

The Life of Racism Post-Trump

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Now that Donald Trump is ousted from presidency, the blatantly racist and misogynistic remarks incessantly spewed by Trump will, to our relief, subside from our view—that is, at least from our full view. On the other hand, Kamala Harris who has been attacked with such hateful name-calling as “monster” —with a whole set of racist and misogynistic implications encapsulated in this tired and tiresome clichéd word, but at the same time also offensively recalling the multiple discriminations of the subaltern black women: misogynoir— by Trump himself, is hailed by the US media and the world, as the first woman vice president, an African American and South Asian woman, at that. In the midst of these dramatic turns, we are understandably tempted to see this as a sign of historical progress in the US racial history. It also gives us pause to reflect on the recent racial trauma wrought by excessive policing and horrific violence that brought the world to witness an unprecedented mobilization of people all over the world in support of the Black Lives Matter Movement (hereafter BLM) in June, squarely in the middle of the pandemic.

Surely, Harris’s breaking of the glass ceiling symbolizes a step towards gender and racial equality in the US, and a shying away from the kind of shameless endorsement of white supremacist hatemongering among Americans. But predictably and rightly so, many will also argue that Harris’s vice-presidency poses the danger of being interpreted as a visible sign of tokenism that the poet Audre Lorde once insightfully criticized. Furthermore, the exceptional rise to power by one African-American/South Asian American woman might also trigger a strong resistance against further discussions on race—such as reparation and affirmative action—on the part of the establishment that will foreseeably use Harris as a case in point for the déjà vu post-race era, via Obama.

Having said this, it must also be conceded that this time around, unlike the triumphant touting of the post-race era by the right-wing politicians and think tanks as soon as Barack

Obama became the president, it will not be so easy for those espousing Trumpism to contend that Harris's vice-presidency signals another post-race era. Americans have already learned the hard way that one black (biracial) male president will not make amends for the hundreds of years of entrenched racism in the US. Americans will be less likely to naively believe that one half black, half Asian female vice president will transform the bleak racial landscape. It will not be so easy to cover up the façade of the ugly face of racism staring into the faces of Americans, especially with the 70 million people who firmly voiced their support of Trump. These supporters did not vote for Trump *despite* Trump's racist and misogynistic views, words and policies. They voted for Trump precisely because of his racist and misogynistic credentials. In this sense, Trumpism is very much alive. And racism is very much alive. Those who voted for Trump are clearly sending the message that they are very comfortable with blatant racism and misogyny; that they would very much prefer it that racial inequality stay an integral part of the American Way.

Black Bodies (at Peril) and “Anti-Will”

The American historical landscape is strewn with dismembered and maimed black bodies. The dead bodies that populated the slave ships, the exploited human flesh of the slavery era which lasted for 200 years, lynched and burnt bodies after the Civil War to the 1950's, tortured and policed bodies during the civil unrest of the 1950's to 1970's, the countless beaten bodies during the urban riots, and the shocking viral images of George Floyd's death in the present moment, all unmistakably show the vulnerability of black bodies in US history. The profound bodily and spiritual suffering of black Americans is reflected in and can be felt in the works of black literary writers whose texts are overwhelmed with the images of torn and dismembered black bodies. Just to note a few, Baby Suggs names and enunciates every human body part, and urges the black community to love their bodies as “they [whites] do not love your neck unnoosed and straight” (Toni Morrison, *Beloved* 104), Michael Harper rages over the destruction of black masculinity in the poetic rendition of “[S]ex fingers toes,” “genitals gone” and “diseased liver” (“Dear John, Dear Coltrane”), and Gwendolyn Brooks commemorates the lynched body of the 14-year old boy Emmett Till through the lynched boy's mother's

immeasurable sorrow and disbelief as she “kisses her killed boy” (“The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till”).

The long reiteration of black history above is not intended to merely allude to black victimhood in the violent and bloody racist American history. Slavery has obviously been over for more than 150 years, although Jim Crow lasted almost another 100 years after the Emancipation; and although it was only through the Civil Rights Movement that racial segregation was declared illegal in the US and the fundamental human rights of African Americans restored, at least *de jure*—despite its deferral *de facto*. Nevertheless, it is well known that the goals of the Civil Rights Movement were not fully achieved and confronted a severe backlash during the Reagan Era onwards. Of course, with affirmative action in place, African Americans broke the walls of the citadels of higher education, and the professional and managerial class among African Americans did see an increase. However, with the acceleration of the neoliberal order in late 20th and the 21st-century, the class divide became deeper, and the urban ghettos did not see much improvement. In fact, the life of poor blacks deteriorated further, as urban gentrification threw those in poverty into a deeper despair. Along with this, mass incarceration became part of the fabric of black life, creating legal barriers for those in the underclass to enter into civil society.

Most problematically, sociologist Orlando Patterson’s diagnosis of “social death” for blacks hardened into social policies that demonized and infantilized African Americans. As the legal scholar and critical race theorist Patricia Williams has stated, “one of the things passed on from slavery...is a belief structure rooted in a concept of black (or brown or red) antiwill, the antithetical embodiment of pure will...To be perceived as unremittingly without will is to be imbued with an almost lethal trait” (“On Being the Object of Property” 218-9). It is against this backdrop of the societal definition of black Americans as subhumans devoid of subjectivity, dignity and will (and thus “antiwill” and “anti-blackness”) that we can better understand the institutional police brutality against black Americans. Trayvon Martin’s death in 2012, followed by numerous deaths of black Americans at the hands of the police were not irregular cases, but in continuum with the long, painful racial history of the US. The instantaneous effect of the social media highlighted these incidents, which in turn, gave rise to the Black Lives Matter Movement.

Is BLM the New Civil Rights Movement of Twenty-First Century?

BLM quickly garnered support as a grassroots movement, the only visibly meaningful movement focused on race, since the 1960's Civil Rights Movement. And it bears mentioning that BLM did not start off as a reaction against Trump. Trayvon Martin's death occurred during President Obama's presidency, as we all vividly recall Obama giving an eloquent speech expressing sympathy for the victim. Obama went so far as to identify himself with the victim: "Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago." Even with sympathy literally welling out from the president, BLM did not succeed in becoming a widespread movement until the recent killing of George Floyd. Because BLM was created through an alliance of leaders of organizations that differed in character, it never reached the status of a tightly knit political organization.

Nevertheless, BLM can be regarded as the something that came closest to something akin to the Civil Rights Movement. It certainly succeeded in spreading strong sentiments across the world that anti-blackness and systemic racism can no longer be tolerated. The sight of Floyd's death shook the world, as hundreds of cities across the globe rose in anger in June. "Something deep had shaken the crowd...And yet all were touched; the song had aroused us all" (*Invisible Man*, 453). Just as the narrator of Ralph Ellison's novel looks upon the Harlem crowd sharing "transcendent emotion" in mourning the wrongful death of Clifton, we could see the world sharing angry sentiments in support of BLM. It seemed that BLM had galvanized worldwide support.

Even as BLM gained visibility, and many suburban lawns across the US became dotted with BLM signs, BLM shows some limitations as an effective political movement, yet to grow into a transformative movement that can actually engender changes in government policies. The most persuasive and challenging critique of BLM is waged by the political scientist Adolph Reed Jr. who has consistently raised the question of efficacy of BLM as a viable political movement. According to Reed, BLM's reliance on black nationalist rhetoric falls short of a trenchant class analysis that is crucial to understanding racial inequalities in the US. Reed points out that reliance on anti-racist sentiments "is not a different sort of egalitarian alternative to a class politics but is a class politics itself," and goes so far as to argue that "antiracist politics is in fact the left wing of neoliberalism" ("How Racial Disparity Does Not Help Make

Sense of Patterns of Police Violence”). Cederic Johnson, another vocal critic of BLM chimes in by adding that “BLM is more of a sentiment than a fully formed political force” (“The Triumph of BLM and Neoliberal Redemption”). Reed and Johnson’s main discontent with BLM is that heavy reliance on anti-racist “feelings” and sentiment against racial injustice fueled by white liberal guilt and black anger will only strengthen neoliberalism without addressing class inequalities, and the urgent need to form a white/black alliance among the working class.

While it is difficult to refute Reed and Johnson’s valid points about BLM’s reliance on anti-racism as the main ideological basis for resistance against the complicated web of factors that contribute to the current racial inequalities in the US, I would cautiously argue that Reed and Johnson tend to downplay the significance of shared “feelings” or sentiments among the supporters of BLM. BLM has, as Reed and Johnson point out, not fully developed into a transformative political movement that coheres around explicit policy changes. But grassroots movements tend to start off with vague and incoherent longings for societal changes, and without these “feelings,” the engine to mobilize and organize may soon be lost, as well. While the kind of emotional surgings and sentiments cannot by themselves solve inequalities by any means, they are symptomatic of the collective recognition that systemic inequalities must be urgently addressed.

Taking this into account, Reed and Johnson’s critique can be considered to be an attack on not the BLM movement per se, but rather, a warning against the dangers of being complacent in the feel-goodness of shared feelings expressed via hashtags and the social media. The challenge for us is: if the hashtag politics is inextricably connected to the neoliberal economy, how do we extricate ourselves from being immersed in the cultural terrain and move on to a momentous political movement that will bring about felt racial progress Post-Trump?

Towards “Positive Peace”

Malcolm X has famously stated that the American Dream is in fact an American nightmare. Less well known is the fact that Martin Luther King Jr., known mostly for his “I Have a Dream” speech has also asserted that his dream has turned into a nightmare. But the real nightmare of today’s US racial politics may be that the obstacles towards racial progress may

lie not amongst the Trump supporters, but among those well-intended liberals who may easily agree with the goals of BLM, and even chant along via hashtag, but are resistant to changes in the status quo. In the words of King Jr, these may be “the [white] moderate, who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice” (“Letter from Birmingham Jail”). They may be sitting in the orderly suburbs, undisturbed in a “negative peace.” Or as the narrator of *Invisible Man* wryly asks, “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”

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