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## Questioning Boundaries with/through Black Lives Matter: A Conversation with Derrais Carter, Ronald A. Judy, Donald E. Pease, and Hortense Spillers

The radical claim by which the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) presents itself on its official website is impressive at many levels: “We affirm the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, undocumented folks, folks with records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. Our network centers those who have been marginalized within Black liberation movements.” Critically aware of the long tradition of Black liberation movements, BLM immediately marks a distance from such powerful legacy by way of a subtle rhetorical decentering of cis-heterosexual Black men, who are displaced from their typical center-stage position in political and social activism to finally allow the full affirmation and recognition of the life and transformative work of a number of long-marginalized Black identities. The upfront radicalism of this message, together with the movement’s undisputed capacity to effectively deploy web-based communication strategies, has rapidly brought the BLM and its take on racial issues to the attention of the general public, the political system, and academic discourse alike (not to mention investigation agencies such as the FBI). In other words, discussing the US today entails considering the new light that the movement has shed on the historical causes, systemic character, and social consequences of racism.

In addition to the scholarship presented in this issue of *RSA Journal*, the following interviews were planned and conducted with the aim to further expand the conversation about the BLM beyond the natural scope of the academic essay form. The ideal context for them was offered by

the 2018 OASIS (Orientale American Studies International School), which gathered prominent scholars of Black Studies and American Studies on the island of Procida for an intense week of lectures and seminars. Derrais Carter (Portland State University), Ronald A. Judy (University of Pittsburgh), Donald E. Pease (Dartmouth College), and Hortense Spillers (Vanderbilt University) accepted to engage a set of questions about some key aspects of the movement from the vantage points of their professional as well as personal background and experience.<sup>1</sup> The resulting polyphonic conversation captures the manifold aspects of the BLM, from its origins to its impact on current politics, from its ideological stance to its intersections with academic discourse and work.

**Gianna Fusco:** I would start from the emphasis of BLM on the need to build up a transnational/global network of people and movements for black liberation: how is this supranational perspective integrated with actions and preoccupations that stem from the US sociopolitical context and its historical specificity?

**Donald Pease:** I don't think they're restricted to the United States. The precipitating context for the BLM movement was the murder of Trayvon Martin in a space that can only be described as an enclave of colonial-imperial violence that's otherwise disavowed in the United States. What interconnects the BLM movement with diaspora and decolonization movements all over the planet is precisely the afterlife of colonial-imperial violence that had been disavowed when Barack Obama became president and there was a description of a post-racial, utterly colorblind movement. This is the reason why, as soon as BLM received not only visibility but a lot of circulation, there was an attempt to perform on that movement precisely what the policy of color-blindness did to the Civil Right Movement, that is to create an All Lives Matter movement. This was a way of, again, producing an understanding of violence and discrimination as colorblind, as distributed more or less equally across races and classes, which is of course utterly untrue. Color-blindness produces at the level of procedure and form an understanding of purely formal equivalence, but when color-blindness is not supplemented or accompanied by a redistribution of economic and

social resources, then the color blindness becomes an alibi for much more virulent forms of racism insofar as it can claim to be just the way in which a colorblind world naturally operates.

**GF:** A certain emphasis in discourses circulating also through social media on the physical reality of being seen as black in the US seems to be in line with what you are saying about color-blindness.

**DP:** Yes. It follows in the sequence of race matters: BLM is a way of giving content to the notion of race matters because even the term “race matters” can be understood as a pretext for saying “but it no longer can be made to matter in the way that it has.” But that race matters is evidenced by the generalized anti-black violence that becomes a constitutive precondition for the organization of the US social order. While Barack Obama was president, this precondition itself was rendered invisible because people could claim “well look! How could the United States be described as a social formation in which race continues to do the work of anti-black violence that had been the historical pretext for the Civil Rights Movement?” And the response of the BLM movement was that the hyper-celebrity of Barack Obama was one pole in the way in which racist stereotyping operates: you produce an over-idealization at the same time as you produce a brutalization; you produce a hyper-conceptualization, and you produce a demonization; those are co-present, co-terminus, and spontaneously mutually constitutive terms. So, in a certain sense, the hyper-celebrity of Barack Obama as the Messiah, as the savior, was also what enabled the hyper-demonization and the radical extinction of black lives. It was as if the election of Barack Obama had been such a violation of the constitutive terms of the US social order – which was constructed out of the violent exclusion of blacks, who are included in the order so as to be violently excluded from it – that in order to overcompensate for the head in that order that operated by way of that constitutive constitutional logic, there had to be a series of episodes of murderous anti-black violence.

**Hortense Spillers:** While I am happy to see the BLM movement, one thing that I’ve always had in my mind and that bothers me about it – and

it is probably generational because they're quite young people – is that I don't necessarily get the sense that they're reading their movement in perspective with African American cultural and historical apprenticeship. In other words, movements like BLM are really quite old. And a global network among black people and people of color is really a very old idea that goes all the way back to at least the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I would like to see them have a better sense of how they are situated generationally in relationship to that history. Their moment may be unique, but they are not unprecedented. I got the feeling they are thinking that “well, there's never been anything quite like this.” I think that's probably not so? I mean, they answer a particular moment in time, in US social and political history. And that they're trying to build an international network, a global network, is a very good thing.

**Ronald Judy:** The internationalism that you're referring to and Hortense has just spoken of was already there in the initial proposition that Garza and Cullors put forward. In fact, in their initial presentations those women put forward a project that was internationalist and feminist in that it understood that the root causes of the violence had to do with the structures of power in the social formations. So the internationalism is not new but it's foundational. Another thing that makes it difficult to attend to some of the issues is that you have Garza and company who have put forward an idea initially in response to Trayvon Martin's killing, and they wanted to understand why, hence their claim about: “we have to challenge the patriarchal structures, we have to have a different notion of the fundamentals of society,” and, paraphrasing their initial statement, “we have to understand it as global.” The movement, however, is a set of franchises, it's highly decentralized. So, whether or not any given chapter is going to be cognizant of what Hortense is talking about is going to vary from franchise to franchise. So, for example, in Minneapolis (I'm from Minneapolis), where there's been a very dynamic chapter of BLM and other radical movements, initially there was a big fight between the black ministers and the BLM (this had to do with the organizing of what ended up being almost a three-week protest of the police station in north Minneapolis), and it was along the lines that Hortense was referring to,

because the black ministers said: “why didn’t you consult us? We have the experience.” The response of the organizers of the BLM chapter in Minneapolis was: “well, no, this is our initiative. We don’t need to consult you, and many of your concepts and practices have been moribund.” And Reverend Herron of Zion Baptist Church on the north side of the city created an organization called Ministers for Social Justice and did something that I think is very important. He said to the organizers of the Minneapolis chapter: “I’ll give you my space to do whatever you want.” And he opened his church, gave them his keys the first time, and left. He repeated this three times, when he gave them the space, and left. The fourth time they said: “Reverend Herron, we want your opinion.” See? He calls this “attentive listening.” Instead of we the elders telling them “listen to us,” merely give them our resources and our space, and let them ask. He took that model and in the summer of 2016 convinced his fellow pastors, who were uncomfortable with some of the tactics of the movement, to sit down with the organizers of the BLM. Now, looking at the issue of chapters, and you have to understand we’re talking about a rather amorphous movement, the question that Hortense raises about a generational transmission in history can be addressed differently. I just had a private viewing of a film by a colleague of mine, Idrissou Mora-Kpai, a film maker from Benin who now is in Pittsburgh. He was in South Carolina making a film about the Black community when Walter Scott was murdered, a documentary focusing upon a key figure in the community who owns a little shop that is the epicenter of communal activity, and so we see them finding out about Walter Scott. Now, Muhiyidin Moya [aka Muhiyidin d’Baha], young black man who ended up being shot to death mysteriously in New Orleans within three weeks of his featuring in this documentary, was a BLM activist of that chapter and very much aware of the heritage you’re talking about, Hortense. So, because the movement is amorphous, we have to be careful when we attend to the specific branches and how they approach this question. The problem, and this goes back to your question about internationalism, is not just with BLM, and it isn’t indeed generational, in that internationalism, although it has a long history, has been pushed aside. I don’t want to suggest it was ever a majority view, but it was prominent. You have instantiations of it from people like

Martin Delany, W.E.B. Du Bois and the Pan-African movement, things like the Black Panther Party, which was expressively internationalist, and the strong Black internationalism in the 1960s. An important name in this respect is Bill Fletcher, the second president of TransAfrica and a very prominent syndicalist, a unionist, who has always been keen on providing the spirit of internationalism among Black Americans. Bill's agenda, through a number of radio and TV shows, has been an effort to put radical black Americans back in touch with the world. In other words, to revive Third-Worldism. In that context, three years ago he launched an initiative, and it appeared in *The New York Times*, a public letter from Black radical organizations in support of the Intifada in Palestine, which Garza et al. signed, they were all signatories. There have been, to my knowledge, three delegations of Black radicals, Garza is one of them, who've gone to the West Bank in solidarity. And I know she was just in England earlier this year in solidarity, in an effort to help build up the branch of BLM that's trying to start in England. So, I'm making two points: first, here are some concrete instances of actions, and this idea is manifesting itself in any gesture of solidarity as opposed to just being a platform statement; and then the other point, of course, is that that idea has been really there to begin with in at least their conceptualization of the movement.

**GF:** How does BLM locate itself alongside, or against, other contemporary resistance groups that might share, at least partially, their political projects? I'm thinking, for example, of what Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor says about the conversation between BLM and Occupy Wall Street and how some of their strategies seem to converge, but also of movements originating outside the US, in the spirit of that supranational mobilization we were just talking about.

**HS:** I don't get the idea, and it's very discouraging, that the left movement in the US at this moment is consistent. My sense of it, and this could be not, by any means, definitive, is that it is sporadic. The OWS movement was a very good sign three or four years ago that there was activity on the left, and it flashed for a moment, then it was gone, and that seems to be followed by BLM. The latter seems to have more continuity at

the moment than Occupy had. There's a movement around what's called in the United States "sensible gun laws" by the young white radicals, and some black ones too, in Florida. But that all seems to be sporadic. And there's been sporadic and massive response to the Trump presidency but there not seems to be any, to my mind, organizing centrality among all these groups except that we're all anti-Trump. We're all broadly left, more or less, and each one has a particular idea in mind, some goal, like changing the gun laws with the group in Florida, OWS has its aims, the BLM has its focus. So those movements are both encouraging and puzzling. I mean, how do you get centrality out of all those porosities and differences and all the divides that people cross: gender, geography, race, class, all of that. So my sense is that we're waiting for some joining thing between these communities or groups that scatter across a broad front of massive energy. The mobilization is there, you can feel the energy in the culture that's fired by this antagonism and the shock and surprise at what happened November 2016. So how do you capitalize on that and get some real change.

**DP:** The BLM is a platform that permits circulation across so many different platforms that it can give rise to multiple but also converging movements. I think that the articulation between and among these movements has to be consciously specified and it also has to become a real nexus, that is, it has to be a site for the emergence and convergence of formations that would otherwise be understood as utterly separate. There is a shared, let's say, concern, but Occupy differs from BLM in that the Occupy movement was voided of any specific social or political demand. The Occupy movement, I believe, was designed to produce the infrastructural equivalent of a general strike in which you de-operationalize the way in which the political machine is capturing and reproducing itself. So it became, quite literally, in the Agambenian sense, politics as pure means without an end, without a telos. And when politics is sheer means without a telos it is that which has as its medium the de-operationalization, in that sense the defanging of the anthropological machine insofar as it is deployed by the political apparatus of the state.

**GF:** Whereas the BLM is maybe more open as to how to do things,

but its objective is very clear. For example, when they reject the idea that racism is a glitch in the US system and maintain that the system actually works perfectly.

**DP:** Yes. It's not only not a glitch, it is that which is presupposed as the precondition: anti-black violence is the constitutive precondition to the organization of the system. But this is also why I think it has precipitated the most important conversation within African American studies, which is the conversation between Black so-called Afropessimists, who believe that there is absolutely no way in which you can transform the existing system without its radical destruction, its complete shattering: you cannot produce an amelioration within the system without justifying allowing the anti-black violence to assume a more and more disguised form; that's one version of the conversation. And another version of the conversation, which I think Lucius Outlaw enunciated quite clearly in his debate with Frank Wilderson, is that you cannot even imagine Afropessimism as a discourse without realizing that the discourse is built upon, teleologically, a series of insights within a movement that includes the Civil Rights Movement and understands Afropessimism and the radical question, the radical imaginary that is generated by the Afropessimism movement, as a moment, as a clear moment that discloses how things have undergone in the formation not only spatial, but temporal transformations.

**RJ:** The moment of conversation between BLM and OWS has to do with tactics and strategies. In this sense, DeRay Mckesson, young black man who came out of the Minneapolis chapter of BLM to go back to Baltimore to run for mayor, was a moment of considerable contestation, even in the Minneapolis chapter, because it had to do with moving into politics and what that does mean. But what BLM and OWS have in common is Tunisia. Tunisia was the model. It was expressly the immediate model for OWS, although they completely did not understand the Tunisian situation. What they saw that was important in Tunisia was the spontaneity of popular unrest and the way in which it was able to achieve political transformation without following the path of political party. It was a different kind of politics, which they thought they could emulate;



OWS was explicit in this. Now, I'm not talking about why that didn't work, I'm gonna talk about what BLM has been able to do differently, which I think is why, to pick up Hortense's remark, they've been a bit more coherent or continuous. The Tunisian situation had everything to do with the perpetuation of leftist intellectual and artistic cultures within Tunisia that stemmed from an ongoing, viable syndicalism. The existence of the unions was of paramount importance, even though indeed the eruptions in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine were spontaneous and leaderless in a very specific way, because the leadership of the unions was completely compromised by the government. Yet, the ongoing structures of the unions, especially at the rank and file level, made available a whole set of organizational resources and capacities that, when the uprising occurred, were able to lend not only expertise knowledge, but even the tools of the union offices, which they just seized from the leadership. In other words, one of the reasons why the Tunisian situation was so important is that it was one of the first popular rebellions against neoliberalism by unemployed people. But you've got a situation of a kind of viable, continuous leftist politics around syndicalism, none of which exists in the US. This goes to the point that Hortense is making: OWS fails because it doesn't have these mechanisms and can only put forward a sort of nebulous set of things they were against. They were quite amorphous and didn't attend to people's real concerns because there was no pre-existing network and no pre-existing way of knowing. And of course there was tremendous attention between OWS and various leftist Black movements, because OWS was principally a movement of middle-class and quasi-affluent white kids. What has made BLM different was putting forward a project of "we are *for* this, we are for re-imagining why Blacks are being killed." Because the current social structure produces a particular kind of attitude that de-humanizes Blacks, but also sustains a broad kind of violence. The BLM has got an idea that is really a re-articulation of old Third-Worldist notions, of what Fanon called new humanism, so they have in their original platform "we recognize that we need to transform the patriarchal familial structures, we need to achieve economic justice across the board." Those are broad enough propositions for, and they're almost the foundations of a kind of program. While the organization model may not be the political party, those are

propositions that can be sustained, repeated, and can attract, in moments of sporadic spontaneity, tremendous energies. So BLM, in coalition with other movements, was able in Minneapolis-St. Paul to compel the police chief to be removed.

**GF:** And they're currently pressing for the election of progressive DAs, for example.

**RJ:** Exactly. So in Minneapolis in 2016 you saw signs for BLM in affluent white neighborhoods. And I had conversations with Trotskyian white leftists who felt the platform resonated with their own ideologies, and they could stand in solidarity with it, in a way that was virtually impossible with OWS. And that approximates somewhat the American landscape, we don't have a viable leftism. I sometimes say there is no Left in the world; if there had been a Left, we would be in solidarity with the Tunisians, who are right now trying to rebuild civil society along leftist lines. I was just in France, and the French Left refuses to acknowledge its imperial history, so can't attend to the ways in which issues of racism in France right now are a consequence of that. So they don't deal with *les gens sans papier* in the most effective ways.

**HS:** Well, there's something that I think we need to account for. It's amorphous, it may be shapeless, it may be unfocused, but there's an energy to the left of the political spectrum, center-left, that's still there, despite the disappearance of communism and the fall of the wall, and all of that. There's something that's holding a place, if you wanna say that, for a real Left. I like to think there's something of a shadow of a Left in the world.

**RJ:** We see evidence of that, I agree completely. We see evidence of that in events like Tunisia, Tahrir, the current student uprising in Paris, but also what's been an ongoing movement among the radical population of color in Paris, which doesn't get just as much attention. We see something of that in the movements in England right now, in support of immigrants against Brexit, or in the Parkland movement for gun regulation in Florida. What we lack, which is why I think BLM becomes important, is an

ideology. We've got a world in which there is a sense of alienation – that is associated with globalization, which is associated with neoliberalism – and a social crisis that has been precipitated by increasing economic disparity. We've seen something of that in the election of Trump and the way in which those who elected Obama could elect Trump.

**HS:** It's been after Davos, for years!

**RJ:** And it's global. And the reason for it has to do with the nature of Cold War. While there is some energy to the left, the only ideological responses in the sense of “here's how we can fix this and go some place else” are coming from the right. They're coming out of discourses of religion, and there again we find the same problem: neoliberalism has done this to you, because it has a certain notion of society, of humanity, that's not viable, and the solution is to come back to our purity of faith and get rid of it. What's missing in all of that is a leftist response to the crisis, a leftist ideology, precisely because of the discrediting of communism by the Soviet Union, and also because of the repression of Third-Worldism, so there's this ideological vacuum. And BLM gives me some hope because, again, it does have an ideological program. It's not alone, they work with things like Black Peace Alliance, BDS [Boycott Divestment Sanction], and there are a number of radical organizations that are trying to do this. BLM works with them in an effort to try to create some sort of viable ideological program and find its way towards action. And that's where the glitch is, because they reject the old models for action. And rightly so. I agree with you, Hortense, the energy is there, so when I say there is no longer a Left, I mean an ideological Left, a Left that puts forward a vision of the world, that has some sort of, if I can use the word, cosmology. And also in the case of Italy, like in France, it has not yet come to terms with its own part in the imperial colonial history. And because of that, it cannot come to terms with the pressing immediate issues of race, which stem out of that colonial history, here as well. And so, can I have a discourse that explains, well: these Eritreans who are here, who've been here for quite some time, decades! These Libyans who are here, who've been here for quite some time, decades! These Moroccans who are here, who've been here for quite

some time, decades! Who brought them by fiat? 'Cause we needed cheap labor. They didn't just show up all of a sudden, but the Left is amazingly silent about it.

**HS:** I think none of this was helped by the eight years that progressive forces tended to be silent during the Obama years. I mean, the Obama presidency, as far as I'm concerned, was a kind of Pyrrhic victory. You know, at long last, there's a black president of the United States, but to what end? We don't answer to that question. The point was that getting there was so important for people. I think that's what was important for Barack Obama himself, that the goal is to *become* the president. Whereas it seems to me that's when your job starts. You are now the president, so now what you're gonna do? Why do you want to be president? But what happened is that his feet were not held to the fire, because everybody was so freaking busy apologizing: "oh we can't ask him to do that!" And you say "well, why not?" Because he is black? Then don't let him be President! So why the fuck should he be president? If he can't be president, or if he's gonna be a reluctant president, or a hesitant president, nobody needs that! So I am very upset about those eight years that passed and people kind of got out of practice! And he didn't encourage it himself, and his administration didn't. I mean, they rested on the fact that they had made it to the White House, and that was a big deal, you know. And I say, that's the beginning of the deal, it's not the end of anything.

**GF:** Looking at the Democratic primaries in 2016, and the race between Hillary Clinton (who had been Obama's opponent eight years before) and Bernie Sanders (who has a long career in US politics), was there any perception of the party politics going back to business as usual after having ticked the box of diversity with the Obama presidency?

**DP:** I think there were two different ways in which what you call going back to business as usual got articulated: on the one hand, Hillary Clinton said she was going to be the continuation of Barack Obama's policies, and on the other hand, Donald Trump was saying in effect that the election of a black president had produced an unrecognizable America, a Third

World country. It wasn't a matter of going back to business as usual, it was a matter of undoing and annihilating, completing erasing the Obama presidency. His first policy was the destruction of the Obamacare, which president Obama understood to be the signature policy of his presidency. Sanders was not business as usual because he represented a socialism that had absolutely no place in the American political system.

**RJ:** I was very skeptical, more than skeptical about the Obama administration from the very beginning. In 2007 I wanted to determine whether it was properly a social movement, or merely a political campaign. And it eventually became clear to me that it was politics. He gave three important papers: the Philadelphia paper everyone talks about, where he talked about race; then he gave the paper a week before on his economic policy, and he gave a foreign policy paper afterwards. And you look at those policies, Obama was very clever: initially I thought he was a fruit pop politician, but it was very clear to me by 2009 that he was an inept politician. But in the 2007 campaign Obama did two quite brilliant things. The first, was to take advantage of the state of the art canvassing and distribution technologies to build a political base. He did it with the Internet and social networks. That was brilliant. The other brilliant thing he did was to follow Clinton's mantra: campaign in the media, govern in writing. So there was a bifurcation in his campaign: he had the media image, which we were all paying attention to, including the social networks. No one paid attention to the policy statements in writing. If you paid attention, then you knew right away: here's an individual who's right-of-center neo-liberal, and he was always very upfront about this, he didn't hide it. Part of the problem was people were so caught up with the media image in the prospect of "oh, we're gonna elect a black president" that they paid no attention to the actual politics. Obama was the sort of death of a certain kind of radicalism, he delegitimized it. If you read his two autobiographies, he's not a friend of radicalism, what we're calling leftism, which is why the black people, the black caucus had its qualms about him in 2007. Glenn Loury went to print over and over again, expressing his qualms. We now know it as the Obama Effect. Now that we have elected a black president, we can forget about that radicalism. So it's not even that people got out of practice, but

they found with Obama an excuse to give up and become apathetic in a certain way. The other thing that Obama did that was devastating is, in spite that he had a moment, he didn't do anything with it. What the right would have done with it would have been create think-tanks to mobilize it. What happened in the Obama administration is Rahm Emanuel is made chief of staff and he systematically purges all of the elements of the campaign who had those progressive tendencies. And we don't get any politicization of the social movement out of that administration. So I think this is important in understanding things like BLM because it produces a certain kind of skepticism among many of those young activists who had participated in the project. What Sanders has been doing, it is called "Our Revolution," is precisely what Obama didn't do. They have taken those young people and they've created all kinds of training camps, and they did this during the 2016 campaign, organizing them with an idea of "we need to get over the party, whether or not we win the presidency, we need to infuse the party with viable leftism." And looking at the elections last month, they're winning. I mean, there's this struggle between what had been categorized as leftist elements of the party and mainstream party. You see this in the compromise election of the democratic party leadership where Keith Ellison, Muslim from Minneapolis, was elected with Perez, because Ellison represents that leftist tendency and Perez an old Obama appointee, and there's a tension right there. I'm somewhat hopeful about that tension, somewhat sanguine, because, again, it shows that the energy you were talking about, Hortense, is there, and the effort of the Sanders people to focus it is there, even though BLM was very critical of Bernie Sanders, and they kept challenging him at events.

**HS:** And that was ridiculous, to me. I didn't see that many of them at the Trump events! Why do you go into the Clinton events and the Sanders events? Why don't you go over here? I thought that was a mistaken strategy. I couldn't understand why they were going to the Sanders events.

**RJ:** They were going to the Sanders events because it was not simply protest, the point was to take over the party.

**HS:** Oh well, that was such crap! Because you don't take the microphone out of the hands of someone who has not denied you entry to their house! And here's somebody who, if you come in the house, will very seriously hurt you! I mean, the Trump people were not playing: you go to a Trump event, somebody is going to hurt you if you try to take the microphone from Donald Trump! To my mind, that particular tactic looked bad, I just thought that was very poor public relations on their part.

**RJ:** The BLM's challenges to Bernie Sanders and to Hillary Clinton were aimed at forcing them as the putative progressive party to include in their platform the agenda and concerns of the BLM. And there they didn't fail. Sanders, within the first two weeks of the protest, began to address the racial issues: he appointed a black woman, Symone Sanders, as one of his prominent spokeswomen; the democratic party leadership, in creating its platform committee, included Cornel West and other people; and there was a great battle precisely over whether or not leftist planks would be included in that platform, and Cornel made a great deal of noise about how he thought that they were abandoning the momentum that things like BLM had put forward for them. I'm trying to say that the strategy of BLM was one of trying to enter into the party and there were disputes among different franchises about "is this the thing to do? Do we want to become political?" I mean, that's a battle, it's not a coherent movement, there was a sort of struggle in it, but as a tactic, I thought it bore some fruit.

**HS:** Well, it would have been very helpful to have some protestors at Trump's rallies. There were some, but I didn't see them there, and certainly didn't see them there in an aggressive way as in taking the microphone out of somebody's hands. To my mind, that was poor public relations for skeptical members of the public, even members of the public who generally agree with the reason why they were in existence in the first place.

**RJ:** I like your metaphor about someone who invites you into his house, although in fact he kept talking only about class, and skipping over the issue of race, and doing his usual social kind of move where you solve the class issue and all these other things will fall in place. And they were

insisting “you have to make race on par with as an issue,” and he was responsive.

**HS:** But what was their response about Donald Trump’s rallies? What did they think about that?

**RJ:** You know, I’m not a representative of BLM, and I think nobody is, because it’s so amorphous. But there were elements of BLM at Trump rallies: Chicago, LA, you know. Those I would consider Pyrrhic victories because the constituency of the Trump rallies and the so-called independent voters who had to be swayed were ideologically fixed in their positions. The only point of going to the Trump rallies would be to try to expose how vicious Trump is by exposing yourself to the violence and precipitating a scandal in the hope that that would cause the electorate to say “we don’t want this man, he’s dangerous.” That would be naïve, because it would fail to understand the extent to which racism – I know you don’t think this way – is completely ingrained within the society. I’m of a different view: I think that the usefulness of attacking the Sanders rallies and the Clinton rallies is an effort to seize the democratic party, to push the democratic party to the Left.

**HS:** But I think Sanders was already doing that anyway.

**RJ:** Not hard enough. They just pushed him harder. And again, he was responsive. And I say that to mark both the efficacy of the tactic and also the integrity of the man: he was responsive, in ways Hillary wasn’t. And the specific ways he was responsive is he opened up the seats of his campaign committee and brought members of those protestors in. And I know first-hand they were doing this at the grassroots levels as well, at caucus levels. That shows someone can be somewhat sanguine about the prospects of a certain kind of political efficacy, although I’m like BLM, I’m not convinced that the old forms of transformation that exist in political parties are of the order of the day. The question becomes how do you organize enough social momentum and energy to affect a political change, and then the energy can defuse itself and can be organized. What you’re calling the sporadic, I don’t



think is necessarily an unwelcome word. In fact, I'm increasingly more inclined towards what my friend Ahmed Jdey called anarchy; that is, we see different notions of sovereignty specifically where the embodiment of sovereignty is not in the party, or not even necessarily in the union, in the institution, but that sovereignty becomes a certain activity under specific circumstances, and what sustains its possibility is a set of principles, a set of convictions about justice, dignity, freedom. And then the question becomes: how do you sustain those principles? How do you articulate them?

**HS:** That's what I'm concerned about most: sustaining them. And making new gains from them. And then what kind of gains are we talking about. It seems to me that a great deal of power has been invested in symbolic victories. Obama's presidency. Hillary's presidency would have been the very same thing: the first black president, and then the first woman president. And the question, the question that is a scandal, is whether it does make a difference. And if it doesn't make a difference, then what the fuck are we doing? If it doesn't make a difference that the woman is the president of the United States, I'm not sure that it would have made a difference! We would have slept better, people would see the world the way we see it, would have been a lot happier with Hillary Clinton, she would have been a better "role model" in the presidency than the person who is in there now, but what difference would it have made? What difference did the Obama presidency make? If you can't answer that question, then I don't know what we've been doing. And I don't know what we're doing anymore because I can't say that it matters to me much now whether or not a woman or a minority gets an office. I wanna know what kind of policy is this person going to push, what are they gonna stand for, once they get to office, if they get to office. Those are the questions that we don't deal with; people want you to shut up when you start saying that. And so, that's why during the Obama years certain people just fell silent. You didn't say anything. I didn't say anything because, you know, my natal community was all for this guy. You can't be a black person against the black president! Just keep your mouth closed. Despite that you think he's ineffective, or he's there at somebody else's behest: powerful forces in Chicago, or somewhere

in the world wanted him to be president. I don't think he had a notion about why he wanted to be president. At all! I don't think he had an idea. I think he got: yeah, it'll be cool! And I'm intelligent enough to do it, I'm handsome enough to do it. I'll be, you know, telegenic, I have a beautiful wife, I have lovely children, it would be great! Yeah, we'll do it. It's not a bad job. I don't think he had a clue.

**RJ:** We're harsh on Obama. He had, beyond the economic, some progressive ideas. He was trying to put in place policies that would be transformative, and these are policies that Trump is unraveling.

**HS:** Oh, I would say urinating on and kicking into the sewer!

**RJ:** Yeah, yeah. On the environment, on international relations, on immigration. There was a piece in *Times* about Obama's reaction when the election results came in, in November 2016. He was out of the country, and he said to his aids "I think we went too far. I think we pushed the people too far and they weren't ready, I think I was ten, twenty years ahead of my time."

**HS:** Oh Christ! Please! Give me a break! You know, this guy might have had certain policies and initiatives in mind, and he did not stand by one of them! Not one! Not a single solitary one. All of it was exactly like saying to Assad in Syria "if you drop gas on your people is crossing a red line." The man not only crossed the line, he danced back and forth across it, and he didn't do anything.

**RJ:** Yeah, yeah. Or even before that: in the early days of his presidency, he was in conversation with important unions like the SEIU. During the campaign he had promised them for their support that he would support their initiative at the time to strengthen labor laws, giving workers the right to unionize, to vote for unions. If you remember, that was a big issue in 2016. In the first two months of his presidency I'm sitting across a New Year's Eve table from one of the leaders of SEIU. The Obama administration had said to them "look, we need you to back off of that because we have a

bigger agenda item. We want to get through the healthcare reform.” And I heard this from other quarters who were from the Obama side. And that’s the one thing he didn’t back off from. Oh well no, I’m being generous.

**HS:** You *are* being generous!

**RJ:** Because the way he negotiated that, he gave up the ghost on that. But they would decide that was gonna be his legacy. And so they asked the unions to back off of their agenda and support him in this because that was gonna be the key. Which of course we know they did. So there’s not a lot of daylight between our positions on the Obama administration. But back to BLM, I think that I’m not ready to say that what they’re going for are symbolic victories. If you remember the debate that went on during the battle for the leadership of the Democratic Party, it was about precisely what you’re talking about. Peter Buttigieg and Keith Ellison were, in their own ways, speaking for the need to have something more substantive than symbolic victories and to move beyond the Hillary issue. The problem with Keith was he was too far on the left. And Peter presented himself as the compromise. Pete is interesting because he’s in a Red state, Indiana, he’s in a city, South Bend that has tremendous racial history and turmoil, and he’s done something unprecedented for a mayor of South Bend. One of the first things he did is he went to all of the black churches, and said to them “what do you want us to do? Can we bring you into the table?” His middle way is a nuanced one, but he was still too far to the left. So Perez and Ellison become the compromise. What’s my point? It’s that there is this effort, which BLM is a party to, to try and push the Democratic Party to the left, and in that they’ve taken a lesson from the Tea Party. Now, there are those who would say this contributes to the polarization of the politics and we need to get rid of the two party system altogether. It’s the system we have, and to have something more than symbolic victories, you have to seize power, you have to be in a position to put in place policies, and there has to be some sort of platform, some sort of idea. So if the issue is to seize power, then by all means take over the Democratic Party. By all means. And we’ll see what happens this fall, if they’re going to fail or succeed. I don’t think if they don’t win in the midterms they’ll give up,

because Sanderites that I know who are part of Our Revolution understand this is a long struggle. But you know, 50% of the women who ran in their primaries took it! And these are women to the left.

**HS:** One of the things that deserve being looked at as intently as BLM is the movement called Moral Mondays. Reverend Barber in North Carolina created it and it is at least a “get out to vote” movement. But then it is also a passionate prophetic movement led by a black charismatic preacher in the tradition of Martin Luther King. Mondays last election season were days to register people to vote, to hold campaigns, to get people to vote: it’s a voting-centered movement. But Barber is himself a very powerful speaker, a very interesting figure. So you’ve got look up Moral Mondays.

**RJ:** Well, the Minneapolis Pastors for Justice is a part of the Moral Monday. That’s also interesting in terms of its relationship to the BLM because, again, that speaks to what you called the generational divide, whether or not they are a church-based movement. And we know this is an old, old dispute. You know, I might be on a different page because I belong to that generation of the 60s, those young middle-class black men who rejected that for Black Power. I was with Stokely [Carmichael] in Mississippi.

**HS:** You see, the thing is that one can actually do both. One can actually love Martin *and* Malcolm. That’s possible too, you know. I did.

**RJ:** Yes, one can, and one did love both Martin and Malcolm. But one can love Martin and march with Malcolm. [Laughs] One can do like Stokely did and stood up before the Arab American Students Association in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1968 and say: there’s two categories of the movement: the militants and the revolutionaries. The militants are those who wanted to see the precepts of the Constitution extended to include them. And those are people like Whitney Young Jr. and Martin Luther King. The revolutionaries are those who want to get rid of the Constitution and put something more radical in place. I’m a revolutionary. [Laughs]

**HS:** Reverend Barber, Reverend Lawson who is now in his eighties . . .

**RJ:** By the way, both of them had a very important dynamic relationship with James Cone, whom we just lost. So it's coming out of that specific tradition called "black liberation theology," which in relationship to BLM is important as Cone developed black liberation theology because he was concerned about three things happening with the black community: one, the diminished role of preachers; two, the rise of black radicals; and three, the rise of Islam. So he set out to formulate a theology that would capture the more progressive elements of those things and still be church-based.

**GF:** BLM has elaborated a narrative of placing center-stage identities and groups (e.g. women, queer and transgender people) that had been marginalized in other Black liberation movements, and has contributed enormously to the current popularity of the term "intersectionality." After a few years of campaigning and expanding their sphere of action, what can be said of BLM's efforts at being inclusive and intersectional?

**Derrais Carter:** One of the beautiful things that we've seen through BLM, but also, in a broader sense, the movement for black lives, is that we've seen both groups, or assemblages of activists and creatives advance a vocabulary for helping us critique some of the very patriarchal ways that black leadership has been framed in the past. I'm thinking specifically about Erica Edwards's book *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* where one of the things that we get to critique are the ways that black men, particularly cis-gender heterosexual black men, are supposed to be historically, and in many ways historically have been the face of Black political mobilization, despite the fact that Black women, femmes, queer folks have done a lot of the underground organizing. So, the implication here is that if you are not cis-gendered, if you are not heterosexual, if you are not a Black man, then you should be behind the scenes, fueling the political machine. One of the things we get from BLM is that power and representational authority when it comes to black leadership do not necessarily need to be centralized. In fact, that's part of the beauty of that we see happening through the BLM: that we have all of these local chapters who are extending and adding layer

upon layer of rich and nuanced meaning on the national platform that BLM has advanced, and that platform isn't supposed to be a top-down kind of mechanism, but instead it allows folks from various communities to think about the specific tensions that they are sitting with on a daily basis, and should they chose to connect that with a larger national platform. So it allows for far more splintering, but also overlapping. And what we see happening is this de-centering of Black men and boys when it comes to thinking about black mobilization. Xhercis Mendez talked a little about this; Treva B. Lindsey, who is this fantastic historian and black cultural studies scholar, is I believe building a project right now writing her second book on state-sanctioned violence against black women and girls. And one of the things we get to see through the work of Mendez, Lindsey, and for me more specifically Sarah Haley out of UCLA, is the ways that a lot of the discourses of violence that we were connecting to black men and boys have been rehearsed and keep being rehearsed on black women and girls for years and years. With Sarah Hailey's book *No Mercy*, we get to see how the state of Georgia has snatched up black women and girls from the streets in order to fold them into a convict labor system. And so it's critically important to me that BLM as a movement has advanced this conversation and allows us to understand that, for those folks who want to center black men and boys, it would do them well to understand what's been happening to black women and girls, precisely because by the time it happens to black men and boys it has already happened to black women and girls. Many times, when I'm asking questions about the role that sexual violence plays in ongoing acts of racialized violence, by centering black men and boys, we get away from thinking specifically about how violence becomes sexualized when it centers black women and girls. To have this conversation necessitates that we think about sexual assault, that we think about rape. These discourses are just as important, if not more important, when we're thinking about state-sanctioned violence, extra-legal violence, anti-black violence. When it comes to thinking about the successes of an intersectional approach for BLM, I'll call it a success in that it has broadened the landscape upon which, and the perspectives or positions from which we can think about gendered expressions of power when it comes to the black public sphere. I think that moving away from a monolithic representational black voice becomes

necessary precisely because we need political discourse and we've had, since black people were engaging in public discourse, multiple locations from which to stake out our politics. One of the problems becomes taking up who needs to hear a statement like "Black Lives Matter." I talk often with my students about how that narrative of black on black violence, which often comes up in my classes, is naturally simply false, but the work that it does ideologically is it pathologizes Black people, such that Americans in general, or folks that are trying to engage in critique of race and racism, begin to take as normal this belief that black life and Black people actually are pathological in our thoughts and in our actions. And so, one of the things that having these various vantage points and this gendered critique allows us to do is pick apart who it is that we need to make the claim that Black lives matter to. For instance, is that claim made to other black people? I don't think that's always the case. Many times it's been made to a dominant racial public, read white, and specifically for the work that I've been doing, it's a white liberal discourse. There's something about the claim that black lives matter – and David Marriott argued this in a piece called "On Decadence" – that feels extra or excessive. To make a claim about black life and to center that in terms of how we approach racial and political discourse seems quite excessive. But that is in part an extension of the logic that blackness is excessive, and so for me having the different vantage point from which to engage this conversation makes it far more difficult to play out this reductive binaristic narratives of race that have so often informed the way that we engage in political address.

**DP:** I think that the question of intersectionality is a matter of case by case. I don't think you can discuss BLM as a means of producing and accumulating inclusivity without recognizing that, by so doing, intersectionality is utilized in order to legitimate a reformist logic. Intersectionality in its clearest formulation is the recognition of multiple and intersecting structures of oppression; but there's always going to be a structure of oppression in dominance that has to be recognized in a case by case approach, because if you don't, then intersectionality can produce a kind of alibi for a set of generalizations that as soon as you articulate the way in which the intersectional is working in a specific situation, the

articulation has done all the work necessary. When Kimberlé Crenshaw, as a legal scholar, decided on that term in order to allow for differends in the Lyotardian understanding, that is wrongs that lack representation within the legal system, she used intersectionality in order to articulate wrongs that had to be righted but that the courts and the legal discourse at the time couldn't recognize as violations, as wrongs, because of the ways in which the social order and the legal order were unable to recognize how, for example, an African American woman was oppressed as a woman, oppressed as a black woman, oppressed as a lower class or working class black woman, oppressed as an African American lower class woman in a ghetto. So all of these were brought into visible representation by Crenshaw in order to call attention to the way in which this woman was in a certain sense unable to present cases before the court for every one of those wrongs. But if the notion of intersectionality becomes a means of simply demonstrating the way in which oppression can be overdetermined and overdetermining, you can lose recognition of the structure of oppression that dominates, which is also doing the work of sustaining the relations among the intersecting structures of oppression. And without that, I don't think you put yourself into a position that is able to engage the intersecting structures.

**GF:** There's also a certain debate around white feminism appropriating the concept of intersectionality: if all the intersecting structures of oppression count the same, you lose the political force of that concept.

**DP:** I agree. And it's another way in which color blindness travels in order to invisibilize. Inclusivity and diversity are liberal markers that are predicated on a reformist logic that is in a strong sense in collision with the BLM movement and not a useful outline, as far as I can see. There are theorists who have argued that the term intersectionality ought to be rethought and perhaps replaced by a theory of assemblage, and I think the clearest articulation of that recommendation was proposed by Jasbir Puar. It would be important, I think, to recognize the shortcomings of that term on strictly political terms.



RJ: Intersectionality, again, is a constitutive aspect of BLM. I don't know what the metrics of its success would be. I would say, yes, indeed, BLM itself is a manifestation of an effort to reimagine the political. And reimagining the political means reimagining the human. So right away, from the jump, they were saying "no, we're a feminist movement; no, we have to reimagine families structures; no, we have to deal with intersectionality," and it's significant that it's a movement initiated by two black lesbian women who don't mirror the old patriarchal structure by saying this should be a movement *led* by . . . When you start getting into the franchise, this is not an issue. The very dynamics that Garza was putting forward are evidence of how they're working. And this is where indeed it's generational. So those platform statements on their part are reflective of what's becoming attitude for a particular generation, in the same way that that generation is on the whole not even accepting, but just less terrified and bothered by things like transgender identities. So when they're thinking in terms of "we've got to get together and lay siege to the 4<sup>th</sup> Precinct in North Minneapolis," you went there and there were transgender people, white people, Black people, old people, Latinos, Somalis, which is a big deal in Minneapolis, who were next to each other focused on the *task*. And that's part also of the discourse about not wanting to have hierarchical leadership. They work very much like a flash crowd: they come around an issue, they address the issue, and then they disperse. But then, two years later the same dynamics kick up around the capitol building in St. Paul: they're there, they're available, that general energy we were talking about. So, what would be the metric of success? Is BLM a reimagining of the political? Yes, constitutively, that's the interesting thing about them. Is it working? I don't know. Every time they're able to organize such events, I'd say it's working. Every time you can see in Charleston two powerful black women, who've been involved in the community with powerful black men, organizing regular events where, as one of the speakers said, "there were only ten of us last week, three days later they're about 40-50, now we're over a thousand." And you look out on the crowd of the thousand and you see everything. You see everything. And no one is freaking out about their being led by a black man and two black women, that is not even on the table. That's a big change, it's not even on the table.

**GF:** Maybe that is a metrics of success, the fact that it's not even on the table.

**RJ:** That's a good point. That's a very good point. Maybe that is the metrics. But when we look at those events that were going on, you don't have the old argument you still have in the Democratic Party, because you don't have what I call the economy of dispensation where, to put it crudely, you have a group of powerful white men with some token white women who are talking about "are we going to include you in the process?" Daisy Thomas, the head of the Utah Democratic Party and one of the candidates for the presidency of the party, in her presidency speech said something great: what is this diversity nonsense? Do you mean you invite people to the table? No, listen to them when they talk! You don't *let* them talk. But you listen when they do talk. And that's her pushing back against the traditional structure of dispensation. BLM is not organized in that way. Do they look like anarchists? Maybe, but that's a new kind of anarchy. That's why I think they pose a question of "is there a new order of sovereignty," a reimagining of the political, at this level of organization.

**HS:** I would agree with that. I was thinking about this the other day, and precisely about certain difficulties of intersectionality. I was thinking that the United States, for example, is a society of 300 million and counting one-man bands. Everybody has a thing, everybody has an identity that's suffering, and it's difficult to find a common will. What does that mean today? I'm not quite sure what that means. But I'm thinking that the politics of identity has been taken to the limit, it has been taken as far as it can go. And now what do we do? You know, what's the joining thing? And I think, at the same time that there is this glorious recognition – everybody is recognizing everybody else's particular thing – at the same time that we have that, is there any thing that we all want together? And if so, what is that? And I wondered about that, if we can find it, or articulate it, or create it, and I suppose in their own way BLM, OWS, the Parkland kids were all looking for what is it that makes us, that joins us, what's the adhesion, the force of adhesion.

**RJ:** I think the question is how can we be in common? And that means thinking about the dynamic constitution of commonness. What is it to be in common? and quite frankly, that's the whole point of my work, and whether or not it's possible to articulate fundamental ways of understanding what we are, what is the human, and what is sociality, and what are the dynamics of sociality. I'm a bit skeptical about approaching it in terms of what are we going to articulate that we have in common, cause that's teleological, and that's going to demand some sort of definitive ideological position and some choice of one view, if we accept your metaphor: 300 million and counting one-man bands. You're right, that notion of sovereignty has run its course. The question becomes what takes its place. But to then say that we have to have a particular goal is to reintroduce precisely the engine of the old political structure.

**HS:** Well, I know. And that's worrisome too, at the same time that . . . ok, that's the dilemma: to have a goal without having a goal, to state a goal without stating it, that we might agree to, because if not, then what are we doing?

**RJ:** Well, if I may, 'cause I think there's something we're kind of dancing around: that's the dilemma in this moment for us, where "us" connotes those who are committed still to a particular kind of, let's say, enlightenment notion about a time, about a certain kind of humanistic order. And we become concerned when we see that those dynamics of organization and movement can also achieve, well we're seeing it, neofascism. If it's just about being able to be in common, you can be in common possibly following the ideals of what we're now calling populism. So for people like you and me, who would find that abhorrent, here's the dilemma: how can we have an open-ended process, again what my friend Ahmed Jdey called anarchy without sovereignty. How is it possible to have that so that the whole process is one of perpetual collective reinvention, so each one of those band members is playing a kind of combination of tunes and can keep improvising, without arriving at fascism. How can we do this and not end up with – here's where my musical bias strikes – Strauss! [Laughs] Or Sousa, better, 'cause I like Strauss better than Sousa. Without ending up

with the maestro conducting the symphony. That's why things like BLM interest me as perspectives: arriving at a notion about its fundamentals. What is the human? What is community? What is its function? What are we doing, to use your phrase, when we are being together? What are we doing? Not just why, but what?

**GF:** Queer Theory and Black Feminism are often evoked as crucial discourses informing BLM rhetoric and action. Is there any connection, or site of possible fruitful interaction, between BLM and recent theories elaborated in other fields of research, such as, for example, biopolitics or political philosophy? Can discourses such as that about "bare life" be mobilized to counter attempts to criminalize the victims of police brutality?

**DP:** I think that reason of the connection with Queer Studies has to do with the radical refusal by Queer Studies of arriving at a specific set of categories that can be understood to stabilize even the notion of intersectionality, because Queer Studies is what could be called a radical resistance to reform without transformation. So queers of color, as figures involved in the founding of the BLM movement, describe a supplement to the BLM platform that could be understood as a co-constitutive formation that enables a set of articulations with related movements, without those articulations and related movements constituting either a totalizing formation, or a formation that can lose sight of – or be understood as being capable of producing the ideological work of losing sight of – the unending responsibility of social transformation. And when it comes to attempts to criminalize the victims, again, if you don't acknowledge case by case the structures that have put in play the justifications for the criminalization, then you have eliminated the political work of both contesting those justifications and, to use an earlier word, de-operationalizing them, once you expose the criteria that have been deployed in order to justify the violence, expose exactly what those criteria are masking and how they're working. Because if you don't, then all of the terms we'd use can do what I would call, again, formal or procedural work, without the necessity for material change, or material transformation: *matter* is the key word.

DC: I center Black Studies in my work, especially when it's about thinking through queerness and queer theory, precisely because in many ways the language that queer theorists use to think about what I read generally as a particular kind of white abjection is informed by the history and political position of black people, which for me is another way of saying queer theory gets its language of abjection from black folks. There's a larger conversation about racial abjection, and in the contemporary context for me it comes from black feminism. I often go back to Hortense Spillers "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" thinking about the un-silencing of black women that becomes necessary in order for all of these identities to come into fruition, to take center stage. But I also think through the work of, again, Sarah Haley, she takes this up; Siobhan Somerville does this in *Queering the Color Line*; and Cathy Cohen has already given us the work that allows us to understand how queer theory has its discursive basis in Black Studies and the experience of black people. There's constantly this claim being made that blackness is always already queer, and so for me there's something about the blackness of queerness that has to be taken up in a more meaningful way. Then, when it comes to black feminism and even discussions of biopolitics in a political present, I often go to Foucault, or I would say, for years I went to Foucault when I was thinking through biopolitics. But after reading [Alexander Weheliye's] *Habeas Viscus*, I was a bit crestfallen because I hadn't spent enough time reading through Sylvia Wynter. This question of the status of black people when it comes to theorizing the human becomes all the more necessary for us to take up precisely because it helps us think through how, for instance (and this is something Sylvia Wynter talks about in "Deciphering Practice"), the question of the human and the positioning of black subjects (or we'll say marginalized and oppressed communities) become integral to how we even think through culture and cultural analysis. So, for instance, with Wynter, when she's working through film practices, there's a way that she weaves us through the idea of the human as reinforced by the construction of a film canon, which is reinforced by the themes and tropes that are taken up in film criticism, which again loop back and reinforce the notions of the human. But even in engaging in a practice of constructing canons and enacting film criticism and deriving a particular kind of pleasure from the

semantic closure that becomes necessary in Western films formulations, we – when I say “we” I mean “we, black folks” – we begin to derive a sense of pleasure via a whole set of filmic and interpretive practices that are arguably fundamentally anti-black. And so, if biopolitics becomes a question about who is deemed fully, not quite, and non-human, if biopolitics is to help us have that conversation, then biopolitics should revisit the question of blackness, the question of race. There are so many times when I’m thinking through political philosophy, or I’m thinking through theory, or I’m thinking through approaches to cultural criticism, and I’m wondering about the extent to which a number of writers are dependent upon not addressing blackness, not addressing anti-blackness in how they construct the subject, or engage in conversations, or engage in political discourse. Patrice Douglass has this explosive, beautiful and relentless essay called “Black feminism for the dead and dying” where she mounts a critique of the racial politics of the Women’s March helping parse through the ways that many of the dominant voices in, and the face of the Women’s March were decidedly white, and that it’s the position of whiteness that allowed many of the participants to march relatively safely in public. But the presence of black bodies, even the presence of black female bodies in public gets coded as extreme, gets coded as extra, and gets coded as, in many respects, in many contexts, masculine, such that there doesn’t seem to be a differentiation when it comes to gender in enacting violence against black bodies. One of the things that Douglass helps us understand is that gender becomes a violent formation when it comes to order and Black life, precisely or in part because it presumes or it claims to provide a level of integrity and protection that is simply not afforded to black people. And so I continue to wonder, even as I’m thinking about questions of biopolitics and political philosophy, what exactly is the status of the black subject in this conversation. Personally, that one question for me gets to the heart, gets to the marrow of the conversation that oftentimes some scholars aren’t having.

**HS:** I think academic discourses haven’t helped this much in some general sense. And I’ve just started thinking that over the last few months, since Trump’s election. And I somehow – it’s not rational, it makes

absolutely no sense – I blame the humanities academy for his election. In the sense that we abandoned our role as teachers of literacy to become professional critics and academics. And our careers were more precious and important to us than teaching reading to whoever was in front of us. So I blame the humanities academy for those failures. I think that's our fault, I think we did not help in certain provincial attitudes about languages and other cultures. I mean, we were sitting in rooms in the 80s when history professors recommended getting rid of the language requirements in very good institutions in the US. We've also sat by and watched the corporatization of the university because it was more important for us to keep our jobs and maintain our professional status than to protest and become revolutionaries, and possibly lose your job. But, at least, you would have gone down fighting! So, between the election of Ronald Reagan, which is about the time that my career and the careers of my generation of professionals were getting started, and the election of Donald Trump, we lost every major struggle because we did not recognize ourselves in the mirror of those struggles, or felt above them, or didn't dare to enter them because that wouldn't have been cool, because bla-bla-bla-bla. So, something unbelievable happens in 2016 and a lot of that has to do with, to my mind, a public whose ignorance is so profound, and whose viciousness in relationship to that ignorance is so unmitigated that it would elect a man that it is possible to completely despise, to be despicable in the eyes of the world. And before God and men. We didn't help that. So, I am at the point where I kind of don't wanna hear about academic discourse! I want another language. I want other languages, I want something else, I want to hear something else. I want to hear a truer language, I want to hear something other than what we've done the last 40 years that gave us this presidency. 'Cause we helped that out! Not that we did it alone, but I don't think we did our job. And our job was to do something unsophisticated. As an English professor with a Ph.D., I essentially do something humble, but it's important: I teach people how to read and write. I have to do that, if I don't do some other stuff. But we were over here doing this other stuff saying "oh well, yeah, that will take care of itself!" At the same time that tuition fees are going up and now it costs an obscene amount of money to give a person a good education in the United States: \$40, 50, 60,000, and

counting. And a new class of wealth, unprecedented, obscene wealth, has been created in American society. And not one thing that we have stood for as a profession has impeded it, intervened on it, and we've constantly talked about intervention, and interpellation, and bla-bla-bla. And what has it meant? So, I've come to the end of a career that's been fairly productive, and I have mostly enjoyed my work, I'm thrilled to have done it, and to do it as long as I can, but I am at this point kind of tearful about how we have abandoned our places. We were the watchmen on the walls of the society, and we gave that up.

**RJ:** And we gave it up. I want to go back to this issue about bare life because it is not bare life, at all. But we gave it up in large measure because, to speak in general terms about humanistic studies – literary studies primarily, but also things like history, anthropology, psychology, the human sciences – we stopped believing in the worth of what we were doing and accepted the metrics of the market, and we took a position of being defensive before the sciences. So instead of contesting the grounds of definition, we ceded the grounds. What Hortense refers to as professionalism was professionalism whose metrics are those of the hard sciences, and much of what became recognized as innovative, especially after 2000 (I would even go as far as after 1990, when the Soviet Union collapsed) was the *point d'appui* of metrics. Certain forms of, I might even name them: things like ecocriticism, or Digital Humanities, or Franco Moretti's project of quantification, all of those were an abandonment of reading. The attack on theory – I was formed in the 80s, I was a student of Wlad Godzich, I was trained as a high theorist – the greatest attacks on such things such as semiotics and theory came from the Left, as well as the Right. The Right was very explicit in their attack, they understood something fundamental: after the conservatives lost in 1964, they recognized that they were a marginalized group and set up a 30-year plan. And you've got things like – Philip Mirowsky has written about this extensively – the Mont Pèlerin group, where they recognized that humanistic education is what brought about the (for them, and they're right from a certain historical perspective) hiatus of the 60s. They began to completely dismantle, attack and try to defund those elements, and the Left started to attack those same



elements on the grounds of, you know: that's white man's discourse, that's the man's discourse, so just gave up the very tools for being able to teach people how to read and write, in order to look like pseudo-scientists. Of course, the whole discourse of bare life comes out of the same fundamental ontological project that begins with Plato, so those terms I have problems with. What I'm finding interesting with BLM is not that it's bare life, and I know how it's been used in certain kinds of biocriticism. I do think that academic discourse matters, although I know that in Tunisia, in the first two years after the revolution one of the great fears of those who had led the revolution was that the academics would take over, and would theorize it back into the bourgeois configurations. You know, I always bristle when someone calls me an academic, I always have bristled. [Laughs] Having said that, however, there's a real reality that we have to attend to, and this goes back to Hortense's point about our responsibility. The theorizations of, say, postcolonial studies that take place in the hallways of Columbia University, or at Rutgers's Brunswick, or CUNY, Tallahassee, which may look like a sort of conversation between South-Asian minorities in the American academic context – and so it fits into the model of diversity, so we don't have to interrogate what they're saying, we can let them be there – those discourses have an immediate impact back in Pakistan and India. Academic discourse, you're right, does inform, it does circulate, it does give views, and we need to recognize that as a part of the responsibility you're talking about, Hortense: to stand for, to know what we stand for. My term for this is parasemiosis, not bare life. I'm just putting out one of the key points of the book I'm working on: one of the reasons I want to look at what those populations that were designated Negro did and how they did is how they were able to utilize attitudes of thinking and being that simply are not ontological. And by ontology I'm talking about that philosophical discourse about *being qua being* that begins with Plato and is predicated upon a violent act. What's the violent act? You've got the stream of existence, of beings that are related to one another and you go in and you make the tear, as I would call it, the rupture, where you grab one element and call it distinct, and make it transcendent: this is man. Sylvia Wynter takes this up, and she's trying to elaborate what Fanon put forward. By calling it man, and to maintain that, you've got to have the

anti-man, and the gradations in between, and to sustain those requires tremendous power and force, and it's a violence against the fluidity of being, which is what the bare life discourse wants to call that: bare life. But that's precisely what Aristotle called it, thereby with that term you preserve the distinction. There are different ways of thinking that are not just distinctive to Africa – they're found in Africa, we find them in the South Pacific – of divisible personalities. In other words: not this notion that there is an integral subject – I don't care if it's the subject that falls from the sky, so we have souls, or the subject that somehow comes out of the hyperactive imagination, René Girard's notion of mimetic desire: all these discourses say that there are 300 million individual sovereign entities. There are other ways of being human that don't think that way, that understand that each person is multiple persons. You've got a cousin in the bush, you've got a twin in the bush, grandfather is present, in and with you, and all of these different personalities are expressed in very specific discourses, and that's a way in which those different discourses are side by side, parallel without achieving a synthesis. If you look at those cosmologies, those are different ways for imagining what it is to be, fundamentally. Those people who got enslaved from Africa, all of them have this conceptualization in common, whatever may be its particular iterations, its particular instantiations, and this is what they bring. One of the things that Tony Bogue is looking at, for example, is the voodoo initiating ceremony at the Cape in Haiti when the woman, Fatiman, with Boukman, which means Muslim scholar, slaughtered the black pig and began it all. It's not a synthesizing syncretism, there are these parallels and these are ways of being. What did Hurston say? "Tell my horse". We know these things which come out of it, but we've always taken them for granted, 'cause it's just the way things are. And so, they articulate ways of being: you can be like that – not be torn apart – 'cause there's no reaching for the integral subject. I call that parasemiosis, and then it has its very particular kind of poesis, or modes of creation; they can be from anywhere in the world and doing it that way. I would offer that instead of bare life, even when looking at something like BLM, going back to the way in which they begin by saying "we're involved with all of these things," and those events that one sees, everything is there, and not in synthesis. It's like flash

crowd, and it can be defused, and then come back again and be defused, so those bands can go off and play what they're playing elsewhere, and come back and jam, 'cause when they're playing those things elsewhere they're refining their technique. So like Wynton [Marsalis] says, you can just drop in on any city if you're a jazz musician, practicing your stuff, and you can hang out with a bunch of other jazz musicians and just decide at twelve o'clock to jam. The question goes back to what you were saying before: what's the common thing? What you're going to jam on? That's the real question: what you're going to jam on? [Laughs]

**GF:** Has the emergence of BLM affected in any way the role of the African American scholar within and outside academia?

**DC:** This question brings me so much joy precisely because, in a moment when so many scholars are dealing with the impact of anti-blackness and the circulation of images of black pain in news discourse or even in popular culture, in this moment I'm seeing so many scholars that are also pumping the brakes on a conversation insofar as they are pushing us to step back and think about ethics of care. When I say scholars, like African American scholars, I include artists, especially visual artists, because there's so much overlap, or cross-pollination when it comes to Black Studies scholarship, so the production of historical monographs and essays and articles, but also these theorists that are producing work and engaging in public conversation, and, more importantly for me, black artists that are visualizing and making audible in various registers black theory. Folks like Christina Sharpe and her book *In the Wake*, which has been unraveling people's brains in this rich way, but also putting a lot of pressure on the ways that we narrate black life, really giving us permission to experiment with modes of narration. This is something that Sharpe does with *In the Wake*, and something that Saidiya Hartman has been doing since at least the publication of *Lose Your Mother*, giving us approaches for circumventing and undermining a set of narrative practices which in part encourage specifically junior faculty in the context of the academy to produce and reproduce over and over again narratives of black death and ravishment as if that was the same as doing work on black life, and that is absolutely not the case. When I'm talking

with my students about this work, I'm posing a particular problem to them: "Your task through this work is to write a fifteen-chapter biography of black life. If I told you that you can only talk about anti-blackness and white supremacy up to the end of chapter two, what would you write for the rest of the book?" Most times my students are stumped because they are fairly well versed in deeming something problematic, but they haven't been given a broad enough vocabulary, or wide and deep enough archive of historical examples and contemporary texts and debates that allowed them to have an affirming conversation about who they are! That's particularly troublesome precisely because it reveals the extent to which their political and creative imaginations around blackness have been severely stunted and limited. And so they feel like it's far too risky, which in many ways it is, to engage in conversations about how black life is affirmed, primarily because all those conversations don't clearly and neatly inhere to larger conversations about black progress. In fact, these expressions of black self-affirmation are going to counter those larger narratives. And the whole point of my conversations with students and my engagement with black historical work, theory work, and arts is that that's more than fine. What better way to honor black life than to do work that reflects the at times mercurial ways we live and improvise life! Some lives are structured by order, others by chaos, and so to use that very reductive binary, there's an oscillation between the two that I feel we as scholars need to honor in terms of how we take up blackness. I think Kali Gross has done this wonderfully in her latest book *Hannah Mary Tabbs and the Disembodied Torso*. Focusing on artists and the work that has been done about black visual culture specifically, there's an artist based in Portland named Melanie Stevens who has a piece called "(If they come in the) Morning Read." In this piece what she does is she creates her own newspaper, and in this newspaper there's an obituary section where she offers speculative obituaries of black people who have been killed as a result of police violence or extra-legal violence. There are two that stand out: in one, the headline reads "Tamir Rice, Celebrated Technology Entrepreneur, Dies at 89"; the other one reads "Sandra Bland, 96; Wrote 'Francis' Series of Novels." So here, through a visual discourse, Steven gives us an opportunity to mourn long lives of Black people. Now, this is not to say that we have to have either the reality

of what happened to Sandra Bland and Tamir Rice, or we have to have this speculative narration of lives that were never fully lived. But it is to say that black visual artists have been absolutely pushing us to contend with what kind of work can be produced in this moment of enduring anti-black violence. There's something so deeply haunting and also beautiful about what Stevens has created in this project. So in terms of academic discourse – and this is in part a riff on something that I heard Katherine McKittrick say about how we should apply black poetry and literature to black theory – I'm interested in what happens when we apply black visual work to black theory and black history. So, what happens when we have Melanie Stevens's speculative obituaries to Tamir Rice and Sandra Bland and we apply that to the earlier discussion of biopolitics? What happens when long black lives is something that at best can be speculated? What does that mean for the ways that we think about political discourse around even life, or vitality, or biopolitics? For me, it puts a different kind of pressure on what exactly longevity looks like, what constitutes evidence, how that functions in terms of the kind of cases that we're making around blackness and black life.

**DP:** I think that the BLM movement indicates what has happened within cultural and literary studies in the United States. In so far as the BLM movement calls attention to what is constitutively wrong with the culture, it's the vanguard, in the Gramscian sense, of an organic movement in which crisis is the primary engine. We wouldn't be having the interview if academia didn't have a role to play. And we wouldn't be involved in the work we do unless we believed that academia matters. I think BLM indicates the eminent critique of academia and also indicates a means for its transformation. Academia is no longer a site where what you can call legitimation, or justification, or normalization transpires insofar as, in the work you and I do, academia is in jeopardy of being dismantled.

**HS:** I think academic discourse is going to have to reimagine itself, and not just for a new century but new terms of order as such, as [Cedric] Robinson entitled a book. I think it's going to have to discover its mission in a world that is no longer paying it very much attention. Capitalism

has been extraordinarily successful in seducing this entire world. The digitalization of life has been extraordinarily successful in seducing people. It seems that human personality is changing: people no longer walk down the street and pay attention to what's around them. They cross the street and they don't even see cars! And you want to say "Why don't you look where you're going? You're not the only person on the planet! What are you doing?" Or you go to the Met and there's *Aida* unfolding on the stage, or you're at the Scala and you've always wanted to go to the Scala, your whole life, and it's unfolding in front of you: what you're watching on your phone! To me there's something wrong with that. I want the academic discourses to deal with that, to have something to say about where we are, because we're not in a good place. I mean, all the environmental criticism has told us that we're not in a good place, that we're losing the planet. I want people and the Humanities to stop arguing about the Enlightenment, or argue about it in a different way, or stop arguing about whether it is all right to be a humanist. I want some responses to where we are in the world because we're in a very critical place. BLM is not looking into any of that, that I see. It's helping with the situation that needs responding to; that situation needs to be placed in the context of the larger disorder that the world is currently in because not only are young black people or old black people worried being shot down: people are hurting everywhere, all over, and I want some response to that. I want black people to go to the polls, to vote for something that they believe in and stop sitting at home saying "oh well you know, there's no black person running, we don't have anything to vote for," or "the ballot is not good because we will never be anything other than . . ." You know, bullshit! I want all of that to stop. And I want something that is going to wake people up to the crisis that we're in right now.

**RJ:** One thing about BLM and its platform that is worthwhile to look at is its webpage, and some writings that have been coming out, because part of the issue is a continual too close association of BLM with Ferguson, or with Trayvon Martin. But even then, Garza's question was "what world produced this possibility?" The relationship with the academe is a very serious question, I agree with you: should academics at all engage