

## Black Lives Matter and the Politics of Redemption

Every political order is necessarily built upon the ashes of those who were swept aside to create their seat at the table. As such, any meaningful concept of justice must offer the potential for redemptive reconstruction, or else be swept away under the weight of historical memory (Meister, 2011). Suffering can never be erased, but through the instruments of justice, it may still be *redeemed*—that is to say: reincorporated into a legitimate moral order (Benjamin 1996). This process is particularly clear in the United States, whose self-image as a ‘redeemer nation’ is sustained through the valorization of heroes like Lincoln and King, who seem to illustrate the capacity for principles to overcome prejudice (Morone, 2003, pp. 9-21). Through its collective repudiation of past mistakes, with slavery being the foundational example, America marks itself as virtuous.

But what is achieved in this act of redemption? More bluntly: who is included within the redemptive order, and who is excluded? This question is especially pressing in the context of race, given the long history of arguments within black political thought over the recuperability of the American promise. On one side: those who believe in the power of higher principles to overwrite the histories within which they have been violated. These redeemers need not be particularly optimistic, but even in the pits of their despair they still hold fast to the possibility of justice to come. Dr. King is perhaps the most prominent voice for this perspective, but one might also point to W.E.B. Du Bois and Frederick Douglass, not to mention to the millions of rank-and-file believers who fought for the right to be included within the American Dream. On the other side: those without such faith, who perceive ‘justice’ as merely another name for rule by the sword. Here, Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey are perhaps the most famous examples.

This article joins the ongoing conversation by arguing that the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement offers a provocative, new approach to the problem of redemption. BLM defies traditional categorization, being comprised of a multifaceted, decentralized constellation of political forces often held together by little more than the associative power evoked by its titular phrase: ‘black lives matter.’<sup>1</sup> However, contained in that phrase is the potential for a complex reordering of politics, in which redemption is defined not by the *erasure* of blackness but rather by its preservation. This is a fragile possibility, located in the interstices of contingent and sometimes contradictory engagements which together comprise a new movement of practical political theory.

To illustrate: consider two valences of the phrase ‘black lives matter.’ On one side, it stands for integration into mainstream frameworks of political value. Black lives must be made to matter, and the oppressive structures that inhibit such valuation must be reconfigured to properly account for systemic biases. Police violence must be challenged, racial discrepancies must be resolved, and the fruits of a just society must be spread equally. In this respect, ‘black lives matter’ is a redemptive claim, calling for integration, equality, and a shared political future. Another perspective sees the phrase as a challenge to the basic structure of our political institutions. It rejects the promises of equality and opportunity as tokens of bad faith, sees the legal system as a technique of oppression that is inherently anti-black, and regards the idea of justice as a mockery. In this respect, ‘black lives matter’ is antagonistic, disruptive, and an effort to politicize the persistent devaluation of blackness by systems founded in white supremacy. It is a direct *challenge* to the politics of redemption.

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, I will occasionally distinguish the Black Lives Matter movement from its organizing phrase. The words ‘black lives matter’ obviously constitute the core principle of the BLM movement, but they have also infiltrated popular culture in a broader sense. These ideas may be used interchangeably, but in order to clarify the distinction, I use ‘BLM’ as shorthand for the social movement, and ‘black lives matter’ when referencing the phrase as a feature of popular discourse.

Whereas theories of racial justice typically demand that we choose one view or the other, by operating both within and against this redemptive tradition, BLM illustrate the need for returning such questions to the realm of *practical* political theory. Their politics is a grounded and material, finding little value in debating concepts like justice, equality, or freedom *as such*. When taken as abstract devices, these concepts are blended into the metanarratives of redemption, and serve little purpose but to shield liberal democracy from the obligation of reckoning with the irreducible exigency of race.

This point is rendered clearly in the debates over the difference between ‘black lives matter’ and ‘all lives matter.’ As a purely analytic question, the latter obviously encompasses the former. But as a matter of reality, they are in sharp conflict, with the ‘all lives’ claim serving to obscure rather than engage the problem of racial exclusion. This disconnection between promise and practice is hardly unique to BLM. What is new and interesting is the way that the tension has been signified. Against the tepid neutralizations that seek to render black lives as meaningful only to the extent that their blackness can be overwritten, BLM stands for the explicit engagement with blackness *qua* blackness. Foregrounding the claim that ‘black lives matter’ challenges the redemptive potential of justice writ large, by articulating a counter-practice that does not treat blackness as a problem in need of redemption but instead as a condition of life that must be valued in and of itself.

By centering their politics on the valuation of blackness BLM resists being assimilated into this nexus of abstraction whereby justice and redemption are blended together to whitewash the persistent fact of racial exclusion. In doing so, they affirm the possibility of (limited) positive political action that is capable of resisting liberalism’s ravenous hunger for the consumption of difference.

The article begins by discussing the importance of ‘black lives matter’ as an organizing phrase. The fluidity of its meaning, and the diversity of ways that it has been used and appropriated, establishes the broad and flexible terms upon which BLM’s political intervention has taken place. To develop this premise, I then focus attention on the importance of emphasizing *difference*, rather than acceding to the false neutralization of identity. By placing the status of racial identity at the core of their politics, BLM demonstrates both the possibilities and the limits of racial redemption. In this tension I discern some glimmers of hope: that black lives might be recognized *in their blackness*, and that the impulse toward redemption might be wielded *against* the impulse to whitewash lingering violence, rather than serving to sustain it.

### **What Does It Mean to Say That ‘Black Lives Matter’?**

The best entry point for analyzing the complexity of BLM is the words themselves: ‘black lives matter.’ What does this mean? Perhaps more importantly, what is the effect of saying it? Answering these questions is more difficult than it might seem. The phrase “might begin as a statement of the obvious, but its implications are not obvious” (Bailey and Leonard 2015, p. 77). In particular, because it contains “no substantive political objective other than affirming, or achieving, the sanctity of Black lives” (Ford, 2015), it is open to radically different interpretive signification. To illustrate this point, consider three different readings, and the consequent political responses they imply.

First: ‘black lives matter’ is a simple statement that certain lives should not be devalued for irrelevant reasons (such as skin color). In the context of modern liberal democracy, this is not a particularly controversial position, and is capable of being endorsed by even relatively conservative institutions like *The Economist* (2017), *National Review* (Durgin, 2016), and

erstwhile #NeverTrump presidential candidate David French (2016). According to this view, ‘black lives matter’ is simply a call to fulfill the basic promise of equality under the law: to make justice truly colorblind. That is by no means an easy task, but it poses no major *philosophical* challenges to existing institutions or values.

Second, it is a recognition of the enduring ways in which race subtly corrodes the promise of justice. Because black life is subject to persistent, systemic harassment and devaluation, one must actively strive to counteract this tendency, not simply assume that colorblind institutions will ensure equal treatment. This is essentially the ‘woke’ liberal response (Hess, 2016), or the “conservative revolutionary” politics of Barack Obama (Coates, 2017, pp. 3-4), which is sensitive to the role of subconscious bias and actively attentive to the need for cultivating social justice. This perspective calls for reorganization of democratic institutions and policies, and possibly even some soul-searching about basic values. Still, it remains essentially optimistic, viewing the American promise as tarnished, but recoverable. Its sins can be scrubbed away through hard and necessary work, leading to a better and brighter future.

Third, it is a radical assault on the American project. Given the irresolvable linkage between white supremacy and practices of justice, to say ‘black lives matter’ challenges the basis of American social solidarity. This leaves no meaningful room for accommodation or collaboration. Notably, variations of this third perspective may be found on different wings of the political spectrum, with many on both the far right and far left sharing a sense that ‘black lives matter’ constitutes a frontal assault on the principles of American democracy (while, obviously, disagreeing about whether this is a good thing).

There is value to each of these characterizations, and one could spin in endless circles debating which is the ‘true’ meaning. But such a search for authenticity should be resisted. There

*is* no core meaning to the phrase, just as there is no core spirit of the movement. Nor does it possess a consistent, unified theoretical architecture. Indeed, the willingness of its adherents to bypass “an either/or choice about which model of black liberation struggle they follow” is one of the most notable and interesting features of BLM (Joseph, 2017). Rather than picking sides, they instead seem to occupy an intentionally fraught space in between various choices—drawing heavily on both integration and resistance as mobilizing objectives.

Moreover, the incongruities of the core phrase are indicative of a larger truth at the interstices of these distinct interpretations: the simple reality that black life has not yet been—seemingly *cannot be*—folded into the sea of shared pluralism. That it remains necessary to *say* ‘black lives matter’ indicates the persistence of their differentiation, and invites speculation into the *meaning* of such discontinuity. Our task is to explore this ambiguity, not with the hope of resolving it but rather in the effort to disaggregate and evaluate its component parts. Doing so will reveal long-simmering conflicts within black political thought over the nature of equality, and illustrate how those issues have been refigured in the present era.

### **The Status of Black Life and the Politics of Difference**

Black protest against the unequal experience of law and order is an enduring force in American history, from Rodney King and Watts to Selma and slave rebellions. In some ways, BLM is a continuation of this process, and has rightly been characterized as “the birth of a new civil rights movement” (Day, 2015). But its politics also reflect the particular circumstances of its emergence: an era of great hope for racial progress—as represented by the election of Barack Obama—and grim recognition that such progress might be further away than ever—as represented by increasingly explicit appeals to white nationalism which have infused the political

landscape, culminating in the presidency of Donald Trump (Giroux, 2017). This mixture of optimism and doubt has generated a brand of political engagement fixated on *practices* more than *promises*. Compared to previous generations mobilized around the rectification of explicit racial discrimination, BLM begins from the recognition that *de jure* removal of racial distinctions has done little to resolve racial exclusions (Ghandnoosh, 2015).

The implications of this attitude become clear when placed into context of the common counter-claim that ‘all lives matter.’ In the early stages of BLM’s emergence, the use of this phrase was quite common, even among the movement’s ostensible left-leaning allies (Lind, 2015). Such usages quickly faded, however, as a set of arguments about *prioritization* took hold. As a *Vox* explainer summarized: “The point of Black Lives Matter isn't to suggest that black lives should be or are more important than all other lives, but instead that black people's lives are relatively undervalued in the US” (Lopez, 2015). In short, to say ‘black lives matter’ is not to deny the value of other lives, but merely to emphasize that black lives are currently being undervalued, and therefore to insist on the need for additional work to be done.

If the goal is to short-circuit trolling chants, the argument for prioritization is sufficient. It limits the scope of disagreement by taking the literal truth that ‘all lives matter’ as a shared principle, and merely seeking to expose how some lives currently do not receive the equal treatment that is implied by that claim. But this does not in fact settle the matter. There are other, more sophisticated variations on the claim for neutrality—which do not generally enunciate their terms so clearly, but which are more dangerous for precisely that reason. Engaging them will require digging more deeply into the question of ultimate compatibility.

Take, for instance, Mark Lilla’s (2016) critique of ‘identity liberalism,’ which acknowledges the value of BLM while subtly seeking to undermine the premises upon which it

is organized. For Lilla “the moral energy surrounding identity has, of course, had many good effects,” and he specifically notes that “Black Lives Matter has delivered a wake-up call to every American with a conscience.” However, he goes on to say, by insisting that justice claims be *centered* on black lives, BLM undermines the great promise of liberal democracy: the universalization of political life. The best way to value black lives, he believes, would be to emphasize their universality, not to fixate on their blackness.

Lilla’s argument reflects a persistent liberal allergy for the politics of identity. For the liberal, difference is a marker of injustice, a cage from which individuals must be freed. Justice is achieved via institutional devices that strip away the ensigns of difference and permit the members of polity to engage on equal terms, guided by the tools of reason rather than prejudice. Everyone is free, that is, when their identity is rendered wholly personal, and removed from its capacity to generate political exclusion (Mills, 2009). By this logic, the overt politicization of race actually risks undermining the cause of racial justice. If the goal is to ensure that black lives are treated as if they matter, best to emphasize their universality and de-emphasize their particularity. They will be valued appropriately once they are regarded as indistinguishable from white ones. The ultimate dream is a world where *difference* has been eradicated, replaced by the less dangerous (and more marketable) phenomenon of *individuality* (Young, 1990). The American project, by this account, is a project of *deracialization* in which all separations are spun away in the centrifuge, and a new continental unity is forged (Gerstle, 2001).

The problem of blackness, then, is its persistent and irresolvable difference. No matter the wealth, status, education, or political affiliation of the individual that inhabits the body, the skin itself marks a permanent form of difference. Observe Henry Louis Gates, professor at Harvard, arrested for trying to enter his own house. Observe Philando Castile, social worker beloved by



his students, murdered in front of his girlfriend and her four year old daughter for calmly stating a legal right. Observe Barack Obama, president of the United States, whose very status as an American was called into question by a racist conspiracy theory of forged birth papers.

In these cases, and so many others, black life *itself* is a problem for the American social order—something that Du Bois (1999, p. 9) perceived over a century ago. It is not simply that racists fear and hate black bodies. It is that the black body's very existence provides incontrovertible proof of the unsustainable premise of a truly universal practice of justice. In response, white America is left with little more than the process of “disremembering,” whereby the historical practices of persistent exclusion are hidden from view, out of fear that a serious engagement might tear apart the myths that sustain the coherence of the nation's underlying principles (Glaude, 2016, pp. 45-50).

In effect, the ‘problem’ of blackness is its irreducible difference, which can never be accommodated and therefore must either be devalued or pushed outside of the scope of political imagination. So long as the “value gap” between black and white lives infects American democracy, “it hardly matters what form our laws and politics take” (Glaude, 2016 p. 34). To the extent that ‘justice’ is possible, it is only available to those who are able (or permitted) to set aside their blackness. Nowhere in such promises is there room for a conversation about what it would mean to have a *specifically black* life that matters.

In this context, foregrounding the claim that *black lives matter* is an active intervention, which asserts the existence of persistent and powerful forms of oppression that linger within supposedly neutral systems (Rickford, 2016). As Bailey and Leonard (2015, p. 69) have argued, “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.” Any serious treatment of the movement must therefore consider the premise that its invocation of difference is not *merely* an argument for prioritization, but is also (at least partially) an argument for challenging the basic outlines of American democracy. The question that naturally follows: can justice be sustained on new terms, or is the promise necessarily hollow?

### **The Politics of Redemption and Distrust**

As described, BLM constitutes a deliberate provocation to dominant American mythologies. By specifying the need to value black lives *as black lives*, they pose a problem for the possibility of neutral, universal theories of justice. This intervention is worthy of study in and of itself, but its true import is less in this act of incitement and more in the resulting self-reflexive debates it produces *within* the BLM movement. Ultimately, the core question posed is simple: has racism “rendered the promise of America unfulfilled or altogether worthless” (Coaston, 2017)?

Once again, we find two conflicting points of view. On one side, a utopian faith in the radical *potential* of justice, which seeks to reclaim the promise of equality over and against the actual practices of contemporary political order. This is the *politics of redemption* (Shulman, 2008). On the other side, a determined pessimism, which organizes itself not merely against the practices and institutions of pluralistic liberalism but also against the redemptive promise that sustains them. This is the *politics of distrust*.

The redemptive approach is grounded in the possibility of empathic connection. It regards its targets of criticism as capable of rehabilitation, potential future allies whose moral

commitments should be taken seriously. By taking the oppressors at their word rather than their deed, the politics of redemption affirms the egalitarian roots of political culture, and reads those promises against the reality. This sense of optimism is not blind to the many barriers that must be breached in order to reach that promised land, but it nevertheless lives in faith that America's status as a "redeemer nation" might one day be fulfilled (Glaude, 2016, pp. 31-33).

To situate the redemptive impulse in the context of BLM, we should return to the problem of 'all lives matter.' From a redemptive perspective, that phrase is dangerous because it obscures the specific ways in which blackness is placed under attack. The underlying claim is of course true (all lives *do* matter), but its deployment shields whiteness from critique under the guise of universality. A redemptive approach to this problem would insist on taking the idea that all lives matter seriously, in order to show *precisely how* that promise has gone unfulfilled. This is a challenge to the constitutional order: bring the "bank of justice" out of default, make good on the "promissory note" of genuine equality for all lives, and thereby redeem the principle (King, 1963). Such an approach is not insensitive to the ways in which blackness has historically been 'disremembered' but sees this as merely an invitation to formulate theories of justice which do not treat race as an afterthought, but instead regard racism as a deep moral stain in need of active cleansing. Tommie Shelby's (2013) rehabilitative work on Rawlsian liberalism provides one example of the ways in which such commitments might be theoretically grounded.

This redemptive treatment establishes a clear line of connection between BLM and a long history of progressive political activity, which has embraced the adaptability of existing institutions and sought to reform them by affirming their egalitarian precepts and rejecting the historical perversions of that promise. Such were the claims of the Jacksonian democrats, the Progressives, the new social movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and many others. The history of

black political action is also filled with similar arguments from Douglass to Tubman to Wells to King—whose fiery assaults on the practices of white supremacy often ran parallel to a deep wellspring of hope in the underlying promise of American democracy (Shulman, 2008). These men and women were anything but naïve about the prospects for racial justice. Still, like the grandfather in *Invisible Man*, they believed in “the principle on which the country was built and not the men...because he knew that the principle was greater than the men, greater than the numbers and the vicious power and all the methods used to corrupt its name” (Ellison, 1995, pp. 574-575). These prophets of redemption love the country not for what it has been, but “for that in it which shows what it might become” (Unger and West, 1998, p. 93).

There is great power in the story of redemption, and for some BLM activists, this is what it *means* to say ‘black lives matter.’ The phrase embodies the hope that the value of those lives will one day be taken as given by all across the political spectrum. Many others, however, see that redemptive promise as not only false but dangerous. The problem is not that black people have been denied access to justice. The problem is that justice itself is a political construction *designed* to sustain their exclusion. There is no point in ‘holding them to their word’ because those promises are simply hollow. White political institutions are enemies to be struggled against, not collaborated with (Lockhart, 2016; Glaude, 2016; McIvor, 2016; Coates, 2017; Mills, 2017).

The politics of distrust is a tragic orientation, which regards the effort to secure inclusion as committing a category error by presuming that universal equality is the desired endpoint. But if the perpetuation of white supremacy *is itself* the desired outcome, then ‘justice’ is merely a device to secure and sustain that result. Afro Pessimists have argued that blackness is an ontological category whose devaluation is *necessary* to assign value to ‘all (other) lives.’ This

negation occurs prior to the articulation of any particular principle, and therefore ensures that blackness is infinitely excludable, regardless of how radical the effort to redeem the idea of justice. Individual black lives may be honored, or grieved, but black life *as such* cannot be given value because blackness literally *means* devaluation (Sexton, 2011). Beginning from such premises leaves no room for redemption. Indeed, as Wilderson (2015) writes: “A Black radical agenda is terrifying to most people on the Left because it emanates from a condition of suffering for which there is no imaginable strategy for redress—no narrative of redemption.”

In the context of BLM, Hooker (2016, p. 458) argues that the model of redemption “shifts attention away from black loss to the idea that black politics should be oriented toward the goal of democratic repair rather than racial justice.” Another pseudonymous activist writes that such efforts are “a real-time sanitizing of the current radical movement for Black lives, in exactly the way empire-penned mythologies of the Civil Rights Movement have erased its dangerous demands and militant tactics” (rad fag, 2016). For these critics, ‘redemption’ means little more than being set adrift in a pluralistic sea, fighting for access to the limited tools of state capacity, perpetually beholden to the fickle support of the ‘tolerant’ left (Rigby and Ziyad, 2016). The very act of supplication implied by such a politics is itself another form of racial violence. As Robert (2013) argues, “the politics of redemption is premised on the need for blacks to constantly seek the validation and approval of whites,” and is derived from the history-erasing violence of the middle passage, which robbed black culture of an independent identity, leaving it grasping for the false prophecy of racial equality.

The prophetic impulse may stem noble intentions. Unfortunately, the drive to redeem injustice eventually overrides the specificity of a given material claim and replaces it with a sort of bland theodicy in which all historical wrongs become little more than opportunities for the

cultivation of just principles. Against this redemptive impulse, black lives are the ‘differends’ of justice (Lyotard, 1988), victims whose suffering cannot even be named as injustice, because such naming would betray the promise of redemption. For BLM to accept this logic would mean succumbing to the traditional fate of black liberalism: its liberalism so completely swallowing its blackness that nothing is left to mark the lingering trauma of racial violence (Zerilli, 2012).

In its distrustful iterations, therefore, BLM means prioritizing radical disruption and refusing to sublimate the value of black life (Blay, 2015). Given that justice has only ever meant the “erasure of the humanity of the black body [as] the first order of American law and order” (Baker, 2016) its achievement could only ever mean the deployment of state violence in service of white supremacy (London, 2015). It is a threat to be managed, not a principle to be redeemed.

### **Theorizing Beyond Theory: The Politics of Quasi-Redemption**

Having outlined general principles of redemption and distrust, we now must complicate these stories. There is no single ‘politics of redemption’ or ‘politics of distrust,’ but rather a multiplicity of interlinked perspectives, each of which interacts differently with the problem of racial difference, and which guide distinct responses. Moreover, we must resist the inclination to paint this movement as engaged in abstract debate over possibility of redemption, and should instead look to specific moments of instantiation, when these theoretical questions are brought to life and concrete choices must be made. Doing so will reveal a complicated network of conflicting value statements, all informed by a macro debate over the viability of redemption, but manifested through a complex array of smaller discussions that defy simple categorization.

Consider: when Hillary Clinton stood on the stage accepting the Democratic Party’s nomination for the presidency, she made a point of explicitly saying “black lives matter” and

referenced the need to fight “systemic racism” (Lockheart, 2016). Was this an indication of the growing power of BLM? An act of cooptation? A gesture of understanding? What sort of political commitments did it imply? More personally, when a white family places a ‘black lives matter’ sign in their yard, what sort of political action is being undertaken? Is it an act of solidarity? A costless gesture unsupported by any material effect? Does BLM need these white allies? Does it want them?

For those informed by the politics of distrust, gestures such as these will tend to ring hollow. The ease with which white liberals mouth the words indicates a serious risk that BLM may become merely one new variation on the longstanding trend of content-free, symbolic affirmation. For this reason, Samaria Rice (2016), the mother of Tamir Rice and a member of the Mothers of the Movement, has explicitly refused requests to endorse political candidates. To her, the failures of these systems are not accidental, and the exclusion of black lives from the halls of justice not a mistake. Instead, “the system is working just the way the people in power want it to.” For others more attuned to the politics of redemption, these gestures indicate an opportunity: a chance to politicize racial identity and thereby challenge the institutions that sustain white supremacy. They tend to adopt a ‘trust but verify’ policy toward white allies, acknowledging that “more white folks could mean more exposure for [anti-racist] issues” without wanting to allow white presence to drown out the core message of black empowerment (Green, 2017).

Who is right? Is BLM’s invocation of black lives merely a challenge to the presumed neutrality of whiteness or an invocation of the need to establish a new black nationalism? Is it an interest group, seeking to wield political power in service of concrete agenda? A revolutionary movement seeking to rewrite the scripts of popular conversations about race? These are serious questions, which deserve scrutiny and investigation. But this must be done carefully. One of the

core strengths of the movement has been its tendency to skirt the sort of internecine debates that often plague revolutionary movements. This does not mean we should avoid examining conflicts, only that we should regard them as more a matter of *process* than of resolution.

Approaching BLM in these terms allows us the opportunity to observe two simultaneous effects. First, they *call attention* to the impossibility of justice—thereby exposing the limitations of theory as such to frame for discussing the valuation of black life. At the same time, they also *employ* these exact techniques. This dual identity is possible because the ‘politics of BLM’ is not unitary but instead is formed via a concatenation of voices clashing together and (occasionally) singing in concert. Through their self-contestation, they enact a sort of living dialectic in which the tensions and incommensurabilities of redemption are encountered, resisted, challenged, and embraced.

In this process, they build what might be best characterized as a ‘quasi-redemptive’ politics organized around the principle that black lives must be valued *here and now* (Bailey and Leonard 2015, p. 68). This presentism is critical, because it resists the impulse to treat justice in trans-historical terms. When horizons stretch out indefinitely, the specificity of blackness is crushed under the weight of infinity. But by *living out* their embodied value claims, BLM carves out a limited space in which black lives may be valued *in their blackness* (Linscott 2017, p. 114). Such valuation is always contingent, and must eventually be reintroduced into historical time, but through constant reiteration the claim that ‘black lives matter’ produces a form of politics that avoids becoming trapped between the anvil of history and the hammer of justice-to-come.

This sort of contingent, practical theorization is critically important but rarely taken seriously because it does not generate clear theoretical principles. The exclusion of contextual politics is a well-known problem in ideal theory—with Charles Mills’ (2009) critique of



Rawlsian political liberalism providing a canonical example of the genre—but is by no means limited to such liberal forms. So long as the meta-structure of redemption is retained, the specificity of practical political engagement will invariably be lost.

To illuminate this point, it is worth considering the recent debate between Cornel West and Ta-Nehisi Coates. While not explicitly *about* BLM and the politics of redemption, this conversation certainly was certainly animated by many of the same forces. But to much less effect. This is because the West/Coates debate was framed by a presumed necessity for comprehensive theorybuilding, leaving it trapped within the terms of its articulation.

The initial assault was launched by West (2017) in an essay alleging that Coates's work is a "neoliberal" trap, characterized by "fatalism about white supremacy and pessimism of black freedom." This challenge to Coates' radicalism is grounded in his failure to braid racial critique together with a larger attack on "Wall Street power, US military policies, and the complex dynamics of class, gender, and sexuality in black America."

This claim is unfair in some respects. Coates engages many of these subjects, and where his work does contain gaps, he has always indicated a desire to learn and develop (Muhammad 2017, Kelley 2017). However, while West's critique misses its target in some of its particularities, there is a deeper truth contained in his challenge, a truth that derives from a disagreement over the politics of redemption. For West, political work is defined by the power of prophetic change. He is deeply skeptical about American political institutions, but nevertheless continues to believe in the power of principles to reshape and reform the world (Cowan, 2003). For him, Coates's work borders on nihilistic, with on the irresistible nature of white supremacy seeming to overshadow any hope of resistance.

On this characterization, West is essentially right. Coates *does* practice a far more distrustful form of politics, and this *does* inform his entire body of work. He has described the redemptive theory of American progress as an “illusion” (Coates, 2017, p. 65) and challenged his readers to confront the possibility of guilt that cannot be expunged or rectified. Most pointedly, when asked by late night host Stephen Colbert whether he had any hope for “a better country” and “better politics,” Coates’s response was a simple “no.”

There is a real difference here between West and Coates, though it is not necessarily clear what to make of it. As is often the case in disputes between great thinkers, much is at stake but much is also lost in translation (Kelley 2017). In search of more clarity, it might be useful to narrow our focus to the question of radicalism. West accuses Coates of ultimately being complicit, but could not the same charge be leveled at West himself? After all, he has worked with presidential candidates and his policy agenda is hardly distinguishable from that of mainstream figures like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren (Coaston, 2017). Moreover, his belief that racial critique must be infused with a broader critique of imperialism is not necessarily incompatible with a reformist agenda. Here we might note voices like King and Du Bois, whose own broad-based critiques were linked closely with advocacy for basic civil rights.

Alternatively, if distrust is the measure of radicalism, it is unclear that Coates would pass the test. While deeply skeptical about the narrative of redemption—understood as a fundamental moral rebirth—he nevertheless does not conclude that there is no room for marginal gains, nor does he fully deny *all* possibility for radical change. His essay on reparations, for example, is clearly an attempt to define the terms through which justice could be restored (Coates, 2014). In his work, we find that skepticism is not categorical rejection, and distrust is not nihilism.

On both sides in this dispute, then, there is a risk of painting in bifurcated terms, and thereby losing the complexities and contradictions of real lives, in which faith and doubt exist together, and hope is always tinged by fear. A more generous approach would see these men as merely enacting their own (denser, more theoretical) versions of the practical realities playing out across the entire BLM movement, where distrust and redemption operate side-by-side, neither being fully dominant. Under the broad umbrella of ‘black lives matter,’ justice takes many forms. Its exclusionary legacy is understood, but not necessarily accepted as given. The seductive call for redemption is challenged, without being fully rejected. Moreover, these engagements play out more as practical conflicts over *what is to be done* than as topics of intellectual debate (Meyer, Jeffers, and Ragland, 2016).

Evidence for this notion may be found in the platform of the Movement for Black Lives (<https://policy.m4bl.org/platform/>), which by no means defines the movement, but does provide a useful document to illustrate the motivations of many of its members. In it we see an expansive coalitional politics of the sort that West would endorse—addressing racism, patriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism as linked forms of discrimination. At the same time, another defining feature of this platform is the *specificity* of its tactical demands: with content related to money bail, police body cameras, universal voter registration, drug decriminalization, etc. Such appeals can be understood from multiple vantage points, and their meaning takes on distinct characteristics from each angle. On one level, these function as pure ‘civil rights’ claims. On another level, they make sense as tactical interventions, designed to restrict the intertwining of law and oppression, but grounded in a sense of resignation about “the permanence of racism” and the impossibility of changing the scope of political possibility (Bell, 1992). From this perspective, black lives cannot be ‘rescued’ by the invocation of rights, and the blanket of law

provides no guarantee of security. Far more important to target concrete *practices* and minimize their harm. On a third level, they exist as merely one aspect of a broader campaign for redemptive justice, which sees superficial changes as a bridge toward the whole reconfiguration of legal, political, and social institutions.

As a movement engaged in *performing* theoretical practice, BLM shows that a singular coherent vision is by no means essential. There is no need to choose one specific meaning to a demand; it may operate on all these levels and more. Further, there is no ‘voice’ of the movement, no leader who defines its vision, no unified platform of resistance. It is instead a “leader-full movement” whose political valence is not dependent on the purity of its ideological construction (McClain, 2017). In broad strokes, its agenda conforms to the politics of redemption. But this does not mean it is *limited* to this perspective. Similarly, the deep veins of skepticism that run through the movement do not prevent engagement with, and even some degree of faith in, mainstream political institutions. As Bailey and Leonard (2015, p. 68) argue, BLM is notable for the way that its advocates “do not vacillate between anger and tenderness, so much as they express each simultaneously” and thereby “maneuver offensively and defensively simultaneously.”

This complexity is a useful reminder of the richness to be found in practical engagement with theoretical questions. The Coates/West debate risks playing out as personal feud, because it operates as a conflict over the comparative worthiness of individuals and the theoretical worlds they have constructed. BLM, by contrast, is diverse and diffuse. While it experiences the exact same conflicts—inclusion vs. exclusion, redemption vs. distrust—these are enacted less as disputes over intellectual purity and more as a conversation about *what will work*. We must therefore resist the impulse to understand BLM’s significance primarily through the work of its

intellectual vanguard, and instead approach it as a collaborative process informed, but not determined, by its theoretical content. To illustrate the point, consider the following characterizations of what BLM means:

Alicia Garza (2014), one of its founders sees BLM as “an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.” For Moore and Green (2015), it is an invocation of self-care and solidarity. For Houston (2016), it is a call for retaliatory violence against a system that cannot, will not be, reformed. Cohen and Jackson (2016) see it as an opportunity to recenter feminist, queer, and other traditionally excluded voices. To Elaine Brown, former chairwoman of the Black Panther Party, the movement’s timidity and faith leaves it trapped in a “plantation mentality” (Slater, 2016). According to Akwugo Emejulu (2016), BLM is intrinsically provocative: “The simple act of stating 'Black Lives Matter' is deeply threatening since there is no honesty about race & racism in the US.” Rigby and Ziyad (2016) view BLM as an exclusionary movement and regard white solidarity as “counterrevolutionary” since “Black liberation must always center on the assault against and defiance of these institutions.” Similarly, Delgado (2017) argues that BLM should resist calls for unity, and turn the tables back on white allies whose collaboration risks derailing black politics by imposing a logic of redemption. In contrast, activists like DeRay McKesson sees collaboration as necessary, and view BLM as a vehicle for consciousness-raising (McKesson, Peterson, and West, 2016). Elsewhere, some black police officers see BLM as an opportunity to “take a seat at the table” and achieve long-desired policing reforms (Hosking, 2017). For Christopher Lebron, it means “unconditional self-possession” (2017, pp. 141-142).

In this range of responses, we find much that resembles the Coates/West debate, but enacted on a smaller and more particularized scale. Exploring the rich veins of conflict immanent

in these statements will be a far better use of mental energy than assessing the status of certain key names. Here, we might be best served by taking the advice of Eve Ewing (2017): “I dream of black freedom and resistance that isn’t unduly occupied by and centered on some dudes being mad at each other and not liking each other and thus pinning the entire moral failing of American empire on other individual dudes and making us read about it.” What value might be added, for example, by evaluating the movement through the lens of Christina Sharpe’s recent work on wakes and the afterlife of slavery (2016)? How might Bonnie Honig’s work on tragedy and optimism (2013) influence our reading of redemption and distrust in BLM? What might be learned by developing a ‘hauntology of blackness’ (Powell, 2016) as a technique for understanding the status of BLM? Where does this movement fit into Shulman’s (2008) rich and sophisticated work on prophecy and redemption? Engaging such approaches will not necessarily provide answers. But it will raise better questions, which is far more important.

### **Redemption Without Justice?**

The movement for black lives is a complex concatenation of practical theoretical engagements with the question of justice. Its persistent theme of distrust is an anvil against which claims may be hammered, reshaped, and forged anew. Teasing out its tensions is often unsatisfactory and incomplete, but this is precisely why it is necessary. This topic matters not only for those hoping to understand BLM itself, but also for those interested in the shape of political thought in a world increasingly defined by gaps between theory and practice.

The idea that theoretical inquiry may be improved by engaging with concrete political claims is by no means original to this essay. Nevertheless, the implications are thrown into particularly stark relief in the context of ‘black lives matter.’ The redemptive impulse finds

fertile ground in this phrase, whose content is so obvious as to be almost banal. To say that ‘black lives matter’ is to speak an obvious, irrefutable truth, one that almost goes without saying. And yet, this is precisely the point. It *goes without saying*. In a world built on liberal principles—which promise equality but do nothing to eradicate the value gap that sustains mass inequality—black lives are *assumed* to matter without ever *actually* being valued (Lebron, 2013).

In many ways, this sort of passive rejection is more troubling for the concept of justice, insofar as it demonstrates that the *practical* limits of theory-building may ultimately be more insurmountable than the conceptual ones. Coates illustrates this point clearly in his essay review of the debate over reparations (2014). As a matter of political imagination, reparations ‘solve’ the problem of historical racial exclusion. While a serious commitment to reparations could not, of course, remedy the many individual racisms buried in the hearts of millions, it *could* strip them of their power at the level of political institutions. Nevertheless, outlining the policy does little more than reveal how little reason there is for hope. Coates’ point is both simple and profound: reparations are conceptually imaginable, but politically impossible, with the latter obviously mattering a great deal more than the former.

As Christopher Lebron (2013, p. 156) has argued, “it is philosophically easy to work out the mechanics of a theory conceived as bearing out one's hope...[but] what if America's race problems are so deeply embedded in our society that no theory of justice could root them out?” This is precisely the question that BLM takes as its starting point. While many of its members continue to believe in the possibility of justice, the tragic core of their politics serves as a constant restraint on the impulse to treat it as a logical endpoint. Here, Lebron’s (2017, pp. 100-114) ruminations on the work of James Baldwin are particularly instructive. In Baldwin, Lebron sees a conflicted soul, driven by faith in the redemptive capacity for love, while simultaneously

aware that love cannot be reduced to acceptance of a legal order that devalues one's own existence. Honig (2001, p. 121) similarly sees Baldwin as performing the ambiguities of a gothic romance, which understands the "terror of belonging" but which cannot thereby free itself from that pain.

This, then, establishes the context through which BLM as a political intervention must be understood. They face an ideology of justice, which seeks to incorporate and coopt their goals, to use their suffering to frame a narrative through which pain may be redeemed. To the extent that BLM is folded into that mode of understanding, it will sustain the underlying theology of depoliticization. And the associated dangers are both real and enormous. One only need look back to the aftermath of the Civil War to see just how destructive the politics of redemption can be. In that case, the narrative of national redemption bespoke a need for unity and the re-affiliation of political life between north and south. The redemptive narrative affirmed was one of togetherness and restoration—the providence of unity, not the providence of freedom for blacks (Noll 2008, pp. 72-83).

And yet, for all these risks, BLM has not, indeed *cannot*, avoid entangling itself in the mythology of redemption. 'Black lives matter' as a unifying claim engages both the politics of negation and the politics of affirmation. These are held together in conflict, as the promise of egalitarianism is affirmed against the impossibility of its perfect achievement. The peak of despair and distrust emerges precisely out of this flux, out of the sense only those who have been *denied* the fruits of justice may truly understand them. Here Du Bois (1999, p. 16) offers a particularly clear example: "there are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes; there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American fairy tales and folk-lore are Indian and



African; and, all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness.” In this, Du Bois affirms a kernel of faith that, by calling attention to the inherent limits of justice, those limits may thereby be exceeded.

There is great power in this ideal, made clear by an alternative historical mode of redemptive politics that arose out of the black prophetic tradition. In the depths of post-Reconstruction despair, black churches mobilized a movement that eventually swept the nation into action in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By organizing themselves around the logic of redemption, this prophetic tradition risked attachment to the stultifying forms of redemptive exclusion. They pressed on regardless, driven by a sense that redemptive ideals constitute the most powerful available “vernacular to provoke acknowledgement of domination and its disavowal” (Shulman, 2008, p. xiii). Against an abstract liberal egalitarianism—which was “too feeble to overcome the entrenched antipathies of a racially riven society” (Noll, 2008, p. 130)—this black prophetic redemption *jolted* society in a way that the secular faiths of mainstream liberal democracy could never manage.

Now, facing a new form of disruptive redemption in the form of the Movement for Black Lives, we are tasked with re-learning this lesson. For those, like myself, who continue to hold out some hope that liberal political institutions may be capable of generating a more inclusive form of justice, it is critical to take the destabilizing force of movement like BLM seriously. This intervention does not merely pose questions about the capacity for policy changes that promote racial justice; it asks deeper, probing questions about whether ‘justice’ itself is ultimately redeemable (see Lebron, 2013, pp. 122-143). These issues must not be minimized or dismissed lightly. For liberally minded allies, there may be a strong temptation to regard BLM as ultimately commensurable with Rawlsian reasonable pluralism (Shelby, 2007), or concordant with a sense

of communicative engagement (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996). Because in *some* sense it is.

The phrase ‘black lives matter’ *is* a reasonable political claim. As political movement, BLM *does* seek to engage with longstanding institutional structures. And, as a matter of faith, BLM *should* be taken as an invitation to reparation.

But it is not enough to rely on the egalitarian foundations of reason. It is not enough to hope that by describing what is truly shared, we might be able to establish a genuine and durable limit on the scope of justification. This article has explored the folly of that premise—using Black Lives Matter and the practices of racial erasure to characterize the limits of redemptive approaches to justice. By literally embodying the limit condition of justice-as-redemption, BLM illustrates the insufficiency of this political form. In the end, if our treatments of justice cannot (or *will* not) express the limitations of redemptive design, they will be lifeless, denuded, and depoliticized, and will serve little function apart from propping up the institutions that sustain precisely the forms of exclusion that are meant to be redeemed.

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