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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 Hennessey 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 Goodman – 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 Bande 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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