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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 grassroots 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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