

EVERYTHING IS A STORY

Editor

Maria Antónia Lima

EVERYTHING IS A STORY: CREATIVE INTERACTIONS IN ANGLO-AMERICAN STUDIES

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Perspectives on Black Lives Matter: Ta-Nehisi Coates and Wesley Lowery

GONÇALO CHOLANT

University of Coimbra, Faculty of Arts and Humanities and CES

The Black Lives Matter Movement was founded in 2013 as a response to police brutality and violence against black people in the United States, emerging from the Twitter hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. It was created by the founding members Alicia Garza, Patrice Cullors, and Opal Tometi, in the sequence of the assassination of Trayvon Martin. Virtual activism became real as the movement gathered physically in Ferguson under this hashtag after the assassination of Michael Brown in 2014. As rapper and activist Tef Poe declared: “This ain’t your grandparents’ civil rights movement.” Some of the characteristics of this new form of protest are its decentralization in several self-organized chapters (understood here as the local branches representing the movement), the lack of a clear unitary leadership, as well as a shunning of respectability politics. The founders, for instance, do not belong to any specific chapter, though they are the most identifiable names associated with the movement, revealing that the Black Lives Moment favors a more horizontal approach to organization. In a piece for *The New Yorker* titled “The Matter of Black Lives,” published in March 2016, Jelani Cobb comments on the difference between the generations of movements and the focus given to leadership, as reported by Patrice Cullors and Alicia Garza:

Cullors says, “The consequence of focusing on a leader is that you develop a necessity for that leader to be the one who’s the spokesperson and the organizer, who tells the masses where to go, rather than the masses understanding that we can catalyze a movement in our own community.” Or, as Garza put it, “The model of the black preacher leading people to the promised land isn’t working right now.” Jesse Jackson – a former aide to King and a two-time Presidential candidate, who won seven primaries and four caucuses in 1988 – was booed when he tried to address young protesters in Ferguson, who saw him as an interloper. That response was seen as indicative of a generational divide. But the divide was as much philosophical as it was generational, and one that was visible half a century earlier. (36)

The works that are going to be analyzed here deal with the movement in different perspectives, indirectly in the case of Ta-Nehisi Coates, and more in depth, in the case of Wesley Lowery, who covered the protests of the Black Lives Movement from its inception. In *We Were Eight Years in Power – An American Tragedy* (2017), the journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates explores the two terms of the Obama administration preceding the Trump Era. The “We” in the title may be understood as either the democrats at large, or, more specifically, as the African Americans, who experience Americanness differently, as they no longer see a representative of their own in the country’s highest office. A situation that evidences that the social and racial improvement that might have existed during this period, even if relative, appears to be purposefully in jeopardy during the current administration. The tragedy in the subtitle may refer to the continuous backlash experienced in America every time a sign of racial progress is achieved. Some examples that illustrate this are the Jim Crow laws in the sequence of the abolition of slavery; the racist practice of redlining in the aftermath of Reconstruction, and the war on drugs and the rise of police violence as a result of black empowerment in the 1970s and 1980s.

The main core of Coates’ text – the eight chapters dedicated to the Obama administration – had previously been published in *The Atlantic* between 2009 and 2017. Yet, the novelty of the compilation resides in the benefit of the hindsight. He expands the former texts with addendums that are called notes from the 1st, 2nd, or 3rd year, and so on, offering context and cohesion to the previously published pieces, enriching and developing the themes that had been approached before. This complex work combining essay, memoir, history and political science, offers a broader understanding of a lived history, as it revises the analysis proposed in contrast to the current political climate, and in its polyphony, giving the writer an opportunity to deliver a more complete and reflexive account. In his compelling explanation, the journalist states that the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement seem fragile to the clamor of present day’s slogan “Make America Great Again,” a reminiscing about a time in which social roles were more clearly defined by race and gender, and in which whiteness was uncontestedly the rod against which all others had to be compared. The exact time that Trump refers is unclear, but it could be found mainly between the decades of 1930 and 1950.

In 1998, in a piece for *The New Yorker*, Toni Morrison defined that Bill Clinton was the first black president, stating that:

[...] white skin notwithstanding, this is our first black President. Blacker than any actual black person who could ever be elected in our children's lifetime. After all, Clinton displays almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald's-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas.

The election of Barack Obama would deliver the first African-American president, though his blackness would be questioned during his two terms, either as not relatable to the majority of the black population – given his Ivy League education, for instance – or as a threat to the whiteness standard that has held Americanness together, exemplified in the “birtherism” movement that claimed Obama’s foreignness, and therefore illegitimacy. The election of Donald Trump, “America’s first white president” (344), as Coates cunningly defines him, meaning a president that holds its core identity in whiteness, is illustrative of the power of the white backlash that we have been witnessing. Coates states: “It is often said that Trump has no real ideology, which is not true – his ideology is white supremacy in all of its truculent and sanctimonious power” (342). The election of Obama, and the inauguration of the so called “Post-racial” America, made room for an imaginary plain level field where white supremacy could rise again with more force after years of subjugation under the promise of the incessant stride for a more perfect union, often (if not mistakenly) epitomized in the Obama figure. Wesley Lowery, also a journalist, is the author of “They Can’t Kill Us All – Ferguson, Baltimore, and a New Era in America’s Racial Justice Movement” (2017) – retrospectively, he comments on Obama’s election and the contradiction and disappointment in terms of race that would characterize his administration:

It’s worth remembering now, as the Obama presidency has come to its close, what it was like to live inside the moment when his ascendancy was a still-unfolding fact. After a seemingly never-ending sea of firsts – first black mayors, first black governors, and first black senators – to have reached that ultimate electoral mountaintop, the presidency, seemed then to have validated decades of struggle. But the nation’s grappling with race and the legacy of its original sin – ongoing since the first slaves arrived in Jamestown in 1619 – was and is far from over. Any façade of a postracial reality was soon melted away amid the all-consuming eight-year flame of racial reckoning that Obama’s election sparked. (13-14)

The Black Lives Matter Movement is one of the forces that currently contests the alleged racial progress in the United States, as the killing of black citizens, and the mobilized protests that ensued, would tarnish the administration in its symbolic promise to answer questions related to equality and discrimination. Lowery points to the mistrust felt by the African-America community during the Obama administration, as the numbers of police brutality seemed to rise, in spite of having a black leadership in power:

A new generation of black Americans were, if anything, as emboldened by our black president as they were unsurprised by the failure of his election to usher in a fantasy period of racial healing. From the death of Oscar Grant on New Year's Eve in 2009 after he was shot by a transit officer in Oakland, California, to the death of Trayvon Martin in February 2012 by the gun of neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida, the headlines of the Obama years often seemed a yearbook of black death, raising a morbid and depressing quandary for black men and women: Why had the promise and potential of such a transformative presidency not yet reached down to the lives of those who elected him? Even the historic Obama presidency could not suspend the injunction that playing by the rules wasn't enough to keep you safe. What protection was offered by a black presidency when, as James Baldwin once wrote, the world is white, and we are black? (15)

In "Notes from the 5th year," the preamble to the 5th chapter "Fear of a Black President," Coates analyses the ways in which Obama was restricted by the racism that inherently accompanied the president during its administration. This is 2013, the year after the shooting of Trayvon Martin, and the Black Lives Matter Movement flourished during the second term of Obama's administration. Obama's pronouncement on Trayvon Martin's case, the famous sound bite in which one can hear him saying that had he had a son, he would have looked like Trayvon, created a backlash in the administration coming from white America, who considered that a black president was choosing sides.

Coates had previously touched topics related to racism and the insecurity of the black body in the United States in *Between the World and Me*, published in 2015. Throughout this book, he does not specifically mention the Black Lives Matter Movement, the text takes place in the sequence of the acquittal of Michael Brown's killer (on 24 November 2014), and also deals with the assassination of Trayvon Martin. Yet, in *We Were Eight Years in Power*, published in 2017, Coates comments on the relationship between the Black Lives Matter

Movement and the Obama's presidency, as the activists refused to meet with him in the beginning of 2016, during a summit in which many African American social movements and activists were invited to the White House. As the Black Lives Matter movement is a more decentralized kind of organization, Opal Tometi, one of its founding members, asked the chapter in Chicago, the city where Obama's political life had started, if such meeting would be of any use. Meanwhile, Obama responded to the snub by calling the movement out in speeches, as quoted by Coates:

You can't refuse to meet because that might compromise the purity of your position [...] The value of social movements and activism is to get you at the table, get you in the room, and then start trying to figure out how is this problem going to be solved. You then have a responsibility to prepare an agenda that is achievable – that can institutionalize the changes you seek – and to engage the other side. (320)

Fearing being used as tokens for change, the refusal to meet with the government translates into the will to resist the power apparatus which the movement seeks to alter. The meeting, intended as an opportunity for different generations of activism to meet, was seen with distrust by the Black Lives Matter leadership. In an interview with Coates, Tometi commented:

They felt – and I think many of our members felt – there wouldn't be the depth of discussion that they wanted to have [...] And if there wasn't that space to have a real heart-to-heart, and if it was just surface level, that it would be more of a disservice to the movement. (Coates 321)

For this summit, The White House invited DeRay Mckesson, Brittany Packnett, and Aislinn Pulley, all activists connected to the anti-racist struggle. Pulley, one of the leaders of the Chicagoan Black Lives Matter chapter, refused to attend, while the other two guests took part in the meeting. Cobb wrote about this meeting, stating that:

[...] it wasn't entirely surprising when [Aislinn] Pulley, a community organizer in Chicago, declined the White House invitation, on the ground that the meeting was nothing more than a "photo opportunity" for the President. She posted a statement online in which she said that she 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. (34)

In the same text, which is a profile of Alicia Garza, Cobb comments that the former president, who had previously built a political career as a community leader and organizer, oriented his perspective for change and emancipation through the lenses of electoral politics. Obama's constraints inside the White House are proof for the social movements' younger generations that the president's choice might not have been the best in the face of present day inequalities, since changing the structural character of racist practices and oppression from the inside, even with a black person occupying the highest office in the nation, seems to be at best slow, and at its worst completely ineffective. Cobb draws a comparison between Obama's strategy and the mentality of the Black Lives Matter Movement, singled out here in the figure of one of its founders, stating that Garza belongs to a generation of activists who have surveyed the circumstances of Obama's term and decided that it was not a model to be followed.

Coates had the chance to interrogate Obama on the matter, who responded that he understood the position taken by the movement, though he felt a little hurt by the stance, since he believed that, sometimes, activists did not recognize the lack of room for direct action inside the political system. He stated:

The reason I say that is because those are the times where sometimes you feel actually a little bit hurt. Because you feel like saying to these folks, "[Don't] you think if I could do it, I [would] have just done it? Do you think that the only problem is that I don't care enough about the plight of poor people, or gay people?" (321-322)

Notice here the absence of the marker of race. It makes one wonder if the distancing from the matter is once again a calculated effort made towards a "race-neutral" position.

Coates pushes the notion of the validity of the mistrust that activism might hold against the government, to which Obama responded:

[...] I think there is a benefit to wanting to hold power's feet to the fire until you actually see the goods. I get that. And I think it is important. And frankly, sometimes it's useful for activists just to be out there to keep you mindful and not

get complacent, even if ultimately you think some of their criticism is misguided. (322)

Lowery deals with a closer approach to the protesters and organizers of demonstrations and the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as the context in which the response arose. Regarding the Obama administration, Lowery admits the ambiguity of this peculiar moment, in which African Americans were both elevated by the achievement of the dream of a black president and deeply affected by state violence, commanded, even if indirectly, by this same figure. He remarks:

A new generation of black Americans were, if anything, as emboldened by our black president as they were unsurprised by the failure of his election to usher in a fantasy period of racial healing. [...] the headlines of the Obama years often seemed a yearbook of black death, raising a morbid and depressing quandary for black men and women: Why had the promise and potential of such a transformative presidency not yet reached down to the lives of those who elected him? (15)

America is still perceived as exceptional in Obama's rhetoric, a representation that renders invisible the plight of those who still do not participate in the exceptional sector of the narrative of the nation. There is, of course, the recognition of the oppressions felt by the downtrodden, but the lack of effective structural change makes impossible to trust this position of aggrandizement. Lowery states:

Unlike politicians who through rhetoric pine for some alleged greatness of years past, Obama keeps his belief in American greatness rooted in the reality of the shortcomings and injustices of generations past, and premises it on the hope of a greater America yet to come. On election night 2008, he declared that "that's the true genius of America: that America can change." (178)

This ideology has been the focus of many critiques by the activists in the Black Lives Matter Movement, who see in this perspective "[...] the condescending moralizing and equivocating of a politician who had long abandoned his activist roots" (Cobb 179). Lowery was present in Ferguson during the first protests after the killing of Michael Brown, as he was sent by *The Washington Post* to cover the incident. He was also part of the team that won the Pulitzer Prize in reporting in 2016, for the "Fatal Force" project, an investigation that

sought to create a database about the police shootings of the previous year, since there was none provided by the federal government. In *They Can't Kill Us All*, the role of social media is evident in Lowery's investigation, bringing to the forefront the centrality of Twitter, Facebook and Snapchat in the organizing of popular mobilization, as well as video evidence provided by the new technologies:

As protests propelled by tweets and hashtags spread under the banner of Black Lives Matter and with cell phone and body camera video shining new light on the way police interact with minority communities, America was forced to consider that not everyone marching in the streets could be wrong. Even if you believe Mike Brown's own questionable choices sealed his fate, did Eric Garner, John Crawford, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, and Sandra Bland all deserve to die? (13)

Lowery's approach to activists on the ground, grants the readership a different kind of access into the machinations and directions that the social movement in question takes. He is critical of the media's role in the making of this narrative in its immediacy, focusing on the here and now, and inadvertently erasing all that has led to this moment. He states: "There are no isolated incidents, yet the media's focus on the victim and the officer inadvertently erases the context of the nation's history as it relates to race, policing, and training for law enforcement" (Cobb 36). In this regard, Lowery brings relevant figures to best understand the history of police brutality: "Out of probably more than ten thousand fatal police shootings by on-duty police officers between 2004 and 2014, just fifty-four officers had been charged with a crime – and very few of those were actually convicted" (Cobb 46).

To conclude this reflection, and focusing on the current political climate in the United States, in a piece for Slate.com titled "What the President won't say," Jamelle Bouie writes of the break in the pattern experienced during the current Trump administration when dealing with matters related to violence against black and brown peoples in the United States. "Trump is so vocal about what he likes and dislikes – so present in the national conversation – that his *omissions* are often more revealing than his comments. On the rare occasions when this president is silent, it is consistently when confronted with violence against nonwhites." The author makes a brief timeline of the Oval Office's previous occupants to stress that both Democrats and Republicans always felt the

need to address concerns that speak to the racial chasm that has historically plagued the country, citing examples related to Trayvon Martin, Alton Sterling, Philando Castille, the Jena Six, Rodney King, Amadou Diallo, among others.

Bouie's commentary comes after the shooting and killing of Stephon Clark on the evening of March 18, 2018, in his grandmother's yard in Sacramento, California. The police was allegedly on the lookout for a suspect for breaking windows. Clark was shot six times in the back. Police officers presumed Clark was carrying a gun, which turned out to be his cellphone. He was twenty-two-years old. Sara Huckabee Sanders, the current Press Secretary, dismissed the incident as a local matter, leaving the responsibility of addressing of such injustice to local entities. Bouie quoted the press secretary: "Certainly, we want to make sure that all law enforcement is carrying out the letter of the law. The president is very supportive of law enforcement, but at the same time in these specific cases and these specific instances, those will be left up to the local authorities." This incident, however, comes in line with those that sparked the outrage against the killing of black lives and is surely to be considered a matter of national interest.

The disregard for black and brown lives during the Trump administration is clear in the silences performed by such a loud character. Trump's position on immigration and immigrants; African Americans, and other ethnic groups; women in general, and his evident disregard for the crisis in Puerto Rico, are testament of the disgraceful state of affairs in questions related to race and racism in our times, making essential the presence of the Black Lives Matter movement as a voice for contestation and resistance more than ever before.

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