

Black Lives Matter: Post-Nihilistic Freedom Dreams

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Three simple words: Black. Lives. Matters. They have come to define a generation as the struggle against persistent violence and unmitigated racial terror. Visible across the nation, from mass demonstrations to social media time-lines, Black Lives Matter as a rally cry exists alongside of daily evidence to the contrary. Images of protests wearing black lives matters shirts or hashtag protests appear alongside further proof of a nation's disregard for black life. Coined by Aliza Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, the mantra "Black Lives Matter" encapsulates the precarious position of black America in our supposedly post-racial movement. Representing a movement, a rhetorical signpost marking the persistence of racial violence, a challenge to white privilege, a sense of community, and an articulation of this generation's "freedom dream," "Black Lives Matter" is a complex articulation of our current moment. This paper takes up the meaning and significance of "Black Lives Matters," arguing that it simultaneously embodies a Black Existentialism, which demands voice and autonomy in an "othering," while at the time demands the basic rights of citizenship and humanity. Pushing back against the hegemony of Black nihilism within the 1980s and 1990s, "Black Lives Matters" imagines a future that exists apart and beyond white supremacy.

Keywords: Activism; Black Existentialism; Black Love; #BlackLivesMatter; Freedom Dreams; Michael Brown; Nihilism; Trayvon Martin

Three simple words: Black- Lives- Matter. These words have come to define this generation's ongoing struggle against persistent state-sponsored violence with black bodies as its target. The simple slogan gestures towards a complex set of issues, each of which contributes to a state of unbroken and unmitigated racial terror. Though its seemingly common-sense exhortation demands nothing more than a bare minimum of human sympathy from the listener, not all have embraced the words (to say nothing of the movement that takes these words as its rallying cry). Right wing pundits routinely question the legitimacy of a movement that claims that black lives matter while remaining "silent" vis-à-vis "black-on-black crime."¹ Likewise, white liberals have balked at the phrase's specificity, preferring instead to say "All lives Matter."² Intellectually dishonest critics on the right and those on the left who would have us make pabulum of a bitter pill

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¹ Conservative columnist Dennis Prager calls it "left-winged hysteria"; see Dennis Prager, "Black Murderers Matter," *Town Hall*, April 21, 2015, <http://townhall.com/columnists/dennisprager/2015/04/21/black-murderers-matter-n1987985/page/full>. See also, Rich Lowry, "The Black Lives That Don't Matter To Progressives," *New York Post*, May 28, 2015, <http://nypost.com/2015/05/28/the-black-lives-that-dont-matter-to-progressives/>.

² George Yancy and Judith Butler, "What's Wrong With 'All Lives Matter?'" *New York Times*, January 12, 2015, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/whats-wrong-with-all-lives-matter/?_r=0. See also Julie Crave, "Please Stop Telling Me That All Lives Matter," *Huffington Post*, November 25, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/julia-craven/please-stop-telling-me-th_b_6223072.html.

reflect a widespread unwillingness to hear the clarion call at the heart of the Black Lives Matter movement. The most charitable interpretation we can offer is that those who would refute, deflect, or diffuse the critiques offered within Black Lives Matter fail to understand the historical, ideological, and philosophical arguments that inform the slogan and the movement(s) that inspired and that take inspiration from it.

Visible across the nation, from mass demonstrations to social media timelines, Black Lives Matter, as a rallying cry, exists alongside daily evidence that proves (at least to those who would see with eyes unclouded by prejudice) just how necessary the cry is. Coined by Aliza Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi,³ the mantra is first and foremost a challenge to the affront of racial violence and prejudiced policing; it is a challenge to white privilege and supremacy, and it seeks to disrupt the *status quo* by forcing America to unflinchingly examine the ways in which state-sponsored agents treat black Americans as, at best, second-class citizens. At the same time, Black Lives Matter marks the indomitableness of Black Love and community; it is an articulation of this generation's "freedom dreams";⁴ it is a statement about not only future possibilities but also what must happen in the current moment. Black Lives Matter is an act of collective imagination, one that both envisions and tries to bring about conditions that will guarantee that the voices, humanity, and lives of African Americans are protected, valued, and embraced.

This forward-looking stance is, however, secondary. This essay argues that Black Lives Matter represents an active engagement, not with the future, but with our present moment. While the palpable demand for a better (specifically equal) future is certainly an important part of the movement, the future seems almost an afterthought. Black lives matter principally in the here and now; this is the urgency that propels the movement forward. It is no wonder that social media, with its endless framing and shaping of the immediate present, has been so crucial to the growth of Black Lives Matter. Expressions of love can coexist with expressions of outrage in the space. Those who are most vocal within this space do not vacillate between anger and tenderness so much as they express each simultaneously. This is the power contained in the slogan: the power to maneuver offensively and defensively simultaneously.

The Black Lives Matter movements, which emerged following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, saw in the Zimmerman verdict a symptom of America's justice system, which repeatedly returns verdicts that prove that black bodies and black lives are disposable. With the racially biased justice system in the national spotlight, the Zimmerman verdict evidenced the claims of competing narratives—the one side claiming that black America was, unsurprisingly, kept at arm's length from even the semblance of justice it sought; the other side claiming that the vindication was proof that the justice system worked perfectly. Black Lives Matter was (and is) a protest against both systemic racism in the justice system, but also a much broader indictment as well. The illusive nature of justice (to say nothing of land, bread, education, and housing) is proof positive of the societal refusal to care for black life. The organizing that has taken place in the aftermath of the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, in the wake of Freddie Gray and Islan Nettles, following Tamir Rice and Renisha McBride, points to the precariousness of black life within a white supremacist police state to a world in which, in the words of Aliza Garza, "Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise."⁵ The material devalu-

³ These three women are distinguished as the orchestrators of the hashtag #Blacklivesmatter. For more information see Deron Dalton, "The Three Women Behind the Black Lives Matter Movement," *Madame Noire*, May 4, 2015, <http://madamenoire.com/528287/the-three-women-behind-the-black-lives-matter-movement/>.

⁴ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

⁵ Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement by Alicia Garza," *The Feminist Wire*, October 7,

ing of black life, evidenced by police shootings and denials of justice, alongside of the symbolic and rhetoric dehumanization within popular culture, online, and in America's daily cultural practices speaks to the many ways in which black lives are seen as expendable and superfluous, to the ways in which black bodies are presented and treated as though they are somehow beneath the dignity of the (White) American project.

Black Lives Matter attempts to deprive white supremacy of the oxygen it needs to sustain these assumptions and the state violence they engender. It seeks to expose in a broader way than ever before (made possible by the ubiquity of social media) the way that these assumptions have led to hyper segregation, the school to prison pipeline, mass unemployment and housing discrimination, just to name a few. By spotlighting the persistent violence, and through elucidating the fallacies, hypocrisies, and double standards that anchor white supremacy, Black Lives Matter is challenging the very foundations upon which Americans claim their democracy is built: that we are all created equal, that all are equally entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

There is sense in which Black Lives Matters is a generational response to a civil rights generation focus on educational programs, respectability politics, and diversity quotas as the remedy to persistent institutional racism. It is this generation's statement that black death cannot be eradicated with cultural competency or some diversity quota. As presently configured, this movement lacks an urgent demand of black power based in the people having the necessary power to determine their communities / resources / coalitions and life. Instead, this is a moral claim that has emerged under the use/abuse of law. Therefore, we argue that Malcolm X died precisely because he shamed America by making black lives matter an international case and linking the need for revolution in the United States with those demanding voice and power in Africa, Asia, and throughout the Third World. Martin Luther King was also killed at the moment he linked poverty to the Vietnam War, as he made clear that Vietnamese Lives Matter; that the lives of the poor matter.

This is where the movement is likely heading—toward action and an ideological framework that shames America's empire on a global level. For example, the links between militarism in Ferguson and Baltimore alongside of discussion of drones points to this emergent framework. A movement that brings together discussions of police violence and capitalism that looks at the dialectics between poverty in Chicago and throughout the Third World brings that structural analysis into focus. In June of 2015, Black movements since the abolishment of slavery down to the black revolution / civil rights have been successful when they have linked themselves to an international level of injustice caused by America. Is that tradition still possible with America being the dominant force in the world?

Black Love

While it challenges white supremacy and privilege, ultimately attempting to decenter whiteness, Black Lives Matter is, in root and branch, an affirmation of black love. It highlights the community's commitment to protecting and loving all black lives. The death of Trayvon Martin and the systemic failure to hold George Zimmerman accountable for that death prompted a range of emotions, emotions all too familiar for black Americans: shock, rage, sadness, and frustration. The Zimmerman verdict and the media's discussion of both victim and circumstances were just the latest examples of a culture and a system that places little to no value on black life. Martin's was just another lost life; the verdict just another moment when the criminal (in)justice system

proved its inability or unwillingness to safeguard black lives; just one more instance that proved that our lack of faith in the justice system and its willingness to hold those with black blood on their hands accountable is perfectly justifiable.

In the face of systemic expressions of America's disdain for and hatred of black life, a movement emerged that centered on black love. Aliza Garza, a Bay Area activist, penned a "love letter to black folks" on Facebook, which ended with this: "Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter."⁶ Patrisse Cullors, also an organizer from California, felt similar rage, unwilling to accept the normalization in the perpetual criminalization and dehumanization of Martin and so many others. She too took to Facebook, "I hope y' all are loving on yourselves today."⁷ Like many of her other posts, she ended this one with the now-familiar hashtag, #blacklivesmatter.⁸

Soon thereafter, April Tometi, an organizer from New York City, joined Garza and Cullors. Black Lives Matter, she said, "was created out of a profound sense of black love. We wanted to affirm to our people that we love one another, and that no matter how many times we hear about the extrajudicial killing of a community member, we would mourn, and affirm the value of their life."⁸ While right wing and white liberal commentators both see the movement as an expression of rage and resistance (their chief disagreement being whether or not this resentment is justified and/or constructive), but it is more than this. The movement's core is not loathing; it is love: a non-contingent love for black bodies both dead and living. Garza attests, "It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression."⁹ At its core, the movement that has emerged in the wake of Trayvon Martin, on the streets of Ferguson, Baltimore, and New York, and, indeed, all over this nation, have been motivated by the need to express black love. In a letter to black students, a group of black faculty from several universities across the nation wrote, "You already know your life matters. Know we're fighting with you and for you. With all of us. For all of us. We got you. We see you. We hear you. We love you."¹⁰ Similarly, in their "A Love Letter to our People in #BlackSpring Time," Kai Green and Darnell More highlight the power of love in the face of violence. Even if the courts, the media, and the nation fail to reveal love for black life, for black political, economic, and cultural needs, it is love that will provide a pathway to freedom:

We are embattled again and again and again and in each case there are different details, different cities, different bodies, and different lies, but the same violence. But know we are strengthened by the spirits of our ancestors who, despite the hardships, prevailed, loved, smiled, fought, pushed, prayed, dreamed, slept, failed, danced, and lived. We love you so much we feel the need to tell you the truth in these times: if there is a God, she is on your side.¹¹

This love is not a perfunctory or clichéd Hallmark statement; it is a political intervention, a challenge to a white supremacist system that routinely expresses its contempt for black life. Such

⁶ Jamilah King, "#blacklivesmatter: How Three Friends Turned a Spontaneous Facebook Post Into a Global Phenomenon," *California Sunday*, March 1, 2015, <https://stories.californiasunday.com/2015-03-01/black-lives-matter/>.

⁷ King, "#blacklivesmatter."

⁸ King, "#blacklivesmatter."

⁹ Garza, "A Herstory."

¹⁰ KaiElz, "An Open Letter of Love to Black Students: #Black Lives Matter," *Chicago Defender*, December 9, 2014 <http://chicagodefender.com/2014/12/09/an-open-letter-of-love-to-black-students-black-livesmatter/>.

¹¹ Darnell L. Moore and Kai M. Green, "A Love Letter to our People in #BlackSpring Time," *The Feminist Wire*, May 2, 2015, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2015/05/a-love-letter-to-our-people-in-blackspring-time/>.

public expression of love offers an intervention, reaffirming black life and humanity. Life is love, and love is life. These calls are not simply about introducing “love” into families and communities deprived of this basic human necessity; the idea that Black America needs to love itself, or that violence (& pathologies) are the result of an inability to practice Black love is both simplistic and without veracity. Instead, we see these movements as building on the work of King, Malcolm, Lorde and others who sought to elucidate and highlight the love that is already there central to community and family. Black love is central to this movement, especially in a moment of hyper-visibility of Black death.

Reclaiming Life: Death Ain’t a Slave’s Freedom

In her poem, “The Funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” Nikki Giovanni gestures towards the precariousness of black life within a predominantly white supremacist society that shares unmistakable features with America’s distant past. Using Dr. King as exemplar, Giovanni pushes back against the notion that freedom for black Americans is only possible in death:

His headstone said
 Free at last, Free at last
 But death is a slave’s freedom
 We seek the freedom of free men
 And the construction of a world
 Where Martin Luther King
 could have lived
 and preached non-violence¹²

At a certain level, Giovanni is challenging the very conception of living and dying, concluding that because of the structures and violence of anti-black racism, black life is one defined by death, despair, and desperation. True freedom, freedom from violence, from the pervasive structures and callous regimes of white supremacy, is only possible in death—never in life (at least not in America). Throughout history, true freedom has been unattainable in life, because of slavery, because of Jim Crow, because of lynchings, and because of the structures of white supremacy. While the free person lives in life, the enslaved is only able to live, to taste complete freedom, in death. The freedom and privileges we seek are the wages of whiteness, the pale privilege that has proved as elusive in the present as it was when Giovanni wrote her poem. The newly constructed world is one very different from the one in which we live. It is one in which the former slave will *want* to live, to breathe the sweet air that has not been polluted by the stench of burning and bleeding black bodies (including his or her own).

Giovanni’s poem expresses a forward-looking optimism that echoes the words and projects the vision of the man she eulogizes, but it is an optimism that is fraying at the edges, one that is struggling to reconcile this vision with the reality of King’s death and all that the loss of King symbolizes. Lurking behind this optimism is a pessimism (or, if you prefer, a historic and lived realism) that is the nearly inevitable result for anybody who has come to grips with the fact that the task they face is Sisyphean. And, as Cornel West has shown, this pessimism is not an endpoint; rather it is a midway point between the optimism of those who feel themselves on the threshold of real progress and the nihilism of those who see that the apparent proximity of the

¹² Nikki Giovanni, “The Funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” in *The Black Poets*, ed. Dudley Randall (New York: Bantam Books, 1985), 323.

promised land is chimerical. Giovanni writes about a freedom in death, but West writes about a more tangible freedom, one that expresses itself in a nihilistic abandonment of hope. Working to provide a structural and historical framework for understanding inner-city violence, West theorizes that nihilism, “the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness,”¹³ is at the center of the problem. Challenging those who naturalize and normalize violence as culturally or biologically predetermined, who write about pathologies and a culture of poverty, West cites examples of destructiveness as a consequence of the permanence of anti-black racism. The byproduct of this permanence is nihilism. West affirms a Nietzschean position in that nihilism “is a natural consequence of a culture (or civilization) ruled and regulated by categories that mask manipulation, mastery and domination of peoples and nature.”¹⁴ In some ways, West argues that nihilism embodies the devaluing of Black life that manifests within America’s inner cities. He demands that society as a whole (and especially those institutions invested in ushering in an era of justice and righteousness) recognize and contextualize the nihilism—the systemic rendering of Black life as valueless and meaningless—that operates within (particularly) urban spaces. Any attempt to address the problems within inner-city black communities must first hear the cries of rage and hopelessness, must feel the pain obliquely expressed through social unrest, drug abuse, and gang violence. Most importantly, West demands that we reevaluate the ways in which society places blame squarely and solely on the shoulders of the black community for activities that are an outcropping of nihilism, which is itself a symptom and outgrowth of systemic racism.

We want to think about Black Lives Matter as building on West, Giovanni and others who theorized on the daily, institutional devaluing of Black Life and the consequences of this persistent dehumanization. The denial of freedom and the frustration of hope have been commonplaces for black Americans since slavery, and the disappointment this engenders anchors the current expressions of black rage and hopelessness. If we are to make any account of social unrest in Ferguson and Baltimore, gun violence in Chicago and Detroit, intimate partner violence, or intra-communal violence experienced by *transgenders* across America, we must explore how central systemic racism and its pernicious and widespread effects have been in black communities.

We also want to think about the influence and implications of Afro-pessimism within the ontology and praxis of Black Lives Matter. The presumption that Afro-pessimism, like nihilism itself, sees no hope is based on a misunderstanding of the former. For Frank Wilderson III, “Afro-Pessimism explores the meaning of Blackness . . . as a structural position of non-communicability in the face of all other positions; this meaning is non-communicable because, again, as a position, Blackness is predicated on modalities of accumulation and fungibility, not exploitation and alienation.”¹⁵ Jared Sexton furthers the discussion in important ways:

Nothing in afro-pessimism suggests that there is no black (social) life, only that black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage, of all the things that colonial society has in common with the colonized, of all that capital has in common with labor—the modern world system. Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived under-

¹³ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 14.

¹⁴ Cornel West, “Nietzsche’s Prefiguration of Postmodern American Philosophy,” in *Cornel West Reader*, ed. George Yancey (New York: Basic Civitas, 1999), 208.

¹⁵ Frank Wilderson, III, *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), chap. 2.

ground, in outer space. . . . Black life is not social, or rather that black life is lived in social death. Double emphasis, on lived and on death. That's the whole point of the enterprise at some level.¹⁶

Just as one's status as a slave/non-slave/former-slave governed (although it didn't over-determine) the existence of blackness before/immediately after emancipation, afro-pessimism locates the regimes of surveillance and policing at the center of definitions of blackness in the twenty-first century.¹⁷ Pushing back against fissures within our notions of color, class, sexuality, geography, and so on, the discourse surrounding Black Lives Matter, like Afro-Pessimism, focuses on the ways that state violence enacted disproportionately upon black bodies not only impacts black communities and their members, it also affect the very definition of blackness in America.¹⁸ This point is clearly lost on those who cite black-on-black crime and those who would cite the purported silence from activists as evidence that the movements that have galvanized around Black Lives Matter are not concerned with social justice. All forms of violence, including state-sponsored violence and gang violence, anchors in white supremacist, state-sponsored violence. Black Lives Matter makes this connection clear in its platform and its daily organizing, which addresses a wide range of pressing problems, each with deep roots in the structures of inequality on which agents of state-sponsored violence feed. It attempts to bring blackness into the light; an attempt to make clearly discernible what is, and long has been, "illegible" in America;¹⁹ as an ontology, a political construct, and a lived experience, blackness is assigned a negative value within the white supremacist imagination, and Black Lives Matter by highlighting the mounting evidence for this negative value, is taking steps to immediately and irrevocably revise this value upwards.

Afro-pessimism also identifies spaces apart from dominant white institutions in which proponents can enact resistance. These are the spaces that Sexton refers to as "underground" places, as places "in outer space."²⁰ Black life, love, and appreciation exist in these underground spaces, and Black Lives Matter has highlighted this fact by making the conversation about black lives, their worth, and the struggle for existence a simultaneously private and public affair. Whether it is in tight-knit communities or on social media, Black Lives Matter is finding a mostly receptive audience in the spaces dedicated to lived freedom and individual worth. This is not what Sexton refers to as the "world that the world lives in,"²¹ though it is a world in which so many of us par-

¹⁶ Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *InTensions*, no. 5, (2011): <http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue5/articles/pdfs/jaredsextonarticle.pdf>.

¹⁷ Here its maybe more accurate to look at Huey P. Newton's dissertation on the Black Panthers (<http://ouleft.org/wp-content/uploads/Huey-WATP.pdf>) in which he shows that legal blacks were excluded from justice in the Constitution and any other legal documents so that American democracy as a limited democracy through representation excludes Blacks even at the limit of being a limited democracy. Huey P. Newton, "War against the Panthers: A Study of Repression in America" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 1980). Shout out to Texas A&M Graduate Student, Dalitso Ruwe for pointing out that this is what Wilderson is trying to get at using slave ontology except the concept falls short when mapped onto history. Ruwe, a mentee of Julius Bailey, notes, "By showing the structure of limited democracy Newton shows we are outside the bounds of justice and always exposed to white violence and vulnerable to being Niggerized" (interview with Julius Bailey, June 12, 2015).

¹⁸ One can read Wilderson's claim and Sexton's also as pessimistic because it doesn't (and likely cannot) account for the historical realities of runaways, slave revolts and even Maroon societies in which Africans rejected the very ontology of being a slave.

¹⁹ Reference to Mark Anthony Neal, *Looking For Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities* (New York: NYU Press, 2013).

²⁰ Jared Sexton, "Anti-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts," *Lateral11*, <http://www.lateral.culturalstudiesassociation.org/issue1/content/sexton.html>.

²¹ Sexton, "Anti-Anti-Blackness."

ticipate. “The world that the world lives in” is the world in which some people maim and murder black bodies with impunity. It is the world that Black life is lived in social death, and, from within its space of relative freedom that is the underground, Black Lives Matter shines a spotlight on this world and the partial or non-existence it offers for Black Americans.

Challenges to White Privilege

Though these may make up the bulk of its representations in social and popular media, Black Lives Matter is not limited to hashtags, signs, and t-shirts. We also see it at work in the rhetorical challenges to the persistent devaluation of black life and in the systemic efforts to combat the cultural and social murder of Blackness. Following the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, African Americans descended upon Twitter, Instagram and Facebook to disrupt the media’s almost immediate attempt to blame Brown for his own death. While taking to the streets with signs in hand, donning shirts to make Black humanity clear, the ease and reach of social media proved to be an important tool.

The focus on his purported criminal background and on the events from earlier in the day, as well as the focus on the fact that Brown was “no angel”²² reflected the appallingly widespread refusal to see black life as a life worthy of celebration and protection. These virtual protests worked to challenge the societal stereotypes that govern the way that black bodies are represented (and indeed treated as well). It is a challenge to the politics of respectability, which has historically demanded that movements for justice only be granted legitimacy when they develop around those who can be said to have lived a blameless life. It is a space from which can emerge fierce resistance to the public shaming and criminalization of victims. When these victims are branded as “criminals” or “thugs” it lends credence to the narrative that the right wing media can be counted upon to offer up whenever these cases garner national attention—namely, that the real victim is the poor officer, who is being convicted in the court of public opinion before all the evidence has been heard. The dead black body is an afterthought in many of these proceedings. Michael Brown and Eric Garner are not victims according to this narrative; their deaths are rationalized and excused in ways that prove their lives do not register as even remotely valuable.

Inspired by the ability of Black Lives Matter to change the conversation about black victims of state-sponsored violence, Black Americans took to social media with the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, placing photographs of themselves next to each other. One of the photographs would mirror dominant stereotypes of black men and women; the other would defy these stereotypes and the expectations they engender. For example, one image showed a young black male puffing smoke and wearing a hoodie alongside a picture of the same young man in his Naval uniform. Another showed a young black woman, her hat tilted to one side, alongside a picture of her in her cap and gown.²³

While working through a juxtaposition that questioned what and how white America sees when it sees blackness, these tweets highlighted the visual cues that are used by the media and the state to justify the unjustifiable—namely, Black Death. The criminalization and dehumaniza-

²² David J. Leonard, “When All the Angels Are White,” *Gawker*, September 13, 2014, <http://gawker.com/when-all-the-angels-are-white-1634298232>.

²³ See “If They Gunned Me Down,” *Tumblr*, <http://iftheygunnedmedown.tumblr.com/>. Yesha Callahan, “#IfTheyGunnedMeDown Shows How Black People Are Portrayed in Mainstream Media,” *The Root*, August 11, 2014, http://www.theroot.com/blogs/the_grapevine/2014/08/_iftheygunnedmedown_shows_how_black_people_are_portrayed_in_mainstream_media.html.

tion of blackness requires the hyper visibility of “thug” imagery and the erasure of the respectability that accompanies uniforms and caps and gowns. The juxtaposition of “no angel” photos with photos that demand respect from the viewer sought to highlight the role that the media plays in shaping not only blackness, but guilt and innocence as well. Many of the posts asked which of the photos the media would use were they to be involved in a deadly altercation with a police officer or even a neighborhood watch member with a taste for vigilante justice. What would white America see if shown the “no angel” photo without the other photo to balance it? If shown both photos, which would they give precedence? Would they see a thug, a criminal, a pot-smoking threat, or a soldier, a student, a professor, a doctor, a son, daughter, father, mother and loved one? To say “Black Lives Matter” is to challenge the cultural equation of Blackness with criminality. To say “Black Lives Matter” is to challenge the presumed innocence and entrenched privileges afforded to whiteness. It is to see police violence against black bodies in a different light. The recent instance of the McKinney, Texas police officer caught on video manhandling a 15-year-old black girl and pulling his gun on two unarmed teens is yet more hard evidence to back the claims of Black Lives Matter. Moreover, at the same time, the almost immediate resignation of the officer involved (rather than an attempt to defend his conduct as even remotely justified) shows that we may be turning the corner, if not in terms of a massive diminishment in the level of police violence with black bodies at its target, at least in terms of those responsible for this violence being held to account for their actions.

What is most apparent in the coverage of the McKinney incident is the media’s apparent unwillingness to bring its tired narrative into play. Excepting those on the extreme right, there has been no attempt to paint the black youths in the video as “thugs” or “gangsters.” These labels are an attempt to justify state violence against black bodies, and the absence of these labels in recent media coverage is telling. As a movement, Black Lives Matter has struggled with the demonization of black youth in Baltimore and Ferguson (and, indeed, in almost every city in America), who have been labeled as criminals and thugs without ever doing anything remotely deserving of these labels. Black Lives Matter has been about more than just the safeguarding of black lives. It has also been about demonstrating that, despite the labels and stereotypes attached to black youths, their actions are about protecting black life in a society condition to only see Black Death.

For example, in a piece documenting the key words of black protest, Shana Redmond and Damien Soyjoyner offered a powerful redefinition of thug that once again operates through the framework of Black Lives Matter through its embrace of all black lives and its refutation of those rhetorical and institutional practices that reduce black bodies to thugs and criminals, unworthy of sympathy, protection, or even rights.

Thug: The so-called “criminals and thugs” described by President Barack Obama in his response to the events of 2015 Baltimore are, in the century of the US prison, a racialized group. Despite arguments to the contrary, “thug” is not a universally or equally applied term, making it the reserve of a select few. As Seattle Seahawks Cornerback Richard Sherman and Baltimore City Councilman Carl Stokes separately argued, “thug” is now a proxy for “nigger,” exhibiting a kinder, gentler racism that is no less consequential for its target. When delivered by the nation’s first Black president or the Black female mayor of Baltimore, the word thug is not divorced from this racial code but rather fortified by its incorporation into the US “multiculturalist white supremacy,” in which people of color—like the president and Baltimore mayor—become spokespeople and executors for further dispossession and violence.²⁴

²⁴ Shana Redmond and Damien Soyjoyner, “Keywords in Black Protest: A(n Anti-) Vocabulary,” *Truthout*, May 29,

Reflecting our own hip-hop sensibilities, we certainly do not see “thug” as a universally pejorative term. Yet, within hegemonic discourses, which so often construct blackness and thuggery as synonymous, the thuggification of blackness contributes to the devaluing of black life. Black Lives Matter has challenged those narratives that pejoratively describe inner-city black youth as thugs, thereby denying them the right to resist, the right to use their voice and agency. Furthermore, it represents a rebuke to a world view that simultaneously imagines black youth as unredeemable criminals and sees whiteness as the spotless hue (necessarily ignoring the white criminals on Wall Street, in motorcycle gangs, and countless other spaces).

Whether it is in the application of a coded language that refers exclusively to black youths or in the attempt to reflect criticisms of police violence back onto the victims of that violence, there is a clear double standard in the way that the media discusses black and white criminals. This double standard allows the media to minimize the threat posed by biker gangs in Waco or white supremacists in Arizona, revealing the ways that the criminalization of blackness works alongside the privilege and assumed innocence of whiteness. The efforts from activists and commentators (from DeRay McKesson to Britney Cooper, from Jesse Williams to Charlene Carruthers, from Garza and Moore to Tometi and Cullors)²⁵ who have been at the forefront of the Black Lives Matter movement, have coalesced to highlight the hypocrisy apparent in both the media and the criminal justice system in terms of the unquestionably unequal treatment of black and white subjects. Specifically, in refusing to label biker gangs and white supremacist groups as “thugs” and as “threats to safety and security,” the media demonstrates how society affords whiteness a degree of humanity and cultural/racial innocence that blackness is not.

This is the case even when white criminals have engaged in widespread criminal or even terrorizing activities. Place the media and political discourse that followed the events in Ferguson and Baltimore alongside the discourse that occurred after the events in Waco and Phoenix. There was no examination of widespread problems in white America, nor was there any attempt to shift the blame from the individuals involved to the cultures that raised them. Country music, rock and roll, and heavy metal were absent from discussions, and the culprits’ fashion choices were left entirely un-scrutinized. There were certainly no calls from the white pundits to put an end to the nationwide scourge of white-on-white crime. This blatant double standard was widely discussed by activists from within the space opened for them by Black Lives Matter. The successful discursive intervention provided the tools, the language, and the receptive audience they needed to show the discontinuity in the media’s coverage of white criminality. Black Lives Matter has proved itself more than a successful discursive tool; it has brought under one tent the calls for justice, the calls to end the systematic disregard for black life, and the drives for community, voice, and future.

Dreaming

In *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Robin D. G. Kelley writes, “Without new visions, we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneu-

2015, <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/31051-keywords-in-black-protest-a-n-anti-vocabulary>.

²⁵ This is a select few of many social media activists who have been torchbearers advancing the discourse, ensuring its visibility and challenging those who cross their widely reached paths, to see the systemic challenges that people of color continue to endure in American life.

vers and tactics, but a process that can and must transform us.”²⁶ By new visions, Kelley does not mean we need to re-examine our collective destination, for we know what we want, for we, each of us, understand what freedom and equality look like, and we know that what we have is, at best, a crude simulacrum. Our goal has not changed; the vision remains the same, but this is not the vision that Kelley is talking about. It is not the goal but how we are to achieve it that must be examined with new eyes. We must seek new perspectives, new paths to the same goal, and, as Black Lives Matter has shown, starting with a basic and irrefutable premise that can be rallied around on a massive scale can be more efficacious in terms of moving communities towards the justice they seek. The expressions of black love, the creation of spaces of protest, the demands for justice that follow, each can gather momentum and spread to become large-scale social movements that can no longer be ignored. To recite “Black Lives Matter” might begin as a statement of the obvious, but its implications are not obvious. Black lives that matter make an outrage of the current social, political, and economic climate. Black lives that matter necessitates the demand for an alternative to the present racial configuration in the United States.

²⁶ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, xii.