now routine in the current, market-driven rather than *Bildung*-oriented understanding of higher education), by injecting their supposed antiquarian orientation with robust doses of reflection on our present-day concerns. On the other hand, it can capitalize on the expertise of literary and cultural scholars to train the students in the analytical skills traditionally honed on literature,

and much needed in order to develop a critical approach to many aspects of contemporary culture, from serial drama to the social media or political rhetoric.

The mention of political rhetoric leads me to one final comment. As I mentioned earlier, one of the main thrusts of US American Studies over the last twenty years has been on the one hand, the internationalization of the field, and on the other, the call for the transnational. The transnational in Donald Pease's view names an "[i]nherently relational" deconstructive operator, an "undecidable economic, political, or social formation that is neither in nor out of the nation-state," involving "a double move: to the inside, to core constituents of a given nation, and to an outside, whatever forces introduce a new configuration" (Pease 5-6). By preventing the nation's closure in the assumed fusion of territory and people, the transnational would thus disaffiliate American Studies from the logic of exceptionality, opening up instead alternative identifications with all the "excepted" communities historically suppressed and discursively disavowed by exceptionalist America (Pease 27). Thus, within the symbolic and intellectual economy of the transnational, US American Studies purporting to embrace the oppressed in a history of global conflicts and multiple inequalities, no longer looks at Europe as its privileged partner and mirror, as it did throughout the Cold War. Where does that leave European American Studies, and what role might it play in this expanded reconfiguration?

Remarkably, as Transnational American Studies repositioned itself within a geo-political scene marked by the demise of national sovereignty as a result of the combined pressure of global capitalism and the post-9/11 world security state, the Trump era was ushering in a new/old form of nationalistic unilateralism. Its rallying cries – "Make America Great Again," "America First," "Pittsburgh, not Paris" – would seem to doom the transnational to oblivion along with other obsolete technologies, possibly dictating the agenda of a newly introverted US American Studies. The US Americanists' moral and political urgency to critique the new administration's nationalism, nativism, and xenophobia seems to be creating a renewed focus on the domestic dimension, paradoxically installing a mirror image of Donald Trump's "America first" at the center

of their concerns. This trend emerged in the wake of the 2016 elections, when, with an obsessive introspection, scholars and analysts sought the causes of Trump's election in a range of endogenous factors, without once extending their ken to the international scene, where, as shown by Marco Morini, the political ascent of questionable billionaires with a populist agenda had been an ongoing phenomenon for some time. Perhaps this will prove to be an opportunity for European Americanists to reclaim a role within a refashioned transnational approach, capable of comparatively contextualizing and interpreting the US within an expanded worldwide framework. At this historical moment, this would perhaps be an antidote not just against US exceptionalism and populism, but also against our own, hardly less troubling local versions.

Notes

[1] The value of this trend has been fiercely debated by historians. For examples of this debate, see Temkin, Jacobson.

[2] Equally valuable meta-narratives include Rodgers and, although written to explain contemporary British history, Robinson et al.

[3] See Tyrrell.

[4] For examples of this process, see Department of Business, Innovation & Skills [BIS], *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education* (2010), and Department of Business, Innovation & Skills [BIS], *Success as a Knowledge Economy* (2016). For a critique, see Collini, *Speaking of Universities*, or Collini, "Who Are the Spongers Now?"

[5] The two institutions that are not related to philological departments are the American Studies Center, University of Warsaw, and the American and Media Studies, University of Łódź. There is also a transatlantic studies program at the American Studies Institute, Jagiellonian University, which stresses political and social sciences, but it's not part of the PAAS. I would like to thank Prof. Marek Paryż, Prof. Agnieszka Graff, Dr. Sylwia Kuźma, and Dr. Justyna Wierzchowska, whose constructive comments helped me improve this article.

[6] Significantly, when contrasted with English Departments and American Studies Institutes in Germany and the UK (the two countries I have most frequently visited as an academic) the position of American studies in Poland appears to bear more resemblance to the one in Germany – where, even though American culture is paid slightly less attention than British, the discrepancy is slight – in contrast to English Departments in the UK, especially in Oxford and Cambridge, where, unsurprisingly, there is by far more space,

time, and attention devoted to British culture. By contrast, in Poland, most of us need to defend ourselves against the predominance of linguistics in the philological curriculum rather than beat off the competition from Shakespeare scholars. This comparison is based on a variety of my personal academic experiences: I was an Erasmus exchange student in the JFK Institute, Free University, Berlin in 2006 and a visiting lecturer in the Department of British, North American, and Anglophone Studies, Saarbrucken, as well as in a number of conferences in the UK in Oxford, Cambridge, York, and Liverpool.

[7] As an analysis of all institutions would be beyond the scope of this article, I have decided to focus on the most significant institutions in Warsaw. I am also most familiar with them personally as a former or present teacher in all three and as a graduate of the Institute of English Studies and American Studies Center.

[8] Jacek Sójka examines the development of Polish cultural studies and contrasts them with their Western European and American counterparts with respect to the Marxist dominant; in the post-war decades, while scholars in the US and Western Europe criticized capitalism through neo-Marxism, in the Soviet Bloc Marxism was an imposed authoritarian ideology rather than a critical tool (102).

[9] The significant position of African American, ethnic, and race studies in Polish American studies in general is evidenced by the publication of *Czarno na Białym. Afroamerykanie, którzy poruszyli Amerykę (In Black and White: African Americans Who Changed America*), edited by Ewa Łuczak and Andrzej Antoszek (2009), numerous workshops and conferences on race and ethnicity organized in Poland, and the fact that in the American Literature Department, UW, 3 out of 8 scholars are predominantly interested in non-white literatures.

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Articles

Irene Polimante

Tracie Morris's Poetic Experience: From Slam Poetry to Sound Poetry

Inside Slam competitions

Slam poetry belongs to the multifaceted movement of Spoken Word Poetry, which engaged academic and media interest during the 1970s as a youth-counter-hegemonic cultural practice (see Sparks and Grochowski), and which "exist[ed] outside the mainstream literary, cultural, and musical genres" (Jenkins 10). Although nowadays it is a geographically, culturally and situationally constructed genre, there is a common feature that associates the many different poetic spoken-word-forms[1] with this heterogeneous movement. Spoken-word poems, indeed, are texts written in everyday language to be interpreted or simply read in front of an audience. The use of voice, sounds (even breath), intonations, gestures, mimic, and body movements are pivotal for the poetic performance, which is not the mere oral representation of a poem[2] but the subversive act to "open spaces between oral and written forms of creative expression by moving the spoken-word-poet's voice from the paper through his or her body, thus serving as a bridge connecting the lived experiences and social realities of individuals through discourse" (10).

These texts, typically written and delivered in the first-person pronoun, directly engage the audience on topics of political and social interest, while the physical presence of the poet opens the way to human bonding and engagement as well. Moreover, the use of public spaces, such as cafes, theatres, parks, event centers, or even university campuses, supports "progressive community-building networks" (Sparks and Grochowski 6), inasmuch as people gather around a poetic event to share the poetic experience and to feel part of a community, even if ephemeral and temporary.[3] And for Morris "community" is the heartbeat of her artistic

enterprise, since the audience she primarily addresses is the urban African American community of Brooklyn.[4] However, in the introduction to her last work, *Who Do with Words* (2018),[5] the artist shows a more inclusive sense of belonging, because at the moment to describe who is her "people" she states:

> Who's "we"? I'll leave you to your own constructions but I mean Black people, people of color generally, women, the poor, the queer, the displaced, the people of unconventional bodies and minds (as well as, of course, combinations of these fluid categories) and even those who have privilege and use it to undermine oppressive systems (John Brown anyone?); those who yearn (for others as well as themselves) to breathe free. I especially mean those who do not benefit from being perceived of as "neutral," the standard. (Morris, *Who Do with Words* 21-22; italics in the original)

Active participation and full involvement of the audience lay at the core of the success of slam poetry – to wit, a performance poetry competition with few rules:

> Anyone can participate. Poets are given three minutes to step up to the mic and perform one original poem of their own construction. Typically, no props, costumes, or outside accompaniment are allowed. After the poem is finished, a panel of 5 judges, who have been randomly selected from the audience, judge the poem and performance on a scale of 0.00-10.00, with the high and low scores dropped. . . . The highest score you can get is 30. . . . Slam's premise is that everyone's opinion about a poem is a valid one. . . . The poets who earn the highest scores return to the stage for multiple rounds, as the field is whittled down based on the reactions of the judges. . . . each attempting to impact the audience (and the judges) just a little more deeply than the last person did. . . . The audience is, in many ways, just as important as the poets. They are encouraged to respond to the poets and the judges in any way they see fit: cheering, booing, laughing. . . . At the end of the night, a winner is crowned. (Aptowicz xxiii)

During the summer of 1986, the Green Mill bar in Chicago hosted the first *Uptown Poetry Slam*, that was the beginning of Marc Smith's

democratic revolution which "took verse outside of the academy, taking evaluative power away from academic critics and giving it to popular audiences" (Somers-Willett 6). However, it was only two years later, when Slam arrived in New York, that it became the editorial and media phenomenon that it now is all around the world. Undoubtedly, the intermingling of policies for the promotion and protection of the Arts[6] with a long established cultural tradition[7] was conducive to such a huge success. Another decisive factor was the constitution of a community of poets who worked together on an unorthodox poetry project which could dialogue with the local citizenry[8] while restoring the lost bond with the ancient oral tradition.[9] This set of intentions brought about a threefold result. Firstly, following in the footsteps of the Beats, "framing poetry as a communal effort parallels community-building work typical of the 1960s and changes established notions of what constitutes authorship and literary production"; secondly, Ginsberg's reference to poets as "community and family" "underscores the tacit acceptance of poetry as a group phenomenon and threatens the prevailing romanticized conception of the author as a solitary inspired figure" (Kane xiii). Finally, the wide use of orality and performance as constitutive elements of slam poetry challenges the supremacy of the written dimension, for they try to rebalance the unequal relationship between "Print Culture" – "and the hierarchies of publishing and circulation [that] are territories where social contentions are as densely coded as anywhere" – and "Talk," "the most mixed of media: social, bodily, clichéd, spontaneous, conflictual, identificatory" (Perelman 201). These three elements also lay at the basis of the poetic production of the vibrant and multicultural community that developed around the Nuyorican Café of Miguel Algarín and Bob Holman, who cared about including "middle-class whites from Queens and Bensonhurst, Latinos from the Lower East Side, blacks from uptown, and visitors who have come to this mecca of slam poetry from Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, or Dublin" (Kane 204). And the poetry performed at slam competitions reflected such a diversity. Furthermore, while offstage, the performers were bonding and networking together as a group but, once on stage, it was the individual with his/her specific identity to be enacted who performed. This synergy between collectivity and individuality made it possible for the poets to highlight

their many differences whilst experiencing a wider sense of unity. Despite the distinctions of gender, status, religion and ethnicity, the poets were able to work as a team, and such union carried the first wave of New York City slam poets to fame and success. Tracie Morris belonged to this group along with other important artists, like Paul Beatty, Willie Perdomo, Adrienne Su, Dana Bryant, Edwin Torres, Maggie Estep, Bobby Miller, etc. (Aptowicz 120-124). From the early stages, Tracie Morris[10] was clearly influenced by the literary and musical African American tradition – which continues to be her source of inspiration and field of study. Morris also showed a real talent for mingling poetic structures with the rhythms, melodies and tones of blues, jazz, hip-hop, funk music and spirituals, insomuch as "within her narratives, she accents syllables in relationship to the beat, but with superb timing and a verbal velocity characteristic of hip-hop forestalling or jazz scatting. She is adept at layering internal and end rhymes as well. Often accompanied by musicians, she recites in sync over articulated rhythms" (Anglesey 77). Another key strength of her poetic, that can be pinpointed even today, is the ability to mediate between the use of ordinary language and more sophisticated aesthetic forms, which pervades both her writing[11] and performance.[12] Such a plasticity allows her poems to be readily enjoyed despite the many cultural references. It is thanks to these qualities that the Brooklyn Girl – the nickname she was given inside the Nuyorican slam hub – managed to win both the Nuyorican Grand Slam Championship and the National Haiku Slam in 1993.

Sound Making Poetry

Although the two national titles launched her on the market, she decided, nevertheless, to complete the poetic competition experience. Thus, at the apex of her success, Morris was determined to begin a new enterprise: to explore and develop new poetic solutions, while trying out her own artistic skills. The starting point of such an endeavor was to go back to her first and main interest: the sound of language(s). This fascination arose during her childhood in the communal housing projects of Brooklyn, where she came in contact with different accents, speeches

and vernaculars.[13] In those same years, she got inspired by the rhythms and rhyme patterns of hip-hop, which became her main tool to bridge lingual sonorities with melodic frameworks.[14] Moreover, this musical genre drove Morris to think of her own language too, since the use of Black English encouraged her to elaborate a personal "association between Black English/ Ebonics and code in the African diaspora" (Morris, "Poetic Statement" 210).

This connection was strengthened by the fact that hip-hop "is an Afro-diasporic cultural form which attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity and community" (Rose, qtd. in Sparks and Grochowski, 6). Representative of this transitional poetic phase was the release of *Intermission* (1998), a collection of different works – in part re-published and in part brand new – which explores a wide range of artistic fields, going from theatre to poetry, and from music to choreography. As the title itself suggests,[15] the anthology has to be read as a "discontinuance": an "interval" that, without a break, leads to the next poetic act/step to come. Morris engages the "page work" as a moment of reflection and analysis of what has been done previously on stage. Therefore, the whole book is built on a dialogue between the "acted" word and the "written" word, in a constant going back and forth of references and influences. The artistic experimentation also involves the aesthetic form, since Morris writes the pages as if she has to conquer a new space, so that the writing takes possession of the blank paper as the body occupies and shapes the stage. It is in these terms that both "Overview" and "Chief Song"– two of the eight texts written for Ralph Lemon's *Geography (1)* – should be read: the disposition of the words on the page follows the pace of an imaginary call and response between two speaking voices. The main voice traces the corpus of the text, which is followed by the answers of the second one that sometimes completes the information, while at other times it acts as an echo of the first voice. This game of repetitions, only for the last word of determined lines, which is modified in its morphology, allows the poet to play with the contrast between graphic sign, its phonetic reproduction and the related semantic meanings, as shown in the extract below, taken from the poem "Overview":

in this
in this heaven
in this heaven
like
hell

we affirm an **inverted** **invented**
God

this is either **a void** **to avoid**
or blinding light blinding

either way i see **nought** **drought**
but blue blues

indomitable

A straight streak
creek flash
sinew of haze

i am green green with
a knew green with
a know greenish

revisiting the issue of **rebuke** **puke**
regeneration of family re-nig, re-nig

bigness of the minute livid
indelible as **a statue** **astute**

still.

(Morris, *Intermission* 61 – bold print mine)

The effect of a double-voice pattern is further heightened by the use of the code-switching from English to African languages, like Bete and

Baule, where words are written phonetically, as it happens in the following excerpt from "Chief Song":

Mene
Mene Iazu na guine puene

Many Bete

Mene Iazu na guine puene

I am supposed to be Noh
I am supposed to be Noh, Noh
I am supposed to be Noh

The lead in Danse ce
Dans ce paradis

Ki Yi – K
Ki Yi – K
Ki Yi – K
Ki Yi – K
Ki Yi – K

– Os?

Noh

But. I ah Noh, Noh

I-A-Kuko
A cool/cool/cool/kuko
(65)

Considering Morris's work on decomposition, manipulation, re-appropriation and re-composition of lingual as well as vocal patterns, the opening statement in the preface of *Intermission* introduces us to another aspect of her attention to sound, as she herself points out: "this new book

reflects a development in my 'page' work. The more 'stage' stuff I make, the more the page presents itself as a forum for another voice" (Morris, *Intermission*, "Preface" n. pag.). And this other voice also emerges from Morris's investigation of her own voice, emphasizing its physicality and materiality, even before its conceptual and cultural utterances (Morris, "Poetics Statement" 210). Far from a philosophical speculation on the ontological problem of voice, which highlights "how the human condition of uniqueness resounds in the register of the voice," Morris seems to sense the "simple truth of the vocal" (Cavarero 8), at least in recognizing those elements of uniqueness and relationality, which pertain both to the voice, as pure sound, and to the human beings. In this first attempt to free the vocal and, more generally, the aural, from the semantic (see Cavarero 9-13 and ch. 3.4), Morris tries to dissociate sound from words. This split, according to her, should reverse the relation of power between the two, insomuch as the written word is deprived of its dominance of the narrative discourse in favor of sound. In this way, sound overcomes discourse, impeding the actualization of that "intellectual exercise" of abstraction which is generally ascribed to language, as Morris declares:

> "My relationship to sound poetry has to do with other ways of framing meaning that aren't literally based. Every language has that – every language has onomatopoeias when things sound like what they mean. For me, sound poetry teases apart the meaning that is embedded with sound and separates that from literal meaning. So what I try to do is pull those things apart and then create a narrative arc from it. . . . Some people just want to make sounds and leave them totally open to interpretation. But I like to use sound to make specific political points. I don't want people to use language as an escape. Language is abstract, right? It only means what we ascribe to it. But people can sometimes get into, 'OK, this word means this,' and then you start getting into that intellectual exercise. I want to get away from the intellectual and into the body." ("Tracie Morris and Queen Golds" n. pag.)

This work with the body, the voice and sound in general leads Morris to create spoken word poems in which the use of sound is ever more relevant. Her first proto-sound poems are greatly influenced by the techniques applied in other fields, namely "the deconstruction of standards in jazz"

(Morris, "Poetics Statement" 210), as well as the work of sound artists like Paul Dutton and the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters. Representative of the first attempts in this direction are "Project Princess" and "A Little." The first one is a "homage to Morris's urban roots" in the form of "an ode and a rallying cry to young, black girls in Brooklyn" (Jenkins 85). From 1993 to 1998, Morris repeatedly worked on it, as the different versions attest,[16] because of the complexity of this set of prose and poetic language, with references to 1990s hip-hop idioms and misogynous culture. The performance overturns the stereotypical image of the black teenage woman as a "chicken-head" (see M.D. Jones 190 and Shonekan 102-110, 190) by means of an intense work on the musicality and aural semantic of words, since "familiar speech sets in motion something close to glossolalia by way of accent, slur, stutter, backtracking, striation, and telescoping tempo" (Hume 421). The second one, "A Little" (2002), addresses the sexual abuse of a little girl and is entirely built on the combination of only six words: "I am just a little girl." The expressive power of voice and sound prevails, once again, on the "cognitive-inducing text," as Morris reveals:

> I came up with the notion (for myself) that the physicality of words would drive the poem, not the text, not even the context. Without thinking of the words, the hearer is with the body and since in this poem, the body of the subject is the focus of impact – where the story is – the inability of the listener to escape into the mind underscores the character's vulnerability, her inability to escape. (Morris, "Poetics Statement" 211)

In other poems the shifting from music to poetry, and from lyrics to text, is pivotal. This is the case with works like "Chain Gang" (2006)[17] and "The Mrs. Gets Her Ass Kicked, (aka Heaven)" (2008), which clearly refer to popular songs with a strong cultural resonance, such as Sam Cooke's "Chain Gang" (1960)[18] and Irving Berlin's[19] "Cheek to Cheek" (1935).[20] Starting from the original lyrics, Morris samples a line or a whole stanza as a basis for her poems, since what matters are not the words on their own, but "the version as sung, the particular sound of them even more than the text (in terms of visceral recognition) that determines their value" (212). An example is the text of "The Mrs. Gets Her Ass Kicked, (aka Heaven)":

Heaven, I'm in heaven
And my heart beats so that I can hardly speak
And I can't describe the happiness that I seek
When we're out / when we're out / when we're out / when we're out

Hea-ven, I-I-I'm in heaven / and my **hard bea'** / my heart / my-my-**heart**
And I can't describe the hap' / and I can't describe / the
And I can't describe / heaven / I-I-I'm in heaven
And my-my / my-eye-heaven / I-I-I'm in
Hea-vin' / m-my-my / **I-I-awe-awe** / can't hardly speak.
(qtd. in Jenkins 123 – bold print mine)

Morris uses different stylistic techniques of the African American oral tradition[21] to move from the dreamlike love story, that the song recalls, to the nightmare of the physical abuse here represented. The expressive power of the performance completely relies on the changes in tone, voice, pitch, and intonation that interchange with Morris's "singing to unvoice sounds by introducing sonic sounds in their place, adopted from the polyrhythmic syncopations and scratching procedure used in hip-hop" (125). In addition to the beating on her chest to stress the rising tension, silences are frantically broken by the use of multiple glottal stops, "as a method illustrating the syncopation used in Jazz Poetry and the polyrhythmic syncopations of hip-hop" (124). To mark the climax of physical violence – expressed in the lines "and hard bea'," "I-I-awe-awe" and "can't hardly speak" – there is a shift in the words, so that "heartbeat" becomes "hard-bea'" and the first-person pronoun "I" turns into "awe." This alteration represents Tracie Morris's attempt to use "humor to show horror" (Hume 417), which is a stratagem taken from the Blues tradition.[22] Morris also plays with the text in order to deconstruct the sentences, the words and the syllables into smaller units that, completely deprived of their semantic meaning, freely reverberate thanks to those strategies "of speaking and 'voicing' that follow from specifically African American experience" (Crown, "'Choice Voice Noise'" 220). In these terms, the combination of "disjunctive sound play" with vocal virtuosity posits Morris among those "experimentalist black poets [who] understand the human voice's capacity for dissociation and

disarticulation as a reservoir for unclaimed experiences produced by ruptures of the African diaspora" (219-220). Hence, the combined intervention of a language-based poetic with a speech-based African American tradition allows Morris to develop what Crown calls the "epistemology of sound" (220). An ideal condition for both sound and voice to gain the right to speak for themselves as subjects of their own discourse and knowledge, by actually taking possession of the body of the performer: "Exploiting the physical contingency and collaborative nature of performance – the open room, the microphone, and the audience response – Morris allows sounds to possess her voice in order to speak their own irruptive and precious knowledge" (223).

Sound Poetry and African American Aesthetic

Morris's work on voice and sound in relation to the body, the written text and the hearer results in the creation of a type of sound poetry which could be ideally situated in-between the Western and the African American traditions of orality and performance. Orality is a fundamental element in sound poetry, given that sound poems are "experimental language-based texts that disrupt the 'natural speech rhythms' of the poet who uses his or her words, in much the same way as jazz poets, blues singers, and hip-hop artists, to situate their narratives in larger societal discourses" (Jenkins 115). These poems embody the perfect bond between literacy and music, a combination that was made popular by the Beats but which also runs through the history of Western literature, as widely documented in Steve McCaffery's *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue* (1978). In this study, McCaffery charts the main historical phases of the evolution of this genre, namely "the ancient and medieval practices of chant; the European avant-garde's experiments with the acoustic, nonsemantic properties of language; and the electrical and technological experience of the 1950s and beyond" (Perloff 97-98). Such an extended time-frame tells the story of a difficult but powerful relationship between the aural, sonic, and musical realm of sound and poetry "within a culture that so readily and pervasively privileges the eye over the ear" (Kahn and Whitehead 4).

In *Sound Poetry and the Musical Avant-Garde: A Musicologist's Perspective*, Nancy Perloff claimed that, since the peculiar characteristic of sound poetry is "to work between media" in the attempt to "incorporate sounds produced by different kinds of musical instruments and by virtuosic vocal techniques," scholars tend to relate this kind of poetry especially to the experimental efforts of the 20th-century European and Russian Avant-garde, as well as to the more contemporary Spoken Word Poetry: with the avant-garde movements, sound poetry shares the effort "to encompass all sounds," while challenging the "traditional distinctions between sound and speech, sound and music, sound and noise, music and noise" (97). Poets, therefore, started to explore "a radically new conception of poetic sound," using performance as the ideal field to probe "the limits of intelligibility and referentiality" in language (97, 98). Moreover, during the 1950s sound poetry rapidly developed, inasmuch as

> poets performing in this genre in the United States began using their poems to bridge the gap between oral tradition and folklore. Through revolutionary dialogues which produced new symbolic meanings situated in the speaker's current day context, the use of sound in poetry became part of the poet's language game in which sounding letters and words contributed to the quality of the poem, by enabling new meanings of words to surface. (Jenkins 112-113)

This poetic practice, so deeply rooted in sound, quickly began to be "an extension of the oral tradition as a form of storytelling and entertainment among marginalized groups" (McCaffery and Nichol 1978). Moving in parallel with the sophisticated elaborations on sound, there is Performance, a multi-genre form of art extensively used by the Beats during their poetry readings to break "the status quo established by both the academy and white, middle-class culture"; for this reason, they took their readings outside "academic settings in order to encourage experimentation and reach nonacademic audiences" (Somers-Willett 52). Moreover, the Beats' performances exhibited a total adhesion to black aesthetic,[23] not only to rouse audiences through the use of the African American oratory technique of call-and-response, but also to reflect "a cultural dialectic between black and white artists and their audiences," in the attempt to resist dominant

postwar culture (54, 55). However, the man who really explored the communicative possibilities of poetry through the use of action and voice was LeRoi Jones – later Amiri Baraka. In the 1960s he left the Beats and found the Black Arts movement which was willing to help "popular poetry gain favor not only among black authors but also, and perhaps more importantly, among black audiences through performance" (57). As a result, poetry readings were turned into events that engaged with the physical context. It was time for drama to intersect poetry readings, blurring the boundaries between the theatrical and the poetic,[24] while poets looked to the work of jazz musicians,[25] since jazz was "perceived as a more significant social critique of an oppressive social structure" (Thomas 291). The interconnection between political engagement and hybridization of poetry with jazz motifs and techniques lies at the core of Baraka's "physical" poems. For Baraka, poetry is a form of action with a concrete function. Poems are physical entities which may be turned into "personal forces" when the poet directly addresses the audience to raise dismay in order to let people gain awareness (292). To cause such a shock, Baraka used to overdramatize the rhetorical tone of his verses while projecting violent images to demand people's attention by almost literally throwing words in their face. However, performance is also a fundamental element in spoken word poetry.

This historical, literary and artistic tradition sets the cultural *milieu* for Morris's work while providing a framework of contrasting critical tendencies and discourses which develops tensions and frictions reflected in her poetry. Morris, indeed, tries to find a balance in a play of opposites: popular and high culture; visual and aural; mind and body; free experimentation and the need for structure and form; not to mention "the rigid binarism between speech and writing, orality and literacy, and vocal 'expression' and written 'experiment,'" that has been addressed by African American literature with a predilection for "a speech-based poetics, while excluding from consideration 'more writerly texts'" (Crown, "'Choice Voice Noise'" 224). The prevailing of orality, therefore, empowers the African American heritage and fosters the countercultural discourse of the "colonized," the "indigenous," the "Other" (224-225). On the contrary, in Western tradition the primacy of the written text has a millennial

tradition, that can be traced back to Aristotelian thought, and has also achieved resounding success in contemporary literary criticism (see Novak 24), with its bias against the oral realization mode, in so far as it does not satisfy the criteria applied to written poetry.

Given such a dynamic and controversial situation, the publishing of *Rhyme Scheme* in 2012 seems an evaluation of the poetic work done over ten years:

> As *Intermission* before, *Rhyme Scheme* is a beginning too. I'm fleshing out the debate between all the poetry influences/ideas/responses of a dozen or so years in my head, an admittedly selective group of thoughts, and getting clarity. I guess the next step is fearlessly accepting that voice but who knows what it'll sound like? I've been surprised before. (Morris, *Rhyme Scheme* 8)

The last poem, "Dystopia: Vertical," is the only dystopian text of the collection. Entirely different from the others, it is an example of Morris's incursion into the field of Afrofuturism. Together with "Mother Earth" and "AfroFuture – Dystopic Unity," it was first published in 2002 in *Afrofuturism: Social Text*. The review, edited by sociologist and writer Alondra Nelson, fueled the debate, which started in 1998, on the relations between technology, fiction and African American diasporic culture. In that context, the three poems offered a poetic point of view on the analysis of the old stereotypes and cultural clichés which were still being spread by the new technologies (see Nelson 1-15; Dery 179-222). "Dystopia" is a hallucinatory nightmare of the planet ravaged by an inconsiderate use of technology, which has intoxicated the air and polluted the soil. The idea of desolation is given by a sequence of seven stanzas that, on a vertical descent from the unnatural stillness of "a rainbowed sky" goes down through "terra vibratos" – spams of nature's "degraded lungs" – to the "world's crust," where even the "graves" have been contaminated by the waste(s) of "reactors balloon" (Morris, *Rhyme Scheme* 90). The vertiginous dive to the moral and physical abyss in which both the Earth and human population have fallen is given by the vivid images, almost creepy photographs, that each stanza creates in only two lines. The last line of the poem marks the epilogue of such a dystopian version of the future. The picture of ancient dead fists

angrily shaken conveys Morris's indignation and rage for such hypothetical but plausible devastation. The poem, far from being a dystopian manifesto of Morris's adhesion to Afrofuturism, is more a conclusive sample of the artistic research that subtends the whole collection. As Terrance Hayes writes, in the foreword to the collection, "*Rhyme Scheme* concerns both 'the turned around image' and the turned around phrase. It is as much about transformative looking/seeing as it is about transformative listening/hearing. Thus, the audio and text here dub, sample and reconfigure language" (Hayes, in Morris, *Rhyme Scheme* 5). This intertwining between "transformative looking/seeing" and "listening/hearing" completes the first part of Morris's poetic and artistic experimentation, that since 2016 has notably increased. Thanks to her teaching position at the Pratt Institute (NY) as a professor of Performance Studies, Morris's awareness of her role of both poet-performer and scholar has heightened, as shown by her two most recent two collections of poems, *Handholding: 5 Kinds* (2016) and *Hard Korè, Poèmes: Perform Poems of Mythos and Place* (2017), which keenly mediate between popular entertainment and intellectual commitment.

Notes

[1] The list goes from the common poetry readings to the folkloric traditional poetic works, embedding Slam poetry, Performance Poetry, Sound Poetry, and Dub Poetry (just to mention the main ones).

[2] "When you're performing, that's also part of the creative process. It's not just a presentation of a finished piece. [When reading,] poets will find themselves leaving out words, adding words. And if you leave out a word on the same poem over a period of time, I challenge you to think that maybe that word shouldn't be there. Performance is another step of editing. Sometimes words will flow from you that need to be added. Most of the time, there are parts that you skip over. But, either way, writing a poem continues as you perform it" (Holman n. pag.).

[3] "Can a poetic point of view bring us closer together? Is this what we mean when we read a poem? Clearly people besides the poet get something out of reading the poem, that's why books are published, work is recorded and people tour. But does this generate community? I guess what I'm asking is: What's the difference between participating in a poetic 'moment' as part of a community instead of that as a consumer?" (Morris, "Journal" n. pag.).

[4] "The Brooklyn Academy of Music in Fort Green"; "the BAM Café"; "the NuYorican Poets Café and the Brooklyn Moon Café" (Crown, "The Spoken Word Poetry of Tracie Morris" 213, 214, 219).

[5] On the grounds of her former researches on African and African American Studies, and Women's Studies, Morris's last ones provide a personal reading of what it means to be "Black," with an in-depth analysis of Black speech acts as well as a philosophical meta-reading of her own *poïesis*, which emerges from a virtual dialogue with some important thinkers – among them the British philosopher John L. Austin.

[6] Policies developed both by arts organizations, like the St. Mark's Poetry Project, and nonprofits poetry institutions, such as the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) and NYSCA (New York State Council of the Arts), just to mention the more active (Aptowicz 17-19).

[7] "the current New York City Poetry Slam Movement owes a great artistic debt to three major 20th-century New York City-associated arts movements: the Harlem Renaissance of the '20s, the Beat Generation of the '50s and '60s, and finally the hip-hop culture of the '70s and '80s" (Aptowicz 4).

[8] "Rather than engaging in the relatively passive dynamics of reading print or listening to a poetry reading, slam poetry, facilitated by performance, commands that the poet, poem, and audience have an immediate and active critical relationship with one another" (Somers-Willett 20).

[9] With the expression "ancient oral tradition" I am alluding to the origin of the oral tradition as it is conceived in Western culture and, by extension, I am also referring to the so called Homeric question, and the consequent debate, between the nineteenth and the twentieth century, that saw many scholars arguing on the relationship between orality, epic poetry, and the written tradition. For more on that debate see, among others, Parry, Ong. In relation to the poetic rift between orality and literacy, see also Nagy, Bakker, and Montanari, Rengakos, Tsagalis.

[10] For a detailed biography of the author, see the section "Biography" in Tracie Morris's official website (http://www.traciemorris.com/).

[11] Like the use of the haiku poetic structure, for example.

[12] "the wonder of her performances is the sheer speed with which she enunciates her puns, en-jambs her syllables, and syncopates her phrasing. This form is not new; it's ancient among the verbal tricksters. The Greeks called this kind of pattern without pause *pignos*, a double-quick delivery that leaves one out of breath. . . . Amazingly, a poem's savvy insights, fresh in code and lingo, are never sacrificed by the speed of delivery. For all this, Morris epitomizes the spoken word artist" (Anglesey 77).

[13] "There was something hidden within the rhyme I was hearing as a teenager and young adult, and I was trying to articulate what it was, operating from an essential premise that there was nothing wrong with the way people in my neighborhood spoke" (Morris, "Poetic Statement" 210).

[14] "I started working toward sound poetry, consciously at least, through hip-hop. I made awkward associations between rhyme schemes in hip-hop and other things I was studying, such as code switching in the Puerto Rican community, which I was learning about in my Black and Puerto Rican Studies classes at Hunter College" (Morris, "Poetic Statement" 210).

[15] "intermission (n.): early 15c., 'fact of intermitting, temporary pause,' from Latin *intermissionem* (nominative *intermissio*) 'a breaking off, discontinuance, interruption,' noun of action from past participle stem of *intermittere* 'to leave off, leave an interval,' from *inter* 'between' (see *inter-*) + *mittere* 'let go, send' (see *mission*). Meaning 'lapse of time between events' is from 1560s; specifically of performances (originally plays, later movies, etc.) from 1854. 'Intermission is used in US for what we call an *interval* (in a musical or dramatic performance). Under the influence of LOVE OF THE LONG WORD, it is beginning to infiltrate here and should be repelled; our own word does very well' [H.W. Fowler, 'Modern English Usage,' 1926]" (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

[16] Written texts for the publishing appeared in *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poet's Café* (1994), *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* (1996), and *United States of Poetry* (1996). There is also a "hip-hop version" of the poem that has been prepared for a video, which was originally recorded in 1998 and uploaded to *YouTube* only in 2010 (Jenkins 85-86).

[17] For the story of Morris's idea to create her own version of the song, see Crown, "'Choice Voice Noise'" 222-224.

[18] "Between the 1940s and 1960s, artists like Wilson Pickett, Sam Cooke, and Otis Redding charged the original sound of the blues with more excitement, adjusting their sound for club appearances and local sock hops. This sound stepped ahead of the blues by adding a pulsing beat and a steady groove to an already polyrhythmic music. They brought in the participatory essence of gospel music, which allowed them to throw themselves into the lyrics and the performance. Here there was heart, spirit, and love, redirected from God and heaven to walking in this world" (Shonekan 32-33). See also Appiah and Gates, Wallenstein.

[19] A Jewish immigrant, Berlin was a leading figure of the Tin Pan Alley second generation of songwriters, "mostly Jewish immigrants" who "were influenced by vaudeville's ethnic songs." In the early Twenties, Berlin became famous, among others, for "the more permissive tone and lyrics of vaudeville novelty songs, creating a new genre of popular song that celebrated the glamour and excitement of big city life, including its romantic and erotic possibilities" (McCracken 109).

[20] The reason for a counter-narration of the renowned song, together with the audio-file of the performance, is available on Tracie Morris's webpage in the online *PennSound Archive*.

[21] On a visual level, the wide use of mimicry, gestures, and facial expressions comes from the tradition of the Black Minstrel shows, that were answering back to the white man's "attempt to reproduce some easily identifiable characteristic of 'the darky'": "white per-

formers using blackface to do 'imitations of Negro life' appeared in America around 1800, usually in solo performances," with the intention of creating a parody of black people by exaggerating some of their physical attributes (L. Jones 83-84). Morris's appropriation of Berlin's song, to build her own counter-narration of the white upper-middle-class love story, recalls the black shows' appropriation of the "white burlesques of Negro mores"; to wit, "black minstrel shows were also what might be called parodies, or exaggerations, of certain aspects of Negro life in America. But in one sense the colored minstrel was poking fun at himself, and in another and probably more profound sense he was poking fun at the white man" (85). Moreover, the chest beating recalls Bobby McFerrin's performances, which, during the 1980s, made him a popular vocalist in the United States, while, on a sonic level, the use of glottal stops and "non-word" sounds, in addition to sound substitutions, vocalizations, silences, and sound distortions, is typical of hip-hop performers (Morris, "Conceptual Poesis of Silence" 389-394).

[22] The whole performance is a gigantic oxymoron, created by the intertwining of two opposite narrations. On the one hand, there is the dreamlike love story, while, on the other hand, there is the telling of the dreadful marital abuse. For more on blues techniques to convey two different meanings at the same time, see Mauro 149-182.

[23] As shown by Ginsberg's first performance of his long poem *Howl* in 1955, at the Six Gallery Reading in San Francisco (see Somers-Willett 53-54). See also Gingell, Wendt.

[24] "Thinking of a poem as script for performance instead of merely a textual entity is also a tenet of the Black Arts movement. . . . Black Art strove instead to be theatrical, ephemeral, and dialectic. Black Arts practitioners called art defined by its process, not its final object or artifact, 'nonobjective.' . . . poetry existed not in textual form but in the dialectic between author and audience that happened in performance. A single Black Arts poem can vary in expression and meaning each time it is performed not only because of performative improvisation but also because of its reception by different audiences" (Somers-Willett 62).

[25] "For Langston Hughes and Rudolph Fisher, jazz is the backdrop for the desperate urbane comedy of the Harlem Renaissance. For the poets of the 1950s 'Beat Generation' and the militant Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and '70s, jazz is perceived as a more significant social critique of an oppressive social structure. Some of the works of Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Bob Kaufman, Larry Neal, and Henry Dumas explore a spiritual dimension of jazz that can be compared to an almost religious fervor, with all of the many implications of that term. For these writers, the jazz musician is not merely the custodian of an authentic folk culture or even the conscious avant-garde artist; he is the leader of rebellion against postwar conformity and the spiritual agent of the politically powerless" (Thomas 291).

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Valerio Massimo De Angelis

What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Italian American Studies – Now

In March 2014, the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of the City University of New York (Queens College) organized a major international conference in Bellagio, *Trascending Borders, Bridging Gaps: Italian Americana, Diasporic Studies, and the University Curriculum* entirely funded by the Rockfeller Foundation. On that occasion, eighteen scholars met "in order to analyze the current status of the field of Italian-American studies in both Italy and the United States and to examine further the possibilities of what the future might hold" (Gardaphé, Tamburri vii). Even though, following a long neglect,[1] the field of Italian American Studies (or Italian/American Studies, as Anthony J. Tamburri proposed a few years ago)[2] had already dramatically expanded over the former couple of decades, the conference somehow marked a significant turn. The conference saw the contribution of eminent figures such as, beyond Tamburri himself, Fred L. Gardaphé, Robert Viscusi, Djelal Kadir, Joseph Sciorra, Mary Jo Bona, Paul Giordano, Peter Carravetta, Marina Camboni, Donatella Izzo, Giorgio Mariani and Maddalena Tirabassi; it also helped establish a much more structured and constant collaboration between the two sides of the Atlantic that somehow re-oriented the critical approaches (in all the sub-areas of the field and in their inter/trans-disciplinary connections) by (re)instating a distinctly (yet not monolithically reified) Italian view. This was of course also the effect of the paradigm shift that at the turn of the millennium has systematically redeployed the various fields of migration studies as more general and "globalized" diaspora studies, so that the stressed part of the (no longer) hyphenated adjective is now the first rather than the second.

In one of the essays of the Bellagio Conference proceedings, Marina Camboni reads Robert Viscusi's *ellis island* (2011) precisely as a perfect instance of this redefinition of migrant/diasporic identities and of their representation, which is at the same time also what is happening today to

the field of Italian American studies itself. If Viscusi somehow frees the Italian American migrant from the fixed fate of a "total uprooting and a one way journey from the home of origin to the new home," turning him/her into the embodiment of "an interrupted story" who is also "the connector of lands, language and cultures" (Camboni 62), this may positively be read as a meta-commentary on the future of the disciplines gathered under the label of Italian American studies. The latter, in fact, are deemed one way or another to transcend the traditional bi-directional tension between "Italy" and "the USA" that often entailed in the past a hypostatization and simplification of both signs,[3] by relocating it within the complex network of interconnections linking on the one hand all the diasporic movements of people whose recent or remote roots are grounded in Italy, and on the other this larger Italian diaspora to all the other modern and postmodern experiences of migration that can legitimately be called diasporic.

Needless to say, this reappraisal of the object of Italian American studies most seriously calls for a re-semanticization and re-contextualization of whatever we talk about when we talk about diasporas, which may involve that planetary dimension (see Elias and Moraru) which has now become rather fashionable after the term "globalization" has acquired a fairly negative connotation. This shift, however, also requires the adoption of a renewed comparative stance that may help avoid the danger of homogenizing the most diverse migratory process by enclosing them into an undifferentiated global diasporic system of fluctuations – that necessity of a "comparative, transnational, and transoceanic critical exchange" Cristina Lombardi-Diop ties to "a postcolonial approach to Italian diaspora studies" (92), as long as this approach is self-consciously double-edged, and is able to clearly stage the contradictory position of "Italianness" in the crux of colonial policies and cultures where the Italians and their descendants may be either their (never really or totally) "passive" objects or their active subjects. As a matter of fact, the comparative/postcolonial perspective implies an even greater attention to the dimension of race that, albeit being present in almost every study on the Italian migration to the United States, has become central especially after Thomas Guglielmo's *White on Arrival* and the collected essays edited by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno *Are Italians White?* (both books were published in 2003). As for the Italian side, a recent relevant contribution has been *Parlare di razza*, the book edited in 2012 by Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh and Anna Scacchi. And just as race

as a cultural construction is especially central in any analysis of the Italian American experience, so is national identity, as Peter Carravetta argues in *After Identity: Migration, Critique, Italian American Culture* (2017), where he states that the nation-state paradigm must be deconstructed when studying the Italian American migration (like any other migration), because it mainly is an ideological screen hiding the real post-national and trans-ethnic struggles of economic and technological power (which most Italian American contemporary literature engages by questioning, destructuring and hybridizing old-fashioned fictions of a stable ethnic identity).

In January 2018 the Calandra Institute hosted in New York City a second *Transcending Borders, Bridging Gaps* meeting. In this case, rather than a conference, what various scholars from the USA, Italy and also the UK met for was a three-day series of workshops on how to re-think the strategies needed to expand both the research methodologies and the pedagogical practices in the field of Italian American and/or Diaspora Studies, and to implement their presence in the university curricula. The final outcome of the meeting was the creation of an Italian American Collaborative whose aim is not only that of fostering and sustaining "an ever-widening collaboration among universities, organizations, groups, and individuals who are committed to Italian American Studies and the study of the Italian Diaspora as seen in its migrations," but also to further explore the study of the "intersections of these transnational migrations with other diasporas" (from the "Mission Statement" of the Italian American Collaborative, drafted in February 2018). All this showed how the Calandra Institute has by now become a central point of reference and a driving force for an extremely diversified variety of initiatives, as it may easily be inferred by the mere list of events organized or sponsored in the month of September 2018 – about 40, more than one each day – and by the role of the Institute in promoting activities abroad like the Italian Diaspora Studies Summer Seminar held in June 2018 at the University of Rome Three (formerly hosted by the University of Calabria).

Just like the Bellagio event, the *Transcending Borders, Bridging Gaps 2.0* highlighted the new directions Italian American Studies are now taking, and the mere fact that such a realignment has occurred in the span of only four years attests the vitality and richness of the lines of research and of the cultural politics that the Italian American transnational collective enterprise bolstered by the Calandra Institute has managed to achieve. Besides further

exploring the global diasporic dimension of the Italian migrations to the USA and elsewhere in a comparative perspective, as witnessed by the three major international conferences on the *Diaspore Italiane – Italy in Movement* organized in less than a year and a half (in Melbourne in April 2018, in New York in November 2018, in Genova in June 2019),[4] this reconfiguration aims at retrieving aspects and factors of the processes involving the Italian mobilities to the United States that have been hitherto underrated, if not utterly ignored. Some of the most recent publications in the field have indeed addressed issues that have come to the fore only in the last five years or so, and that have been investigated in the Calandra Institute meeting, such as the self-representation of Italian Americans as "whites" in public culture (Vellon), the cultural impact of Italian "ethnicity" in US consumer society (Cinotto, ed., *Making Italian America*), the interethnic dialogue and mutual influence between the Italian American and African American communities (Celenza, Gennari, and Pardini), Italian American food culture (Cinotto, *The Italian American Table*), the spreading of Italian vernacular music in the USA (Frasca), the material representations of the Italian Catholic culture in New York "vernacular sacred sites" (Sciorra xxiii), the Italian migrant women's role in the American and global diasporas (Luconi and Varricchio) and their artistry in needlework (Sciorra and Giunta).

The most outstanding synthesis of these new trends is probably the two-volume anthology *New Italian Migrations to the United States* (2017), edited by Laura Ruberto and Joseph Sciorra, which showcases essays on the Italian and US politics of migration after World War 2, new second-generation youth sub-culture, the role of Italian American politicians in Italian elections, the much more than virtual communities created by Italian American radios, the image of Italian women in US cinema, the "translation zone" where Italian popular musical genres are assimilated into the American musical landscape and Italian cuisine becomes Italian American. Particularly relevant is Tamburri's essay at the end of the second volume that proposes to redefine the label "Italian writer," so as not to make it applicable only to "Italy-born, -bred, and –residential" authors (Tamburri, "Afterword" 200), and to turn it instead into a much more flexible and multidirectional category – and thus including also non-"Italian" American writers who, like Jumpha Lahiri, now write in Italian, and possibly former immigrants to Italy who started to write in Italian and

later migrated to the United States, like the Algerian-born Amara Lakhous.[5] If Ruberto and Sciorra's anthology somehow sets the agenda for the future of Italian American and Italian Diaspora Studies, Maddalena Tirabassi and Alvise Del Pra's *La meglio Italia* (2014) examines the 21st-century Italian migrations to assess their continuities and discontinuities with the past, in the context of rapidly changing geopolitical and ideological boundaries that are being torn down and redrawn under the pressure of economic crises and the new diasporas from Africa and the Middle East.

Witnessing to the gradual "empowering" of Italian American studies in the Italian academic world (and in public culture too)[6] is the special issue *Riflessi di un'America italiana: Studi sulla cultura italoamericana negli Stati Uniti* of the journal of North-American Studies *Ácoma* (vol. 24, no. 13, Fall-Winter 2017), while the same journal had been severely criticized by Tamburri himself for not having included Italian American literature in a section on contemporary ethnic literatures in the USA published in its Spring-Summer 2006 issue no. 31 (see Tamburri, *Re-reading Italian Americana* 8).[7] In the special 2017 issue, Donatella Izzo draws a precise picture, provided with a theoretically dense framework, of the state of the art in Italian American Studies, to which the present article only aspires to be a modest adjunct. Other important events that confirm the consolidation of the field in Italy are the creation, at the end of 2015, of the Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi ItaloAmericani (CISIA) at the University of Macerata, thanks to the efforts of Marina Camboni, now its Honorary President, and the strong inclination towards Italian-American matters of the Centro di Ricerca Interdipartimentale di Studi Amrericani (CRISA), founded in 2010 on Cristina Giorcelli's initiative at the University of Rome Three, which in 2016 held a major international conference on *Re-Mapping Italian America* (the proceedings have been published by Bordighera Press). Both Centers, besides, conceptualize "Italian American" in a circum-Atlantic horizon, involving the whole American continent, in the wake of the long standing tradition of Italian "American Studies" inaugurated by the very first Dipartimento di Studi Americani in Italy (originally at the University of Rome La Sapienza, and then at the University of Rome Three) under the guidance of Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli – something that anticipated the current preoccupations for a non-imperialistic, non-US-centered vision of American Studies.

The contribution of the Italian angle of vision to this decentralization of

(Italian) American Studies can be detected in the two conferences organized by the CISIA in Macerata: *Democracies on the Move: Citizenships, Languages and Migrations across Italy, Europe, and the Americas* (May 2017) and *Nuove migrazioni, nuovi ritorni: Le diaspore italiane nelle Americhe dopo il 1945* (June 2018). The latter, besides presenting Ruberto and Sciorra's anthology, featured a number of contributions which crossed multiple boundaries, from the geographical ones between Italy and the Americas on one side and the various sub-spaces of the American continent (especially the USA and Argentina), to those between scholarly research, personal memoir and creative expression (literary and musical). Furthermore, the conference pointed out another feature of contemporary Italian diasporas, that is the growing importance placed on the use of Italian as a literary language (see Tamburri, *Un biculturalismo negato*) by both Italian migrants to America and former Italian American immigrants, or their descendants, who have come back to Italy and retrieved the *lingua madre* – not to mention the relatively small, yet strongly influential (given their academic role) number of Italian scholars who, like Paolo Valesio, have expatriated to America but keep writing poetry or fiction in Italian. Among them is also Ernesto Livorni, who took part in the *Nuove migrazioni, nuovi ritorni* conference, an eminent Italianist who teaches at the University of Wisconsin and publishes his poetry in Italian, where he often autobiographically meditates on the contemporary experience of the migrant/expat caught in an incessant back-and-forth motion (both physically and psychologically) between the two sides of the Atlantic.

This movement can be detected, analyzed and interpreted in the totality of its complex articulation only when the view from *this* side is added, and when not only the migrant subject is visibly present in the mobile landscape of Italian dipaosras, but also the families and communities that, though staying at "home," remain in touch across the ocean(s), thus building up a two-way exchange of experiences. And the "back" leg of the movement of all the people who did not permanently stay in America must also be better foregrounded, to make all its distinctive features come fully to light, in order to ascertain the ways in which the migrants who finally returned to Italy had to readjust to a vastly different country, which in its turn could discover how remote, in many cases, the experience of migration had actually been from the most popular images disseminated by dominant culture.

Last but not least, in this pretentious as well as crudely drawn agenda

of things to think and to do in the field of Italian American / Italian Diaspora Studies, is the investigation of the processes of reception of the Italian American material products and cultural expressions in Italy, and the re-orientation of Italian society toward the migrant communities in America they bring about. Through this reorientation of the critical gaze, the redefinition of the relationships between the individual subject and the different national and local allegiances his/her identity is transnationally built *across* in a never ending dialogue and/or struggle can become what we talk about when we talk about Italian American Studies – now.[8]

Notes

[1] If Italian American migrations to the US have gained the attention of historians, social scientists and anthropologists almost since the very beginning, with books such as Antonio Mangano's *Sons of Italy* (1917), Enrico C. Sartorio's *Social and Religious Life of Italians in America* (1918), and Philip M. Rose's *The Italian in America* (1922), only in 1974 the very first extensive study of Italian American literature was published, Rose Basile Green's *The Italian-American Novel*. And only in the 1990s a substantial corpus of volume-length literary studies finally appeared, with significant contributions from Italian scholars like Martino Marazzi and Francesco Durante.

[2] In the preface to the Bellagio conference proceedings we still see instead the much abhorred hyphen, whose substitution with the slash Tamburri already motivated in 1991 by claiming the need to cast "by the wayside any notion of universality or absoluteness with regard to the regulated use of the hyphen in adjectival phrases denoting national origin, ethnicity, race, or gender" (Tamburri, *To Hyphenate or Not to Hyphenate* 18) – while the slash should signal not the separation but the possibility of dynamically alternating between the two areas of identity, and therefore challenging their representativeness, as Giorgio Mariani states in his essay in the proceedings.

[3] The two classic studies that at the end of last century deconstructed the dominant semiotics that up to then had forced Italian American identity into a binary dialectic of assimilation/irreducibility between the two hypostasized signs "Italian" and "American" are of course Fred L. Gardaphé's *Italian Signs, American Streets* (1996) and Anthony Julian Tamburri's *A Semiotic of Ethnicity* (1998).

[4] The titles of the conferences making up this "Symposium on Three Continents" are *Living Transcultural Spaces*, *Transnationalism and Questions of identity* and *Between Immigration and Historical Amnesia*.

[5] On contemporary "Italian" American literature, and more generally on the literature of the Italian diaspora, see also Fontanella, and Bonaffini and Perricone.

[6] One major evidence can be the exhibition *L'Italia a Hollywood*, featured at the Museo

Salvatore Ferragamo in Florence (May 2018-March 2019), which showcases a rich and varied reconstruction not only of the contribution of Italian actors such as Rodolfo Valentino to the birth and development of early American cinema, but also of the intricate two-way dialogue between US movie industry and Italy as both a reservoir of settings and artistic suggestions (as in Henry King's *Romola*, shot in Florence in 1924) and the country which actually invented a commercial cinema that managed to combine popular success and aesthetic sophistication (as in the case of the very first "kolossal" in film history, *Cabiria*, directed in 1914 by Giovanni Pastrone with Gabriele D'Annunzio "epic/poetic" screenwriting and intertitles) and that powerfully influenced subsequent American cinema. The catalogue, edited by Stefania Ricci, is much more than a simple description of the materials displayed in the exhibition, and the essays by authors like Giuliana Muscio, Maddalena Tirabassi and John Paul Russo offer an in-depth analysis of the transnational social and cultural dynamics that shaped Italian-American relationships in the first decades of the twentieth century.

[7] The first relevant 21st-century extended reconsideration of Italian American literature in an Italian journal may be found in the Forum *The Emerging Canon in Italian-American Literature*, ed. by John Paul Russo and Leonardo Buonomo in issue 21-22 of *RSAJournal* (2010-11).

[8] As a further evidence of the vitality of the field in Italy, I came to know of the publication of two new books, the collection *Incontri italoamericani*, ed. by Michele Bottalico, and Giuliana Muscio's *Napoli/New York/Hollywood*, when this essay was already in its first proofs, and I did not even have the time to read them. To these I must add, from the US side, the equally new, and ponderously exhaustive (almost 40 essays), *Routledge History of Italian Americans*, ed. by William J. Connell and Stanislao G. Pugliese.

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L'inedito

Anna Scacchi

"Chained to Hope": A Short Story by Noni Carter

I met Noni Carter in Paris last October. We were both speakers in a workshop on "Slavery, Memory, and Literature" organized by Aarhus University and Columbia University and I was immediately struck by this young woman's poise and academic brilliance. Many outstanding papers were presented during the two-day conference – which included such renowned scholars as Anne Bailey, Laura Murphy, and Domna Stanton, just to name a few – but hers was closely connected to my own current research on the memory of slavery and the representation of black bodies in pain, and I found it both profound and moving. Her reading of M. NourbeSe Philip's experimental poem *Zong!* and investigation of the genealogical arc of the trope of the slave ship from Enlightenment literary works to contemporary artistic practice were deeply engaging. Particularly interesting to me was her focus on the expendability of the black body and the fabrication of blackness starting "in the belly of the ship," as the title of her presentation said. So during coffee and lunch breaks we exchanged ideas and bibliographic tips and promised to stay in touch.

To me she was an incredibly gifted PhD student, a promising scholar, a beautiful, smart black young woman with a committed soul, but I certainly did not expect that only a few weeks later I would discover there was a lot more to Noni. I was planning to send her a follow-up message and, as I had misplaced her email address, I googled her name and this is how I stumbled on the title of a novel, a contemporary narrative of slavery for young adults published by Simon & Schuster in 2010, whose author was a teenager – she was just 18 at the time – by the name of Noni Carter. I was delighted to find that the YA neoslave narrative was another mutual interest of ours. The memorialization of slavery in contemporary children's and Young Adult literature is a topic I have studied and written about

and I am constantly on the look out for new titles to add to my research corpus, yet I had not been aware of *Good Fortune*. It would certainly have caught my attention as I was investigating the discussion on how/what to tell children about the slave past which followed the release of Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* and Steve McQueen's *Twelve Years a Slave*, a discussion that was deeply influenced by Trayvon Martin's and Michael Brown's killings. I deeply regretted that I missed it, since it offered the unique perspective of a teenager in a scene dominated by adults discussing how best narrate the past to kids.

Good Fortune, which Noni Carter began writing at 12 and completed by the age of 15, expanding it from the original short story format to an almost 500-page novel, places great emphasis on the power of education, as it was to be expected in a work by an amazingly young achiever, but the message it spreads is also about the importance of cherishing and learning from the ancestors, who never gave up hope or stopped fighting in spite of their excruciating circumstances. The novel won the Parents' Choice Gold Award and was used in high schools to encourage the young to value their heritage and believe in their dreams. It tells the story of Ayanna Bahati, an African child who is kidnapped in the early 1800 and taken across the Atlantic Ocean to be sold as a slave in the US, and follows her journey into adulthood and her flight away from the dangers of the plantation to freedom, schooling and love. Carter's inspiration came from the stories her great-aunt told her when she was a child and especially that of her great-great-great grandmother Rose Caldwell who, at the age of twelve, watched her mother sail away on the Mississippi river, because she had been sold by their master, never to be seen again.

What does it take to survive such a dehumanizing pain and stay human? This was the question that the young Noni felt compelled to try and unravel through writing and one that, in spite of her age, she was able to frame and reply to in very different terms from the college mate who inspired Octavia Butler's writing of *Kindred* – the boy who could not understand resistance except as open, armed rebellion – or from Kanye West, who has recently affirmed that 400 years of slavery "sound like a choice" and can only be explained by mental enslavement. This question is still largely behind both her fiction and her research work as a scholar,

though of course her approach has become much more complex and investigates the very definition of "human," questioning its racialized Enlightenment association with literacy.

Carter's dissertation project explores scientific and literary investments in the "human," a category elaborated and debated in the scientific work of the European Enlightenment and re-scripted in recent science fiction (in literature, visual art, and performance) of the Anglophone and Francophone African diaspora. Her most recent fictional work, a YA novel which is currently being reviewed, and a SF novella which she is pitching for publication, translates into literary practice the very same inquiries into the human, with a marked gendered perspective. This is how she described to me both works:

> *Womb Talk* is both a historical and speculative Young Adult fiction epistolary novel following a year in the life of a young woman of color who writes to an aborted child as she works through the post-traumatic stress disorder surrounding the pregnancy, and contends with the sudden appearance of a ghost-like character that takes her deeply into the (troubling) folds of her family history, all the while trying to determine what "feminism" means for her. The novel treats many tangled, touchy topics – abortion, the loose definitions around "rape," sexual fluidity, mental health in People of Color communities, and what it means for a teenager (or *this* teenager) to navigate them all. *Expendability* is a wild dystopian sci-fi novella exploring what it might look like in a futuristic society for people of color to live out the legacies of black expendability (that began during the slave trade) and what this would mean for the way we love, nurture, and relate.

When Gianna Fusco and I started to work on this special issue of *RSA* on BLM and current forms of black activism in the US, I immediately thought of Noni as a possible contributor to the "unpublished manuscript section." And she was so generous as to grace our journal with a short story that speaks right to the concerns of this issue. In "Chained to Hope" we are presented with two characters, a young man, Xave, and a young woman, Gelé, who traverse the full spectrum of black life in the US. Xave is one of the million black inmates in American prisons legally enslaved under the 13th amendment, a number completely disproportionate to their

ratio in the country's population.[1] Gelé, an Ivy League graduate, works in a San Francisco corporate company, one of the handful token blacks the corporation hires. Xave has been sentenced to seventeen years for a crime that should have amounted to half the time, because of misdemeanors he committed when he was a gifted, inquiring, outspoken teenager but also a grieving boy who dropped school and ran away from home. Gelé is an achiever who has survived the death of her parents, her mother in Hurricane Katrina, her father of a heart attack, completed her education and landed a well-paid job away from Louisiana.

Xave and Gelé, though, are twins. Like the two brothers in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" they have responded to racism in different ways, Xave by falling in a mandated pattern of engulfing blackness, and ending up in solitary confinement, Gelé by distancing herself from blackness, though she refuses to "whiten" her black body and sometimes relapses into her southern drawl. Both however are isolated in a cage, literal or metaphorical. Life and the different impact anti-blackness has made on their existence have separated them but they are mysteriously connected, as, like the Marassa twins of Afro-diasporic religions, they are halves of the same whole and they strive to regain wholeness. When Gelé discovers that the company she works for is going into a new investing venture, the private prisons business, she is incensed as a black person but also deeply wounded, in ways that she cannot understand, as if their willing to profit from the labor of black bodies is connected to her not only historically, politically and culturally, but also on a personal level. She starts feeling sick and the memory of her lost brother, who disappeared from her life when she decided to attend an Ivy League university, hits in full force after years of fighting it back so as to cope with the "white" world. The physical pain she is feeling – something that neither her physician nor her therapist can explain – is Xave's, who is feverish and has gangrene on his hand because they refused to treat it. Her body is what tells her the truth, her black body acting as a conduit to wholeness. When they finally reunite, her brother has lost a hand and is a broken person, yet Gelé spots a humanity in his eyes, one which defies Western definitions of the human, as well as black superhero versions of it: "Not a 'Universal Rights Declaration' kind of

humanity. Not a Kantian humanity. Not even a Wakandian humanity. It's a humanity that this world has yet to know."

A dedication to three Garners ends the short story: Margaret, the fugitive enslaved mother who in 1856 killed her daughter and tried to kill her other children so that they would not be returned to slavery, whose story inspired Toni Morrison's *Beloved*; Eric, who in 2014 died at 43 in a chokehold, guilty of illegally peddling cigarettes, whose agony, like that of Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, and so many others, was captured in a heartbreaking video and shared on social media; Erica, his daughter, mother of two, BLM activist, who died at 27 of a heart attack. Only two of them were kin, yet Carter's dedication weaves them together into family, wonderfully chaining a long history of abuse to hope in a declaration that black lives matter.

Notes

[1] According to the NAACP, in 2014 African Americans constituted 2.3 million, or 34%, of the total 6.8 million correctional population. The 13th Constitutional Amendment reads: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

Noni Carter

Chained to Hope

If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

Lilla Watson, Murri artist
and activist

The sorcery of law {is} most instrumental when most fantastic and most violent when most spectral.

Joan Dayan, *Codes of Law, Bodies of Color*

What is this magic that our bodies keep repeating?
What is this curse that our bodies keep recycling?

Gelé

One: Xave

In this dystopian universe, there are no bedtime stories, no goodnight kisses, no safe zones to shield the young brown body, the rich black mind, the recuperating psyche. In this dystopian universe where the groping fingers of rainbows never bother to reach, bodies enter the world labeled "expendable." Bodies full of life fall limp under the invidious contradictions of the penal system. Bodies circulate to help amass wealth in the pockets of the stingy.

So here's what Xave *wants* to know: what's one to do with criminals who are so bad, they commit crimes *almost* as heinous as the ones committed

by those who continue to run the world? What to do with all these bars holding back "criminals" whose actions are *almost* as stomach-churning as these free people's crimes and their high-brow methods of touting those crimes high overhead? Their methods of concealing these crimes under the ostentatiousness of "philanthropic" work? Their manners of burying these crimes in plain sight amidst the addictive allure of royal weddings and such? Yes, Xave saw the whole "charming" debacle. Every channel he and his inmates flipped through that week, every news station, displaying the grand wedding of May 2018 like the spoils of a 17th-century adventurer/murderer, as if nothing of greater importance existed in this wide world.

And here's what Xave *already* knows: The crime they claim he committed, it's a speck of dust in the long history of unrepented and unaddressed colonial, imperial assaults on communities of color.

Xave curls into himself, lying on the side of his body in the middle of this cage's floor. It's a new, smaller, more damning cage, this one. Xave is thinking about this "speech" he had given his fellow inmates a few weeks ago, the TV going in the background, the guards telling him to shut his muzzle or else. He's missing the other inmates and the corridors of the general population like he never thought he could. In here, he's so alone sometimes he thinks the loneliness might choke him dead.

Xave makes sure, as he rocks to and fro, that he doesn't bang his injured hand against the ground, feeling a little sick to his stomach. Feeling like some type of parasite is crawling through his belly, wreaking havoc. Xave doesn't even bother telling the staff about his stomach bug; they'll laugh at him. He closes his eyes, instead, to the hoary grey of the room that greets him day in, day out, like a melancholic lover, staring him in the eyes when he wakes. He clasps his shins with his arms, wrapping them tightly around his legs. The thick wisps of hair growing in on his chin scrape his kneecaps while his crooked, bitten fingernails dig deeply into the darker spots on his elbows. Lying there, he's wishing he could be in that TV room again, surrounded by his crew, "preaching relevance" as they had come to call it in his seven years in this dump. He couldn't help it when the "relevance" came spurting out, his version of "history" stirring on his tongue. Like they used to on his Daddy's tongue. Like they used to in Mr. MacDaniel's dope history class he'd taken before Mr. MacDaniels was fired for being

"too fiery," before Xave dropped school, running from the pain at home, running from his sister's heartbroken eyes.

But Xave's *personal* history? They tell him it's a car, a police officer, an attempted motor vehicle assault. Seventeen years for a crime that should have only amounted to half that time, or less. He knew, for he looked it up.

The car, the officer, the assault – these are supposed to be Xave's memories, but he can't find them. In between these rugged walls, time distorts itself; he measures the passage of time by the arrival of the guards who shovel his meals in twice a day. Time bounces off the chipping paint, crisscrossing through his mind's reasoning, pouring delusion into his eyes. This distortion forces Xave to blink into the absent zones of his thoughts, makes him wonder once, twice, a thousand times, if maybe he did commit the crime? If maybe the officer's blood stains Xave's guilty fingers? If maybe Xave's body is exactly what they told him it was – a waste bin waiting to collect the trash, an extraneous garbage pit accumulating the excess of other people's desires, of other people's shed life experiences.

What was the *mofo* doing anyway to have a car driven at him? The courts never asked that question. And cops can't be guilty, can they? In Xave's book of world facts, that reigns as number one.

And yet. When Xave walks around in circles in the confines of his cage, chasing the pitter-patter of his shoe-less toes, or when he lies wide awake at night beneath his damp and fetid wool blanket, sweating out his nightmares, sometimes rehearsing the pages of books he read long ago, Xave searches, but can't find the memories of his crime. They're not hidden among the cassette tapes of regrets that skip, rewind, repeat somewhere deep in his cranium. Nor are they filed along the petty misdemeanors he had "committed" as a grieving teenager. These memories of the felony committed didn't belong to him. They belonged to some poor kid, maybe still stalking the streets, *just being a kid*, working out his or her damaged psyche in the best way he or she knew how. And here Xave was in the kid's place, his two small misdemeanors – shoplifting, and something else he pretends he can't remember – used to overlook the evidence and do away with anything fair about his trial. Sure, Xave's done some dumb, shady things in this world. But you can't convince him that there's a man or woman walking this Earth who hasn't. No way.

So here he is, guilty of being innocent. And no amount of good behavior, no amount of running what his fellow inmates had taken to calling Xave's "smart-ass Panther mouth," would change that, would bring him back to loved ones he rashly cut himself off from for silly reasons before his arrest, loved ones who he couldn't track, who had no idea he was even here, even *alive*.

Xave's body is half immersed in the funk of his urine mixed with the *whatever* that had been sputtering out of a broken, hidden pipe for three days now. The handymen failed to acknowledge it. They usually failed to acknowledge *anything* unless a brawl called for their attention.

Fights were frequent here. After all, the fellows did have to find ways of entertaining themselves; that is besides shouting in code at each other through their bars, innovating gambling games in the cafeteria, a handful of them signing up for trades for which they were paid by a private company something like 32 cents an hour. The other men were forced to vacillate between hard labor and menial jobs throughout the facility. And some didn't work at all.

Xave used to be a part of this handful of "trained" men before he was put on suicide watch two weeks ago. He had packaged fish for some highfalutin folks somewhere in the city who'd buy the goods, who may or may not have known the source of the labor. *Cheap* labor. Innocent hands offering to the world *free* labor. In the 300-something years since Xave's ancestors were forced over the oceans into this country, what had changed? These able-bodied people provided work with nothing to show for it but a lackluster speech given once a year by a white man from the company (and once in a blue moon a brother) or a bible-toting female minister, the former wearing a *Nordstrom* suit, the latter a floral-patterned dress. They'd list out the many ways in which the men's work trained them to be better people in society, better citizens of *God*.

If you mean better men like you, serving your *God, I'll pass,* Xave always thought to himself, arms folded, sinking down in his chair. It was all fake shit, anyway. Even when the visitors believed whole-heartedly in their speeches, still fake. Most of them knew it, too. That was the point of running a business out of a prison, wasn't it? Holding appearance for appearance's sake when behind the scenes, all they wanted was on the one hand cheap

labor, and on the other, an eye-witness confirmation of a Darwinian, European Enlightenment-inspired politics of species degeneration (or in other words, confirmation that racialized folks *were* the stereotypical "lesser than"; they *were* buffoons, hyper-sexual, dangerous, needing to be saved). If these "trained" inmates expected the hands of corporate America to generously embrace them, welcome them as truly rehabilitated men of society, they were up shit's creek. Communities of color might hire them when they broke loose from the system. But that is if they *ever* broke loose. Xave had seen so many repeat-offenders, he was starting to believe deep down that the words "rehabilitation" and "transitional" really meant ensuring a system of punishment that would hold certain bodies in place simply because of color or class, *by any means necessary*.

In his mind, Xave sees the words *by any means necessary* flit by, and pairs them with a quote he remembers picking up from somewhere: "*We declare our right on this Earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this Earth, on this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary.*"

For a moment, Xave thinks this is a quote from an NWA song. But no, he realizes; it's Malcolm. 1965. Telling the world that if *they* had their version of "by any means necessary," then why shouldn't we? Xave's mind holds onto words and dates like nobody's business. Photographic memory, they called it. *A sick gift of a wondrous boy-god* his mother used to say before she passed.

The *something*-infested pool of wetness soaks through Xave's slacks. He's been in here for two weeks; half the time, they wouldn't let him out of his cage. Instead, they'd circle back to him, making faces, watching the "suicide watch" try and break Xave even further. The guards, some not much older than him, would flaunt money and cell phones, giving themselves to hard facades that Xave knew they didn't really own. For he could hear, on quiet days, their life stories creep across the walls, down the hallways, their uncertain whispers, their hidden whimpers about a hungry baby waiting at home. And he would listen, intently, letting the words dance into his ears.

Xave was always a good listener. It's what Mr. MacDaniels would tell him quite frequently, the retired black football player-turned-international

studies high school teacher. Mr. MacDaniels was the best of them, convinced Xave back in the day to take a stab at the school's Model United Nations team. "You've got a brain like a sponge . . . no, a computer!" Mr. MacDaniels would always tell him during their frequent part-detention, part-"learn-to-be-a-solid-black-man" talks after school. "A heart like a camel's back. Ears like the walls of Symphony Hall. A tongue like Raid spray – sits there, bottled up, but fierce and dangerous when it's ready to go for the kill. And you, you've got to own them, Xave. Let these gifts of yours make an amazing human being out of you. Humanity's not even ready for it." Mr. MacDaniels always ended his thoughts with a deep-throated chuckle.

It's memories like this that come in uninvited spurts to greet Xave day in, day out. And he often wonders, what good are his ears, now? To pick up the echoes of grunts and curses he catches every now and again? To pay homage to the maddening dripping from that broken pipe? Day in, day out. He listens. He breathes. He recites the pages of books he's read. He breathes. Exhaling. Inhaling. Exhaling. Slower. He breathes. It's one of the many tricks he's learned, not for sanity's sake. Sanity left a long time ago. Just threw up the "deuces" sign and walked out the back door. They were tricks to stay alive.

Xave's left hand is itching like bloody hell. Itching and burning. It's a bandaged, watery mess that he suspects is beginning to smell like a rotting cow. He *suspects* for he's too afraid to put his nose too close to it and really see if that's where the smell is coming from. It's the reason he got placed into suicide watch – a tiny mouse-hole where he sits staring at the ceiling, rocking himself on the wet floor. Xave had gotten into a brawl on his way out of the bathroom, was cut three times on the side of his left hand with a knife he still can't remember seeing, it happened so fast. The man had cut right into the part of Xave's hand that meant everything in the world, where his only tattoo had been, stretching sideways from his wrist to the knuckle of his index finger. It was a girl's name, with several words written in Louisiana creole underneath it:

> you are the brightest star in my sky,
> precious. And your life matters.

Now damaged. Now gone, a few chunks of broken, hanging skin left in its stead. Xave didn't even care to undo the bandage and look at what wasn't there.

No one would come out and admit who did it, Xave knew. But Xave wouldn't rat for the life of him, not in here. *That* was a dangerous road to walk, no matter how incensed he was. To expedite the investigation, they claimed in the paperwork that Xave tried to harm himself. Skipped any surgery to save (business) dollars, gave him some bandages, burning alcohol, shoved him behind these new bars.

Xave hears the man in the mouse-hole far down the hall begin his daily routine of counting backwards from seventy. He did it every time he sensed a guard coming their way. Xave never knew how the man could tell exactly when the guard would show, but sure enough, the man's at *10* and Xave hears the slow footsteps echoing down the hall. He pulls himself to a seated position, crawls over to the bars.

"Hey! Hey! Hey!" Xave shouts at the guard.

"What?" The guard bites back, pausing in front of Xave's cell.

"I need to see a doctor. Please."

"Whatchu want with a doctor?"

"Something's not right with my hand."

"Lemme see it." The guard leans closer to the cell. Xave is hesitant, wondering if this is a trick. He cautiously extends his left arm through the cell. No quicker had Xave offered the guard the target than he slapped Xave's hand back in the cell, continued with a chuckle back down the hallway.

It hurt like hell.

Two: Gelé

Gelé glances back over her shoulder, past her cubicle to make sure no one's sneaking peeks at her computer screen. It happens at a competitive San Fran job. Especially when you're one of a handful of People of Color in the company. Your co-workers either pretend you don't exist, or they're patronizing, their glances revealing that they somehow think Affirmative Action got you here, that Affirmative Action is synonymous with Black Excellence.

How stupid and uninformed, Gelé always thinks, catching these glances with the edges of her eyes. It especially happens when her southern drawl kicks in when she's slightly heated. Or maybe it was her thick thighs, the way she wore her hair wild and free, as if they thought no one taught her how to "whiten" herself, tame her "kitchen," fix her posture, limit the hip-movement in her gait, all for the sake of decorum. Gelé knows she doesn't really fit in this corporation; the clinical cleanliness makes her feel isolated, caged almost. And every once in a while, copious waves of loneliness corner her, cause panic attacks that make her feel like she could choke on the lonely and die.

But how could she complain? It was good money.

"Damn," she mutters, massaging the sudden ache that's hit her for the umpteenth time in the side of her right hand where the bones of her index finger meet those of her thumb. A few weeks ago, she was out at a bar, a sharp pain tore through her hand, though there were no visible signs of trauma. Ever since then, she's felt this mysterious aching.

Mental note, she thinks to herself as she re-adjusts both hand clothes that she ties around her palms every morning, *stop by Walgreens, pick up some liquid minerals for this muscle pain.*

Gelé lowers her short, business-pink acrylic nails over the mousepad, glances back once more, then types the words "CCA investing" into Google's search box where some scientist Gelé doesn't know is gesticulating.

CCA: Correction Corporation of America. Or CoreCivic.

Gelé pauses before the screen, feeling like she's dangling her heart over boiling water, and quite unsure as to why. I mean, the *crap* her company had pulled today was enough to make any "woke" person of color incensed.

But when Gelé learned the news, it felt personal in a way she couldn't put her finger on.

Gelé had stepped into the office that morning, 7:45 sharp like every morning, her face a mask, her feelings buried at the bottom of a deep crater inside of her. She can't afford *feelings* at this job. At 8:06 on the dot (she knows because she had been staring at the clock in the right hand corner of her computer screen, wondering why time wasn't moving more quickly), a message appeared in her inbox – a general message from the company that ran down the weekly engagements. She opened the mail and found her eyes lingering on one piece of information that hopped out at her like the old jack in the box her mother gave her when she was a baby.

Now here Gelé is, two hours later, still staring at the computer screen, wondering why this nonsense the company was engaged in felt like more than a target on her racialized community; it felt like a shot to the heart . . .

But why?

Xave is flashing before her eyes. She's remembering against her will her Daddy who died eleven years ago. She's remembering the tune he made up for her and Xave, a tune he'd walk around their humble little house whistling:

> Twins don't break,
> an' they don't lose!
> Chained together,
> forever fused!
> Don't need no hope,
> ain't got no blues.
> Twins win I tell ya,
> an that's the news.

Gelé hardens her mind against the melodic memory; this was a past she had given up when she entered corporate, running from the holes she couldn't fill. Why had this news about CCA been a trigger?

She inhales, then lets the breath go, sending her mumbles "Correction my ass" riding the tail of that breath. When the wave of emotion dies down, she tries to settle herself, but the wave's post-crash ripples have only pulled her deeper into its waters. No choice but to swim, now. So she

swallows back her soppiness, and begins to research about CCA, pausing at an Angela Davis quote:

"Colored bodies constitute the main human raw material in this vast experiment to disappear the major social problems of our time. Once the aura of magic is stripped away from the imprisonment solution, what is revealed is racism, class bias, and the parasitic seduction of capitalist profit. The prison industrial system materially and morally impoverishes its inhabitants and devours the social wealth needed to address the very problems that have led to spiraling numbers of prisoners . . . "

"Who decorates their palms with scarves? You've *got* to explain this to me one day."

Gelé whips her head back, the bottom edges of her kinky blowout brushing up against her shoulder. It's only Ra. She notices the way her hands are slightly trembling and scoffs quietly at herself, clasping them tightly together. She doesn't bother responding to his millionth request to know what she's hiding beneath the colorful hand wraps. She claims that they help with her sweaty palms, but Ra can detect a lie from a mile away. She doesn't bother showing him the small tattoo across the side of her hand or explaining where it came from, how it got there. It's a memory she hides, not only from the world, but mostly from herself.

Ra glances at the computer screen Gelé thought she was hiding, then pulls his hands up into a prayer pose, leaning in closer to whisper, "That's some bullshit, ain't it? The company's fucking new investing venture?"

Gelé half smiles at Ra, always amused when he code-switches at the job, reminding her of back home in Louisiana.

"Yes, it is," she replies.

Ra grabs the vacant mesh chair at the cubicle behind her and slides his nose into her business, like a nettling little brother. That had become Gelé's nickname for him: *Nettling bro-femme.* He preferred the *femme* part of the nickname, she liked the spicy directness of *nettling*. And the "bro" sat comfortably between them, gesturing towards the unspoken bond Gelé and Ra had formed the first week she arrived at the job, new to San Francisco, new to the corporate world.

"What have you found?"

"They're putting 100k in, Ra! Investing 100k in the prison industry," Gelé tells him, trying to keep her voice steady and quiet, but feeling it take

on its own life, like her hips in last week's pair of jeans. "Do you know what that means? That means more bodies. That means potential profit stripped from our communities and placed in the hands of those who don't need it, who *shouldn't have it!* That means more lies. That means *more* prisons being built in the wake of *more* schools being torn down, no improvement to the systems, and no interest in the care and keeping of my brothers and sisters trapped in the cycle."

"Or more of the world spinning on the same axis that it started on when ole boy Columbus sailed the waters in 1492," Ra adds, his left eyebrow raised acrimoniously.

Gelé nods, shuts her eyes and massages the edges of her nose to keep from crying.

"It just . . . it just disgusts me. And sometimes, Ra, I feel like a sellout, you know? Sitting here making money, talking the right talk . . . "

. . . *and forgetting about him*, Gelé thinks to herself. Forgetting about her other half who she hasn't seen for almost eight years now. The last time they spoke, a heated argument about her going far away to an Ivy League (for which Xave had pretty much written her entire common app essay), Xave disappeared, first not returning her calls, then dropping his service altogether, leaving her wondering if he was dead or something worse. Ever since then, she's been fighting like hell to make it out in the corporate world, fighting to get here, forgetting that *getting here* meant placing the past in a duffle bag like a dead body, and tossing it into the abyss.

She feels herself tear up, knowing there's no sensible connection with this past and her company investing money in CCA, hoping to exploit black bodies for more bank.

Ra looks from her teary eyes to the hand she's massaging.

"You okay?" he asks her.

Gelé sighs and nods. "This is all just bringing up stuff I don't want to think about. And anyway, Ra. You lost your 'caring for others' privilege this week. Remember? We agreed to two 'are you okays' per week for you. You met that quota Tuesday morning. So you're officially banned from asking *anyone* if they're okay until next week."

"Oh please. Like you count, Gel."

"Nah Ra, sorry but I *do* count. You need to focus on *your* needs a little

bit more in this place. Otherwise, when you look up, you'll have people mopping the floor with you. Or laughing when they ask you to sweep it. I know you got all this curly hair, mixed as you are",? Gelé says, reaching out teasingly to pull at one of Ra's light brown strands, "but to them, you're *still* black. And how many of us are there now? Three?"

"Five, actually. Out of eighty six employees," Ra responds with a look of disapprobation.

"Uh-huh. Exactly."

"What's going on with your hand? You keep grimacing?" he says anyway, ignoring her tirade.

"Don't worry about it."

But Ra worries. That's what Ra does. That's what Ra says beautiful black femmes do; especially those who are expected to be resilient when sometimes what they really need is the time and space to process their own trauma. Black femmes who "fail to be seen with any clarity or insight," Ra often tells her, quoting his new favorite academic, Kimberly Juanita Brown. Black femmes whose beautiful faces are disproportionately screwed under the weight of humanitarian hype and flashy images of a master race and culture saving the poor, starving world. Black femmes who keep on holding up the world, even when their own brothers turn from them, make them into foils towards their own masculine liberation, "i.e. *Get Out*," Mr. TV-buff Ra would tell Gelé, time and again, like a young spoken word artist clinging to her last refrain.

"Leave my good, innocent TV watching *out* of the political arena, will you!" Gelé would reply.

"The representative *is* the ultimate political, babe. Think meta, for me," Ra would respond, continuing on with his rant about black femmes invisible on TV or bastardized and repeatedly erased like a predictable plot, like a *Jessica Jones season 2*, black femmes killed off and used towards white women liberation. "I mean," Ra would say, "we might as well be calling this movement . . .

#MetoobutNOTYOU

. . . with the exception of Lili Bernard and a few others, right?"

"What does *that* have to do with anything, Ra?" Gelé would say, trying to get in a word or two, but Ra would race on, telling her how *Black Museum* and *Black Panther* got it right, but how long must we wait to make serious, every day, unexceptional *space* for her, and not just the mixed curly haired black femmes, but the dark coiled and kinky haired black femmes. And space for their daughters who, despite media's failures, will grow up fierce as hell anyway, who'll take on the world whether we watch, or whether we ignore . . . ?

All of this is Ra's politics, anyway, not hers. Though he *did* have quite a few solid points.

Gelé sighs, lets the ruckus in her chest settle like she's used to doing in the workplace, knowing a little liqueur could help. But it's only 10 a.m. She's got, what, eight more hours on the clock before she can even begin to move in that direction?

Then all of a sudden, Gelé's stomach churns. Ra's talking, but she loses his words, focusing on trying to stop herself from doubling over, thinking maybe it was the beginnings of a bad diarrhea episode. Bile collects in her mouth; Gelé feels like her nose is pressed against a rag wrung with her body's liquid excrements. The feeling, the smell, the *sensation*, it all passes just as quickly as it came. But she's left with the memory of it. She tries to stop herself, but groans anyway, feeling sweat accumulating between her thighs.

"Whatsup with you?" Ra asks.

Gelé blinks up at him.

"I . . . nothing."

Ra gives her the quizzical I-don't-believe-you look. "Maybe you got something from your weekend escapades?" he says, lowering his voice to emphasize the scandal dangling from his words.

She laughs a little, swatting at the air. "Come on, Ra." He knew good and darn well that twenty seven year-old Gelé, with her serious attachment issues and her slew of men, was as careful as careful could be. "I didn't get anything from *anyone*. I just felt sick for a couple of seconds. Like a stomach bug came and went away again."

"Well, all seriousness then. Maybe you need to go see a doctor?" Ra says

this as he stands and stretches. "I'll see you at lunch, gotta get back." He winks at Gelé, walks away.

"Maybe," she responds belatedly, to herself. Gelé straightens up, stares at the information on the screen. Without thinking, she finds herself untying the cloth on her right hand; it's the first time she's done this in public in years. After four long years of hoping, worrying, searching for signs that Xave was alive, delaying her studies, of falling in and out of depressions, she needed a way to cope, to forget. So she found the cloth, and hid the tattoo.

Now, with it uncovered, lying bare underneath her gaze, she fingers the words written in Louisiana creole under Xave's beautiful name, whispers them under her breath:

> your life is the dark matter of my world
> precious, mattering the most

Gelé glances out the tiny window to her right, watching the bustle of people in the streets blur. Her desk catches a tear; she's wondering: *if* Xave is alive, where could he be?

Three: Xave

Xave hasn't been this agitated for a long time.

He's finally off suicide watch, feeling split between two different sentiments. On the one hand, his body doesn't feel right. He's feverish and more fatigued than he ever remembers feeling in his life, weighed down by headaches every time he goes to stand up, on the verge of passing out.

But on the other hand, his spirit's been feeling . . . *things* he hasn't felt in years now. Things he can't seem to shape in his mouth. But if he has to articulate it, maybe he'll call it . . . *life?* Yes, life. Life in his spirit while the life in his body feels like it's leaving him.

It was seeing her this morning that threw everything, Xave knew. He was standing in front of his reflection, musing in detached observation at how scrawny and thin his face had become. Like a sudden realization that

someone was standing in a room you thought was vacant, he saw her, to his left, right beside his reflection. He saw her face, her bright brown eyes, staring back at him, intensely as ever. Then the rest of her manifested – large chest, torso, her generous thighs folding into themselves. He had instinctively laughed aloud without realizing he was laughing. A memory that should have flaked off his brain long ago had slipped back in. It was a memory of him making fun of her, telling her she was turning into a chicken with her chicken legs.

Then she was gone, replaced by a sudden sting of life that had grown the size of three skyscrapers in those few seconds. It was the feeling of sensing what she felt, though he couldn't explain how. Xave had seen too many "impossibles" to feel like he needed to explain, anyway. Gelé was there, with him, for those few seconds. What else mattered? The person born the same day as him, whose first cries raced from infant lips at the same time as his, who learned to walk on the very same day, who uttered the same first words, he had seen her again when he thought he never would, flesh and bone, staring at him.

Xave had felt himself reaching for his tattoo in that moment. But he met the hard bandages of his putrefying wound instead. He remembered. After their parents died, he and Gelé had snuck on a bus when his Uncle was sleeping, crossed state lines, and joined a *Black Lives Matter* rally. Pumped with adrenaline from the crowd and the shouts and the feelings of being wronged, they had found a tattoo shop, seared their bond on their hands forever.

Since seeing her in the mirror, Xave's been walking on clouds. So much so that when he struts with his food tray past a guard in heavy conversation with a female corrections officer, and catches their dialogue about the backwardness of immigrants and about how they thought that children at the borders being separated from their parents was a "necessary evil," Xave sits his tray down, turns to the two of them, gives them a piece of his mind.

The guard steps to him, "You better shut your trap."

And Xave, feeling like pre-prison Xave, the freedom Gelé had let him taste that morning running through his bones, tells the man, "Don't tell me to shut up, you racist – ,"

The guard curls his fist, slams it into Xave's jaw. Dares Xave to hit

back. Xave falls back, then down; his body slumps. He touches his mouth, sees a little blood, a chipped tooth. Nothing more. He tries to lift himself, but can't; his arms are too weak. He's suddenly dizzy, feeling chills running up his arms. So from the floor, he gets ready to bad-mouth the guy again, but sees out of the corner of his eyes a few half-interested glances, coke cans raised to parted, amused lips, and remembers where he is.

Xave shuts his eyes, leans his spinning head against the leg of a table, giving his strength over to the silence that has glued itself to his lips. No one can hear him in this hell hole. No one is coming for him. No one even knows where he is. Not even her.

Xave thinks to himself *W.E.B.* And not the intellectual either. *Why. Even. Bother.*

Four: Gelé

Pre-dawn. Long before the morning birds find their voices, Gelé feels her eyes flutter open, a bodily instinct as she half-awakens from a series of grueling nightmares. Her jaws are dangerously rigid, tightly shut like they had been at the end of her dream where she stood next to an electric gate, naked, enslaved, with a muzzle over her lips.

Panic sits in her chest, frozen like a thief disguised as a friendly neighbor. It only slithers back, away from her body, when she realizes that her jaw isn't actually stuck; she can move it. Without thinking, Gelé pulls maniacally at one of her cuticles that's been aggravating her ring finger. She pulls down, down, too far, until the skin rips and starts to bleed. Blinking wide awake, now, Gelé yanks her scarred hand from the relentless grip of her fingers, thrusts the bloody nail in her mouth against the soothing ridges of her tongue. She does it to keep from moaning. She glances in pathetic disgust at the *Tinder* date who's lying with a pale, bare, hairy leg sticking out of her taupe-colored blankets, half of his rubicund buttocks showing.

Gelé slips her finger out of her mouth just quickly enough to shoot an imperceptible "uggh" at his sleeping body before softly pulling her own out of the bed. She shimmies her hips back into her jeans she'd walked

out of in her midnight carousing, and into her black slippers waiting by the door. Groggy and disoriented, walking the tightrope between her dreams and her reality, Gelé shuffles her way to the kitchen, coughs into her elbow, and cradles her throbbing palm, noticing for the first time not only the stiffness, but the acute aching she now feels in her jawbone. Like she punched *herself* in the jaw during her sleep. Weird.

Gelé sifts through her cabinets, looking for ginseng tea, then heats the stove so she can warm herself a cup. Thinking maybe it just might pull her back into herself. For she's been off, lately, *really* off, her body running every which way, feeling feverish without her thermometer actually proving it, her thoughts racing to places she thought she left behind.

When the water's heated and the tea bag seeps, Gelé searches mindlessly to find something else to busy her hands with – anything, really, to avoid lingering on the images that slithered into bed next to her via her nightmares. She settles on re-organizing the mail on her countertop, switching the TV on, cutting it down low.

But inevitably, Gelé's shadows begin to bellow and yield to the weight of her jittery nerves and thunderous imagination. And these shadows, they're louder than any distraction she can cook up for herself. Pieces of the conversation she had with her doctor a week ago come chasing her woozy mind:

Gelé, the conditions you're describing – aching limbs, sharp muscle pains in your hand, feeling nutrient-sapped, the smells you've been experiencing, the fevers, I have nothing to tell you. We ran all the tests, and all I have for you is the usual. We'll keep working on your weight. And your blood pressure is tipping to the high side of the spectrum, but nothing to worry too much about. Maybe you should take a little break from work?

Oh please. Gelé didn't know what the word *break* even meant. Compliments of a father who literally worked himself into the stroke that took his life.

Thinking of her father while she sat in that doctor's office, Gelé had wanted to ask her doctor about the bodily rage that accumulates, piling up generation after generation in the blood stream. But she couldn't manage it; instead she found herself staring at the doctor's shoes, thinking that the doctor's funny glances at her *really* must be the doctor's way of silently

telling Gelé: *This pain you're feeling, young black woman, I can't see it. I can't diagnose it. It doesn't make sense to me. So it must not exist.*

Then, two days ago, Gelé's therapist left her weighed down in the gunk of her feelings when she said, quite directly and simply, "You can't run around the past, Gelé. It'll bind your feet in a trap, trip you before you figure out how to catch yourself."

And then . . . there was Xave.

Flashing through her mind as if she had seen him just that morning. Chasing her into her dreams, through her dreams, out of her dreams, into her waking thoughts. In her nightmares, his body was distorted, disfigured, carved into. It reminded her somehow of a short story she had read in college several years ago, Kafka's *The Penal Colony*. She had written a paper on it, comparing Kafka's antiquated system with America's penal process. Her biased professor almost failed her for it. Maybe that's what pushed her into finance.

Gelé lifts the cup of tea to her lips, nearly scalds the taste buds off her tongue. Waiting for it to cool, she leans her tired body against the windowsill. The first bird begins to chirp outside while her memories have her bound, victim to their adulterous embraces. She's thinking about a story Xave used to tell her. Back when they'd sit on patches of dry wood, listening to roosters cackling in a neighbor's secret grove. Xave had just learned what the word *capitalist* meant, and had gotten all hype about it. For Gelé, it didn't matter what millions of explanations her teachers gave her about that word, that word didn't mean anything to her. Not until college. Not until Marx. And even then, no one had done a better job at explaining than Xave. For he didn't try to make sense out of it like everyone else. Xave made nonsense out of it, brought it back to slavery, brought it back to *colonialism* – another word Xave had taught her in the decadent verdure of their backyard. All of this before his academic interests took a turn.

Gelé wipes a tear, sees them standing there, kids in the backyard, steps away from the river, finding solace in their games a year after losing their mother, two years before losing their dad. Gelé remembers the angular shape of Xave's arms, his animated smile, the scar on the side of his eye. With one of his ginger-colored hands, he clasped her shoulder, a roguish

look in his eye. She remembers the way his knuckles were *really* ashy that day, looking greyish white like the color of a ghost's coughed up placenta, postmortem rather than postpartum.

Xave told her that there once was a boy. Standing before this machine.

"Imagine a gigantic machine," he told her, "feeding, can't stop feeding, can't stop feeding! It's an ugly mess. Can you see it?"

Gelé nodded at him.

Xave went on to tell her that this machine, it wanted nothing more but to keep eating, swallowing, eating. It was made of fake jewels and sparkly things; it attracted people from all over the world to participate in its magnificent feast. But the boy wasn't fooled. He saw the machine's darker side. He saw it eat his ancestors, then saw it coming for him! The boy swore he'd kill it. Swore it on his life. Swore all the way up until the moment he stood eye to eye with the machine, up close and personal with the beast.

There was a problem. A true conundrum. The boy *couldn't* kill it. Why? Because somehow, the little boy realized that the machine was made with *his* skin. That it was functioning by virtue of *his* organs. That it borrowed *his* eyes to see, used *his* legs to walk. It was the biggest contradiction the little boy had ever faced in his life.

Xave's story ended there, right there, on that big fat question mark Gelé remembers hating so much that she implored her brother to make up something more satisfying. Xave refused. Told her that he wasn't telling her a story, he was defining for her a system. That was all.

Suddenly, Gelé hears a voice echo beside her eardrum. It's abrupt, close, much louder than her memories.

"Chained to you," the whispers says.

Gelé gasps, her tea mug slipping from her hands. It falls with a clatter onto the counter, cracking up the center. Gelé turns, 360 degrees, sees nothing, sees no one. But in her mind, her nightmares are re-appearing, clear as day, and dark as night, running wild in her head like the untamable roots of her hair. She sees the bones of her brother making up the bars of a cell, one *she's* locked inside of.

Gelé squeezes her eyes shut, willing the images to disappear. But as she does so, she hears the whisper again.

"Chained to hope."

Again, she spins around, a 180 this time, to spot whoever it was that had spoken. But she knows this time she won't see anyone. She already feels her panic subsiding. For she knows that voice echoing in her cranium. She knows it well.

It's Xave's voice. Clear. Direct. Close enough, she could kiss his cheek, touch his skin, jump for joy.

"Don't run from me. Don't look away from me," it says, a final breathy whisper on the air.

Gelé lowers herself in her seat, unsure of what's happening, but willing to ride the waves of this craze as far as it will take her. Especially if it will pave the road, take her to him.

"Xave," she whispers to the day that must have sensed her breaking, for it is asking to join her so it might break, too. "Tell me where you are!" she bellows, giving the rising sun the strength of her longing.

And for the first time in years, she detects something of a real answer, bouncing back to meet her.

Five: Xave

"You looked away. I thought you said you wanted to see", the doctor says, chuckling as Xave blinks his eyes open, trying to come to. But Xave's brain keeps weighing him down with a memory he can't explain.

Ring . . . Ring . . .

"Xave?"

"Gelé? How are you . . . how are you . . . here*?"*

"I found you."

Xave shakes his head and tries to come back to the moment. Something serious is happening. Something terrible. What is it? He remembers the doctor saying that he might run out of anesthesia before it took effect, to brace himself for the pain. But Xave had been knocked out during the entire procedure. He tries, again, to fully rouse himself, but his dreams keep repeating variations of the same dialogue:

Ring . . . Ring . . .

"Xave?"

"Gelé?"

The feeling is returning to Xave's limbs. He can hear his heart beating like a dying animal's fighting for life. It's the same feeling that waved goodnight to him as he drifted off, hearing the phrases *gangrene* and *have to cut*.

Cut what?

Xave is confused.

He blinks around him, sees the vermilion blood-soaked towels. And something fleshy sitting haphazardly in the bucket beside his head. Is that . . .

. . . is that his hand?

It's his hand!

Xave doesn't think it's possible for his heart to beat even heavier, but here it is, doing just that as he chokes on the spit collecting in his dry throat.

"Okay now settle down," the doctor says, putting an arm on Xave's shoulder. "How'd you find your way into this mess?"

Xave searches for his voice; when he finds it, he tries to hide his emotion from the man, this stranger. "No one would listen when I said I needed surgery," Xave coughs out.

"I didn't mean the hand, son. I mean this shit-hole."

Immediately, Xave turns his face away, shaking the doctor's existence from his mind. Thinking instead of his hand.

His hand.

Gone.

What else could possibly matter?

But just when misery promises to steal his last breath, Xave opens his eyes, feels his heart settling as he remembers. It *wasn't* a dream. That ringing, that voice . . .

Ring . . . Ring . . .

"Xave?"

"Gelé?"

It was real. Xave's breath returns as he blinks into the ceiling,

remembering. Remembering her voice. Not years ago, not in his mind, but there, real, on the phone, was it yesterday?

Xave looks back at his hand, and thinks about one of the Haitian men he knew growing up in Louisiana. The man once told him that in Voudoun, when you ask for something, expect to lose something else in return. That's the pact you make when trading off with the spirits.

Maybe that's what this trade off had been. His hand for his twin.

Yesterday morning, the guards told Xave he had a phone call. Something he *never* had. He heard her voice on the other line, a voice he could spot anywhere as if it were the mesmeric melody of his soul mate. Well, it *was* the voice of his soulmate.

"Xave?"

"Gelé?"

It must have been five whole minutes, he listened to her heavy breathing on the other line, wondering at the perspicacity that had led her to him. He felt like it couldn't be real. But no mistaking that voice. It was his sister's.

"How are you . . . how are you . . . *here?*" he mutters into the receiver.

"I found you."

"But how?"

"I don't know. The tattoo? I really don't know, Xave. I felt you call, I think? I followed your voice and the things my body told me, the *truth* it was telling me, then I . . . I *saw* you somehow."

"You saw me?"

"Kind of. Like a dream, maybe? I saw bars. I saw . . . a cage. I did some guess-work, a little research, a little serendipity. I followed my feelings. Hey Xave?"

"Gel?"

"We're gonna get you out, we're gonna get you out, we're gonna get you out," she started to mumble.

And Xave could hear her smiling through the phone, through her tears. For the briefest of moments, Xave felt himself smile, too.

Six: Gelé

A mural stretches across the wall at the building's entrance. It highlights the majesty of a bald eagle with humorously drooping wings. Gelé sees her face oddly reflected in the chipping paint. As if her face had been etched into the concrete long before the drawing. Long before this symbol of Independence and freedom rang out in all its contradiction. Long before "America" even began.

"Ain't my America. Or *only* my America. Mine and my native brother's and sister's," she whispers to the painting, suddenly thinking of the trip she took to the South of France in a car ride with two charming Tunisian brothers, who, yet and still, had bugged the hell out of her in their last few moments of exchange. They'd asked her where she was from. "The US," she replied. "No, but like where are your *parents* from?" "The US" "No, but like your lineage? Vous êtes d'où?"

"America, goddammit! First boat, first ride". That's what the world could *not* understand about the magic of black *presence*. We have always only been everywhere.

Gelé's hand is wrapped in a sling tied around her neck. She had had a severe attack of pain the day before in her wrist. Ra had driven her to the hospital, all the while telling her he didn't believe in any superstition, and he *certainly* wasn't religious. But if straight-pathed Gelé wanted to lose her mind just this once, he'd accompany her on that rollercoaster so he could play that card if he ever needed to in the future.

Of course, the doctors found nothing. And Gelé knew why.

Something must have happened to Xave's hand.

Gelé shoves the other jittery hand into the shallow pockets of her blue jean overalls. Ra hands her one of the ham and turkey sandwiches they made this morning. She shakes her head, knowing she won't be able to stomach it.

In the front office, Nat King Cole's voice drifts towards them, heavy like water in the air, singing out the refrains of some speculative future Gelé wonders if he actually ever knew.

"And I think to myself, what a wonderful world."

Gelé signs a few papers, walks into the waiting area. Sits. Waits. Crosses her legs. Waits.

Swallows.

Waits.

Fidgets.

Waits.

Pulls out that sandwich and takes a bite.

Waits.

Until

Gelé's eyes collide with his.

He's standing in the doorway looking nothing like her brother.

But looking everything like her brother.

"Xave," she murmurs.

His eyes are like a canvas, wide, suggestive, innocent but hard. Like spurts of color on an empty page, his eyes hold the weight of the promised world. In their deep groves, she sees broken. But she sees something else, too. Something that reminds Gelé of their mother's eyes. Their mother who washed up on shore after the big hurricane.

Gelé thinks she spots a humanity in those eyes. Not a "Universal Rights Declaration" kind of humanity. Not a Kantian humanity. Not even a Wakandian humanity. It's a humanity that this world has yet to know.

For:
Margaret Garner.
Eric Garner.
Erica Garner.
And the millions more.

Abstracts

Vincenzo Bavaro, "Taking Back One's Narrative": *Dear White People,* Cultural Appropriation, and the Challenge of Anti-essentialism

The essay "Taking Back One's Narrative" focuses on the 2017 Netflix series *Dear White People*, created by director and screenwriter Justin Simien. By focusing on the lives of a group of African American students in a prestigious Ivy League university, the series both articulates and interrogates issues and debates that are crucial to an understanding of African-American identity in the US today. In particular, the essay argues that cultural appropriation and the power of narratives are at the thematic and stylistic center of the series, and that the script, the direction, and the actors' performances contribute to question essentialist understanding of black identity, and deliberately pose more questions than they intend to answer.

Monia Dal Checco, "Not Your Grandmamma's Civil Rights Movement": A New Take on Black Activism

The article reflects on how the failure of the post-racial ideal, evident in the many forms of institutionalized racism that still plague American society, has shaped a new approach to black activism. Weaving together several theoretical frameworks – critical race studies, the history of black social movements, visual studies, black feminism, intersectionality theory and life narrative studies – I analyze how #BlackLivesMatter and other contemporary movements for social justice have ignited a new phase of black activism which rejects many of the strategies employed by previous generations of black organizers, such as the focus on respectability politics and the tendency to favor charismatic male leadership. In this context, contemporary activism is giving space to more inclusive and participatory policies, based on the work of women and LGBTQ people and on a bottom-up rather than a hierarchical, top-down approach. The focus of #BlackLivesMatter on humanity, moreover, can be interpreted as a struggle

for human rights rather than civil rights, which further differentiates the movement from earlier phases of black militancy. In the last section of the article I briefly consider how this new approach to activism is represented in *When They Call You a Terrorist* (2018), the recently published memoir of #BlackLivesMatter co-founder Patrisse Khan-Cullors.

Patrick Deer, Black Lives Matter In Wartime

The Black Lives Matter movement has been remarkably effective at mobilizing symbolic protest and policy proposals to render visible and interrupt the pervasive militarization of American society, exposing its intimate relationship to longer histories of structural racism and white supremacy. This essay distinguishes between militarist spectacles of police hardware and paramilitary SWAT raids and an uneven logic of militarization spanning the Reagan-era War on Drugs, domestic Pentagon arms transfers, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I read documentaries like *Whose Streets?*, *Do Not Resist*, and *Stay Woke,* activist memoirs and visual culture of the Ferguson protests through the ethical debate among activists, journalists and critical race theorists about the politics of representation in circulating videos of the police killings of Eric Garner, Alton Sterling or Orlando Castile. The Black Lives Matter movement has denaturalized the spectacle of police violence against black bodies and re-embedded the stories of young black men killed by police and the activists who mourn and demonstrate into a counter-narrative of militarized occupation and protest. By doing so, I argue, the movement has intervened in the historical memory of America's recent wars and challenged the embedding of military narratives and agendas within US institutions and civil society.

Stefano Luconi, Black Lives and the First African-American President

Focusing on #BlackLivesMatter, this article examines African Americans' campaigns against police brutality and for racial justice during Barack Obama's second term. It compares this mobilization to the previous experiences of the civil rights movement and the Black Panther Party. It also addresses the issue of how the great expectations resulting from the first African American president's election and the subsequent unfulfilled hopes

of fairness, following Obama's post-racial politics, shaped the response to police officers' fatal shooting of unarmed blacks. Specifically, the article suggests that disappointment with the president's approach accounts, at least in part, for the growing radicalization of African Americans' reaction to law enforcers' ruthless methods as the relations between blacks and the police descended to an all-time low during the Obama administration.

Irene Polimante, Tracie Morris's Poetic Experience: From Slam Poetry to Sound Poetry

The following paper draws the main lines of Tracie Morris's poetic production from the early 1990s, when she began her poetic carrier in the slam competitions circuit, to the dawning of the new millennium, when Morris left the poetic competition to explore a more composite way to create poetry, in order to dig the relations between music and voice, voice and text, body and voice. Referring to the first part of Morris's poetic research, this work focuses on her two collections of poems, *Intermission* (1998) and *Rhyme Scheme* (2012) as well as on her many interviews and performances of those years. Her poems show a strong feeling of belonging to the marginalized housing project community of Brooklyn, where she spent her childhood and adolescence. And this sense of attachment and inclusion, especially to the New York African American community, opens Morris's poetic discourse to social activism. As a matter of fact, many of her poetic works deal with topics of gender, violence, ethnicity, social class, and sexual abuse. This complex ensemble of artistic intuition, political agency, and literary research gives to Morris's works the contours, the colors, the rhythm and the tone of a contemporary poetic quest.

Valerio Massimo De Angelis, What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Italian American Studies – Now

This article tries to draw a summary picture of the current trends in the field of Italian American Studies, of their "globalization" in terms of diasporic studies, of the role Italian individual researchers and organizations have gained inside the field, and of its possible future developments. The occasion for this sort of assessment of the state of the art and of the meaning(s) of "Italian American" Studies has been the second *Trascending*

Borders, Bridging Gaps meeting organized in January 2018 by the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute at the City University of New York (the first one was a major international conference in Bellagio, in 2014), which saw the participation of a number of scholars for the USA, Italy and the UK. Both events somehow marked significant turns in the definition of what we talk about when we talk about Italian American Studies, starting from the questioning of any easy and monolithically reified definition of "Italian" and "American," as witnessed by a number of recent publications, and fostered the ever-growing collaboration between the two sides of the Atlantic, culminating in important international conferences organized in Italy and in the creation of new research centers such as the Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi ItaloAmericani at the University of Macerata.

Notes on Contributors

Vincenzo Bavaro is Assistant Professor of American Literature at the University "L'Orientale" in Naples. He holds an MA in Cultural Studies from Dartmouth College, NH, USA, and a PhD in English from the University of Rome "La Sapienza." He is the author of *"Una Storia Etnica"? Capitale culturale e performance etnica nella letteratura degli Stati Uniti* (2013) and *La città contesa: Sessualità e appropriazione dello spazio urbano a New York negli anni Settanta* (2017). His latest publications include work on 20th-century African American Drama and has recently co-edited with Shirley Geok-Lin Lim an issue of *Anglistica* on the representation and the performance of "mess."

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Monia Dal Checco is a PhD candidate at the Doctoral School of Linguistic, Philological and Literary Sciences at the University of Padua, Italy. Her dissertation project focuses on the re-elaboration of the concept of authentic

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Pochmara was the editor of *Acta Philologica*, the journal of the Faculty of Modern Languages, UW, and in 2018 she co-edited *On Uses of Black Camp*, a special issue of *Open Cultural Studies*. This year, in collaboration with Ewa Luczak and Samir Dayal, she has co-edited the anthology *Cosmopolitanisms, Race, and Ethnicity* (2019). She is the author of over twenty articles and reviews in the field of American studies and of *The Making of the New Negro: Black Authorship, Masculinity, and Sexuality* (2011), for which she received the Polish Minister of Science and Higher Education Award. Pochmara's current research project concerns the uses of temperance and intemperance in late 19th-century and early 20th-century African American literature.

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