Black Lives Matter & the Mo(ve)ment of Black Life in America

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[The United States] trains her immigrants [Irish, German, Russian, Jew, Slave, etc.] to this despising of 'niggers' from the day of their landing, and they carry and send the news back to the submerged classes in the fatherlands.[1]

My early interest in the color problems in the United States and Africa led to the habit of travel … and knowledge of current thought in modern countries was always a part of my study …[2]

W.E.B. DuBois

Foto: Monica Miller

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How Does It Feel to *Be* a Problem?

In 1903, African American sociologist W.E.B. DuBois gave one of the first theories of black life in America: double consciousness. He posed the question, "How does it feel to be a problem?"[3] Elaborating, he explained that to be black in America was to find oneself unable to enter into the full social arrangement, but damnably, to see with clarity that very discrepancy which white people could not (or would not) recognize – the full humanity of black people, outside of an ontologized "problem" status. Hence, black life in America would come to be marked by both a lack of recognition of this fullness, the "not-yet-fully-human" (i.e., as 3/5s human during American slavery) and a dogged determination to render that which is *not yet*, ontologically, as *still*, yet somehow a problem. Such a counterintuitive incongruity would come to comprise a gross *mis*recognition of a problem that, when buttressed by those seeking full

1 W. E. B. DuBois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (Dover Publications, 1999 (1920)), 28-9.
2 W. E. B. DuBois, *In Battle for Peace (The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois): The Story of My 83rd Birthday* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 11.
3 W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903.

recognition of the seemingly unreconcilable two-ness of being both black *and* human, ostensibly remained unknowledgeable among those in control of the parameters and barometers of social legibility. Thus, such a conundrum would come to ultimately turn back on, be returned to, those already constituted as occupying "problem" status: *not yet* fully human *and* yet responsible for the constitution of their own humanity. Hence, the problem was never (seen as) racism, as such, or a largescale failure to recast anew the category "human" equitably and without contingencies, otherwise. Rather, blacks *were* (seen as) the problem, and responsible for recalibrating their own status of being a "problem."

What, we might ask, is one to do when, irrespective of ones' social status as illegible in perpetuity, still marked *as* a problem while simultaneously being denied the ontological condition of being *human*? What logics of identity are at work in an equation that marks a people or group as a social dilemma while denying that same group the very condition of *Sein* needed to precede such denial? How can that which is not acknowledged or recognized be denied? Is it possible to move away from this recursively contrived social arrangement of perpetual contradiction whereby social seeing/not-seeing remains heavily engined by a predicament of oscillating strangeness: that of *being* (depicted as) a problem while occupying a state of *nothingness*, the *not-yet-being*? And yet, the social magic borne from the condition of such *im*possibilities, would come to mark the limits and excess of black life in America.

For those caught amidst this unending double-bind of social *il*legibility, the perennial question of "proper response" in the face of such protracted life options remains: what is one, caught between an unending double-bind of *il*legibility, to do *within* a social world not designed to see their humanity? Whether in the service of everyday survival, or barely surviving every day, the realities of escape, surrender, and making worlds *within* worlds are but a few among a host of strategies and tactics utilized by blacks in America. For some, escape *into* that world not made nor designed with you in mind, enabled uncharted space to consider anew the predicaments of black life.

Black bodies have come to be something of a mirror for America, and as a consequence, have reflected the fragmented reality of racial life within it. But they have done more than *mirror* reality, they also *refracted* it as to attempt a change of "direction" of the "beams" constituting life in the U.S. from various angles and asymmetries. This process of refraction involves trying ones' hand at the alchemical work of *re*direction where lenses and material intersect. Notwithstanding the deep diversity of skill and capacity undergirding black life in America, such work of "vision" no doubt involves an acuity for measurement and focus, especially as it concerns the focusing characteristics of an eye ("I"), and/or the eyes of others. Among great luminaries and visionaries adept at manipulating the direction of incoming rays, objects, and substances, DuBois' own life, personally and professionally, bore witness to such skill *and* yet reflected, simultaneously, some of the most racially pernicious historical moments such as (American racial) Reconstruction, the advent of racial segregation – particularly in the South, the rise and growth of the Ku Klux Klan and other pernicious hate groups, to name a few. It also saw the birth of a host of social protest movements meant to inspire and cultivate varying approaches to black legibility, racial uplift and advance, in tandem with a dogged desire to name, call out, and eventually bear witness to the end of white supremacist ideologies, policies and the enduring oppressive life circumstances for African Americans in the U.S., and marginalized people globally – especially within Asia and Africa. Throughout his life, DuBois witnessed a plethora of movements for social and political change, strategies of black social protest, and as black man *and* scholar – or, put otherwise, a scholar who *happened* to be black during a time when black humanity was not yet acknowledged with fullness according to the law – the promise accompanying the peril of black life in the U.S.

The first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard University, DuBois is widely regarded as one of the fathers of modern sociology. What's more, he looked to the "social sciences" (and later the idea of Education as an "equalizer" of sorts) as something that could help eliminate segregation, ultimately arriving at the conclusion that the only "proper" response to the racial predicament of America was *agitation*.

DuBois was both agitated and agitator, embodying something of a paradox of movement/moment that marks the long moment of white American denial of black humanity. The problem of racialized problem-status tarried in ways that arrested black life to a seemingly gridlocked state of perpetual deferral – or, better put, relegated to the status of a "permanent outsider" within the microcosm of a "national family." This perpetual state of *nonbeing* while *being* cast a "problem" is beautifully, yet tragically, captured in DuBois' own words when he writes, "I have been in the world … but not of it."[4] Disillusioned with the U.S. (and its incremental strategies for racial equality), and compelled by a more globally expansive politic and purview, DuBois would come to find respite in Ghana in 1961, where he would, a year later renounce his American citizenship, and ultimately die in 1963 just hours before the historic

4 DuBois, *Darkwater*, ix.

March on Washington in D.C.[5] Despite where one stood along the sometimes contentious yet layered spectrum of social protest strategies (e.g., Accommodation vs. Assimilation vs. Integration, etc.,) many would come to view the ideological, political, and social options for racial recognition in the U.S. made possible, as at once, now stunted and stymied in both form and content. Through it all, the paradox of movement – black mobility, be it geographic or otherwise – consistently reigned among the most palpable options for black legibility and survivability – as both mystery (the question – "why?") *and* response (the answer – "a way out of no way") to racialized *im*mobility.

In life and on the page, DuBois was an extensive traveler – and managed to transmute and bring into sharp relief the racial paradoxes and two-ness of America without overdetermining human capacity, agency and ingenuity, fixity, and/or limitation on either side of the racial divide. And, to "travel" from the vantage point of double consciousness necessitates the black body that is both *there* and yet *not there*, ontologically recognizable from within the space-of-the-non-space – the *inside* of the *outside* of the social body, and *be*, always, cognizant that black bodies lack the necessary conditions to set *Sein* forth in its fullness. DuBois' travels shaped his interest in and wisdom about matters concerning the category of race and the veracity of its significance (or not) in the social world. Take for instance the maturity of DuBois' thoughts on the category "race" penned in his classic text *Darkwater* wherein his consideration upon the invention of race was not only far ahead of its time, but also, "clairvoyant," wherein a deeply reflective peek into the "The Souls of White Folk" leaves no particular kind of whiteness unscathed:

The discovery of personal whiteness among the world's peoples is a very modern thing, – a nineteenth and twentieth century matter, indeed. The ancient world would have laughed at such a distinction … . Today we have changed all that, and the world in a sudden, emotional conversion has discovered that it is white and by that token, wonderful![6]

DuBois' foresight and wisdom was paired with, and balanced by the nuance necessary as to guard against the all-too-easy geographic flattening and social reduction that often accompany such a claim. For sure, DuBois was not ignorant that American racism and European racism had their differences in both degree and kind, but remained keenly aware that recognition of such qualitative distinctions of "difference" are not, self-evidently insured with a promise of acquittal or exoneration. As people travel, so too do their ideas in what might be regarded as a kind of movement, a certain sort of "flow" that is, at once *not* untethered from the contingencies of history and context, but also, not fully determined by them. Imagine a boat at sea, or a dandelion floating in wind: ideas *about* race, and racialized ideas, just like antiracist sentiments, and even ideas that altogether ignore the category and reality of race – ebb, wane, and drift. Here, movement vis-à-vis travel, and travel *as enabling* spaces of generative possibility, are constitutive with the porosity, as well as stasis at the sites of borders, centers, margins, and spaces of relative safety.

1903 to the *Matter* of *Black Lives*: Movement in the Moment?

What of the "movement" *for* and *among* black lives? Response to such a query, which stands as the perennial question of *now* in the U.S. and abroad, necessitates a more expansive notion of *movement* grounded in the strange predicament of the twoness of black life. Here, movement or the *moment* in it does not, as often thought, precede solely from social stasis, rather, its possibility (that is, black mobility) is an indictment of whiteness' inability to know fully, thus control, the "clairvoyance" of black matter (i.e., bodies). With this in mind, consider the *movement* preceding and proceeding the dead black body of Michael Brown, killed at the hands of white police officer Darren Wilson, whose body was left splayed out in the baking sun, on display, for hours: moving about the world as a problem before his death, walking yet not fully being seen, but, being seen enough *as* a problem as to cut short the slightest reality of black capacity (*to be*) in the midst of insurmountable debility. And yet, even *after* the sting of such unnecessary and calculating death, black movement (e.g., "Black Lives Matter") gained strength from such instances of immobile black fixity (e.g., Brown's dead black body on display). It is for this reason that beyond personal choice, or having such choice(s) made for you, black bodies, whether desired or not, recognized or ignored, are always in a constant state of movement, and therefore, tragically, a perpetual danger. The look and feel of some of the greatest and most historic movements for racial equality (e.g., Civil Rights, Black Power, Black Lives Matter) in the U.S. always, in one way or another, involve movement, emphasizing black bodies in-motion, dead or alive: *marching* for civil rights, *sitting* in the front of the bus, rather than the back, *singing* songs of freedom, slaves *running* for/towards freedom. Even *in* death, where the permanence of racialized fixity neither promises nor offers return, black bodies remain charged with the crime of movement while held in suspicion for capacity to defy the threshold of clinical death. More plainly yet no less tragically put, such reality is illuminated with chilling clarity in the scene of lynched black bodies "swinging in

5 Manning Marable, "Introduction," in W.E.B. DuBois, *Darkwater*, viii.
6 W.E.B. Dubois, *Darkwater*, 17.

the summer breeze," as famously sung by Billie Holiday, lyrically encompassing an uneasy timelessness that mirror the unforgiving inhumanity hanging from Southern poplar trees in the hot concrete of Ferguson, MO. There, in 2014, Wilson pumped countless bullets into the black body of Brown, later describing Brown as somehow still *moving* towards him (while being shot at) in a superhuman capacity – the mythological beasts white America often depicted them to be. Not *fully* human, yet somehow imbued with *super*human ability – perhaps this is the condition that procures the "magical" ingenuity of clairvoyance, black conjuration, that DuBois so aptly writes of in his work. Hence, the lives of black matter, *and* the Movement for the Matter of Black Lives is a reality of, and outgrowth from, this veiled "Double-Consciousness" forced upon the strange predicament of black lives in America. The doubly daunting social reality haunting black bodies effectually, and by proxy, reconciles the illusory bipolarity of social difference that ensnare, and enable the double-consciousness endemic to black life, not as an option, but rather as a forced reality. An analyses, therefore of the state, the current *moment* of "Black Lives" requires categorical *movement*, escape from the sacred/profane thinking that keeps at bay recognition of black life *as* matter, and *mattering* at all. Consequentially, escape is nowhere, save movement, itself.

Any foray into the question of the movement for black lives in the Twenty-First Century, is not a *new* beginning of a chapter in the story of race in America. It is, rather, a continuation of the necessary realization that the *movement* of the movement for black livability must entail a sense of knowing *how* to move, knowing where to go while also *knowing* concurrently history bears witness to the strong possibility of still having *nowhere* to go. In the United States, many ask and fiercely debate if the Black Lives Matter Movement is a continuation of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. This basic political question of legacy and inheritance leads to a host of intellectual questions: What is meant by *movement* among the recurring reality of unending state sanctioned black death? Does the current movement for racial equitability, the current moment for increased legibility itself promise to untether the "problem" of blackness from the social system of racialized inequity? Would this require flight from, or outside of the "system" itself? Does the fight for racial equality require attention to more than simply tackling ineffective policy issues? Does the historic moment of a black president help to offset the problem of blackness in America? Is the Black Lives Matter Movement America's "new" Movement for Civil Rights, or a *new moment* with roots in the productive abrasiveness of hip hop's challenge to an "us vs. them" society?

An honest confrontation with, and measurement of, these and other questions of great significance require balancing the scale of proximity and distance, nearness and farness to *travel*. DuBois himself required distance from home (U.S.) so as to think more critically, expansively, and to imagine new directions of travel, and uncharted lines of flight. In the introductory epigraphs, DuBois does not distinguish physical travel from the ideological and social. Rather, geographic travel is part and parcel to and with ideological travel. Evidenced by DuBois's eventual (one-way) exilic arrival to Africa at the invitation of Kwame Nkrumah, his journey *away* from the problem of blackness, inevitably prepared him for recognizing that where American racism was concerned, there was really no movement that could provide an eventual escape, or resolution to its necessity.

Today's movement for black life is a *moment* in a constant flow of black creative response to U.S. policies and social practices that have ensured, with great success, that the black underclass not only remain an underclass, but also, treated as unworthy of *being*. Journalists, scholars, and activists often refer to the birth and growth of Black Lives Matter *as* a Movement, singular and variable, or more formally (and internationally) classified as the contemporary moment of the "Movement for Black Life." *Moment* has a temporality to it, while the notion of *movement* conjures a feeling that something is actively happening and changing, long term rather than fleeting. But, if the moment of the movement for black lives is characterized, as it often is, by the tragic reality that despite instances of social and juridical progress, black death continues to proliferate, is lasting *movement* ever (really) possible? Are we really *moving* in this *moment*?

On an existential level, I am less interested in easy (or even complicated) answers to the problem of black bodies having been situated as a problem, in perpetuity. As to matters of social policy, I remain suspect of quick turns to all-too-easy resolutions, such as the suggestion that employing more black police officers will quell American law enforcement assaults on black people. To much larger and indeed historically significant moments of great progress and outgrowths from movements such as Civil Rights and Black Power, witnessed in the ascendance of a first black president, such moments made possible by these movements have done little to mitigate racism on interpersonal and structural levels. For the unconvinced, Michael Brown's dead black body was still relegated to the sun and concrete for hours, baking on display as *reality* and cautionary reminder. The problem of black movement/s, for some, remains reconciled in the (re)solution of black death.

Due to the physical and social death that has been American policy historically, the idea of "black life" remains more than a political exaggeration, and contemporary instances of juridical abuse and extralegal enforcement of black movement have a long and telling history. During the 19th Century, most black folks in the U.S. were enslaved, with the U.S. Congress famously passing the "3/5s Compromise," which ensured that the enslaved would still be counted among census reports (for the tallying of how many representatives each state received), with every five enslaved counting as three persons. Put differently, though no less tragically, black bodies, the value of them, were only worth 3/5s that of white bodies. At the time of this legislation, many considered it a compromise to avoid war. Today, many historians will explain that this compromise delayed but also guaranteed the American Civil War of 1863-1865.

The Civil War would eventually come to an end, but the question or topic at the heart of the war – white American disregard for black life – has yet to be addressed fully in the United States. In fact, law professor Michelle Alexander argues that the last forty years has seen a rising prison industrial complex organized around a war on drugs and disproportionately impacting the lives of black and brown Americans.[7] Almost difficult to refute or deny, black people in the United States face bleak life options, due in large part to continued policies that criminalize blackness and poverty, alike. The prison industrial complex is a summation of hundreds of years worth of U.S. policies and laws built not around freedom (as is often suggested) but to keep in place the profitable state of black immobility. There is little left to wonder concerning the significance of the prison complex among black activism today, concurrent with long held distrust in, and suspicion of, the American legal system.

Fast-forwarding *back* to the moment of the present – 112 years since DuBois' perennial question discussed earlier, this era of proliferating black death and illegibility, the confounding condition and prospect of the "be" in DuBois' already catastrophic question (*having* problems is something wholly different from *being* a problem) – remains possibly impossible. In the current moment *of* the Movement for Black Lives, the West has "solved" countless problems, while having done little to address the more fundamental problem-status for black and brown bodies. And not just black bodies, but queer bodies, poor bodies, differently abled bodies. Globally, Muslim bodies, migrant bodies, outlawed bodies – of bodies living in the clairvoyant state behind and beyond the veil, do not possess the luxury of *being*, unable to exist outside of an understanding of their existence being posed as an impasse.

For many black bodies, and the groups named above, the early 21st century continues to be a colossal death-knell where the permanence of black death remains routine, and momentous. Rehearsal of the statistics which remind us of the haunting number of deaths, are needed no more, rather, they only recount the tragic specifics of habituated black death during what is otherwise considered regular moments of daily life. And, like the expansion of the Black Lives Matter Movement globally, this social reality is not novel in the U.S. or among Europe. But perhaps the last century has borne witness to a *new* kind of moment of *black death* – not one based on medieval street filth and poor sewerage, but on the propagation of equally filthy ideological expressions of discipline and punishment – where whiteness and the white life springing forth from it, continues to fight tooth and nail against its own social death, as Africans, Syrians, Brits and so many more bear the costs of social consequences just as torturous as medieval stockades. The politics of surveillance and policing bear down on these bodies with a ferocity perhaps only matched by white complicity to this reoccurring scene of surveillance.

Moving with Flow

Chronologically coinciding to the growth of the U.S. prison industrial complex population explosion is hip hop culture and its fast moving global travels and weight. Hip hop, one of my primary areas of interest, offers a helpful heuristic frame for understanding Black Lives Matter as a moment of "flow." Hip hop was born in destitution, among a space where marginalized young people turned to found objects around them and created a world within a world. Artists – whether rapper, dj, dancer, graffiti artist – enabled a kind of travel for themselves, a cultural one whose unsuspecting travel has since resonated with people the world over. It is at this juncture where the story of Black Lives Matter and hip hop come together, fused by the concrete where death *and* rebirth spring forth. Understanding the movement for black life requires attention to the movement of hip hop. As such, hip hop culture provides a flow that allows us to keep complexity and contradiction in tension. Germane to hip hop is flexibility, constant movement, disturbance of assumptions, witty – a product of double consciousness. During its historical emergence, and true today, the arrival and fast rise of hip hop culture eluded prediction and calculable apprehension. Utilizing the bricolage so endemic to black survivability and creativity in America, the art of taking what already is and making something new, distinct and useable, hip hop functioned as the existential and social salve for

7 Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. 1st ed. (New Press, 2010), 6.

approximately two generations of young black, brown, and even white folks, globally. By tapping into the strategies cultivated by, and in, hip hop, Black Lives Matter has quickly cultivated widespread attention to the pernicious double bind of American racism, the double consciousness of black life, and the contemporary refusal to live beneath the veil no longer.

Despite the coherence they are often granted and imbued with, social movements are more often than not fragmented in purpose and aim, lacking in specific or general direction, and seemingly lost in what cultural theorist Jean-François Bayart refers to as a "battle for identity."[8] This "battle" is waged over a wide variety of cultural identities and forms, often ensuing amidst processes of legitimation and delegitimation of the very categories that give shape and reality to their naming. Who "we" are, think ourselves to be, is rarely if ever as stable under conditions of perceived threat, the site where the battle for identity comes undone at the seams. Thinking further with Bayart's suggestion above, perhaps social belief in the "we" is an elaborate fiction occurring on both sides of such a battle, a reoccurring fable that turns other peoples' fictions (e.g., white normativity) into Others' daunting realities (e.g., black death).

For instance, this movement is expected to be universal (e.g., global, inclusive, etc.) in its scope and reach precisely at the critical *moment* when the particularity of interminable black death is named, and foregrounded. When chants, proclamations, and cries of "Black Lives Matter" reverberate, the instantaneous like response of "All Lives Matter" is as preposterous as much as it is politically polarizing, where the catchall phrase "All lives" euphemistically conceals, and masquerades, as "White." The back and forth of this constant public debate demonstrates an all-too-common feature of ontology: the struggle to give attention to the universal and the particular within an ecosystem where racial equity and parity have *yet* to unfold, and racial monotony is, at once, called for when those occupying the center begin to anxiously feel the ground slipping from beneath them. Rather than struggle to *see* and *embrace* social difference for the particularized sake of difference alone, white normativity remains the homogenizing default for maintaining generalized ideals, such as "order" and "peace." When the social grip of this default position begins to loosen, white anxiety over loss of that which it has yet named and acknowledged tragically results, most often, in a fury of death dealing rage. In fact, "*all* lives matter" rebuttals signify a tragic irony that expose the *need* undergirding such a movement today – the shouts and calls that "Black Lives Matter" unfortunately corroborate this catastrophic reality. And, the capacity of this self-effacing tendency is, in no way, unique to dominant groups' struggle for power – capitalizing on poles of the particular vs. universal in managing the direction of social energy likewise play out in marginal movements, strategically and otherwise. For example, the Civil Rights Movement was, in large part, organized around a successful variety of claims that appealed to perceived universals, such as brotherly love, turning the other cheek, and civic responsibility. Today, we know these "truths" as no more contingent than the particularities they attempt to offset, and accomplishing much more than a simple reinforcement of a particular brand of racial, cultural or religious dominance. While the Civil Rights Movement played to social assumptions of U.S. Christianity, the Black Power Movement rejected the widely proffered Christian ethic of turning the other cheek, by reinforcing exaggerated aspects of black exceptionalism and separation. And, despite their fundamental differences in politic (e.g., the "what" of the larger political imagination) and action (e.g., various approaches to the "how" of the group politic), both movements for black social change shared a deeply troubling undercurrent: sexism, homophobia, and misogyny. The historical record documents well the manner in which Women of color (i.e., their contributions and leadership) were grossly overlooked, and seldom recognized as worthy of the same respect demanded for, and by, black men on both ends of the political spectrum.

Traveling back to the question of *what* typifies the undercurrents of the "what" in the query, "what moment is this?" we need not remain beholden to age-old traditions and barometers as reliable indicators for present-day day advancement. Such approach of holding the present moment accountable to perceived progresses of the past, holds movement towards social change at bay, arresting new currents of identity formation to worn models of the past. Critiqued often for lacking the "strong" and "stable" leadership said to have stood at the helm of historic black movements, Black Lives Matter marches to the beat of a new moment. Productively disorganized, and opting for alternative leadership options beyond centralized structures, the Movement for Black Lives employs what is otherwise deemed an unsystematic approach to social protest as to rupture the conformity of assumed standards and universals.

Moving beyond the charted waters of historical circumstance and the heritage of black possibility doesn't involve rejecting moments and movements of the past, but rather, recasting this heritage otherwise so that it may continue to live. Before the momentum of Black Lives Matter gained speed, a stagnant politics of "keeping it real" (to the inheritance of such heritage) did little to contest the white

8 Jean-François Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 252.

lies of the past, and their seeming productivity of belief in believing themselves to be white.[9] Expecting Black Lives Matter to repackage the look, feel, tone and shape of what has *already* come before, only stymies its capacious possibility for a more intersectional approach to the *matter* of social difference.

Just as hip hop culture is not a *new* mode of rock and roll, Black Lives Matter is in no way newfangled and unmoored from its past. In popular discourse, the American Civil Rights[10] and Black Power[11] movements are commonly defined and signified on in homogenized ways (most especially in terms of the defining political imagination) – and as tradition in America – pitted as two warring ideals consciously antagonistic and immutably incompatible. Such longstanding efforts leave unscathed those at social centers of dominance, and threaten the promise of movement, and flights from the perils of the past. It is commonplace, especially when social progress is at stake, to turn to the comfortability of historical events/voices to undergird the analytical efforts of assessing contemporary moments for change. Classic examples, as noted above, include the specter of figures such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and of course, even my beginning this essay with DuBois. And such grounding in the past is appropriate, indeed necessary, but not at the expense of overdetermining the futurity of the present.

In 2014, hip hop artist Nicki Minaj released the hit single titled "Lookin Ass Nigga."[12] No stranger to controversy, Minaj found herself once again at the center of fierce public debate when outraged ensued over the album artwork featured Malcolm X famously holding a rifle and looking out a window.[13] The image intimated that Malcolm X, ever occupied with revolutionary black politics, was simultaneously guilty of a familiar patriarchal, pornotropic gaze so often cast on women of color.[14] The unforgiving public concern with Minaj's artistic choices, and the direction of which it points, demonstrates a preoccupation with looking backward, a sanctification of a past meant to protect a present contingency of group members ironically not content with *their* version of the contemporary moment. The album cover highlights the manner in which acute moments of racialized politicization can easily, without necessary forward moving reflexivity and courage, all too easily stunt the "making" of realized a mo(ve)ment. Intentionally committed to long-term social change, the contemporary Black Lives Matter Movement purposefully refuses to privilege racial difference at the expense of other intersecting points of identity. Understanding well that identities are always co-constitutive and interconnected, many among Black Lives Matter remain critically attentive to the role gender, class, region, and sexuality, play in the protraction of racialized life options. In this way, commitment to a forward-looking *movement* in the *moment,* is held accountable to, and uncoupled from, the *past* in the *present*, especially as it concerns social progress for marginalized demographics. Much like hip hop culture, Black Lives Matters refuses a blind eye towards other dimensions of social difference beyond a singular focus on race, vital for those doggedly fighting for their right to be seen, to be legible. Structurally, this movement is nebulous in physical persons as with the political issues it seeks to address, *and* intersectional insomuch as much of its attention is framed around the myriad of social identifications that mark black bodies, in particular times and places, as fully human in all of their complexities.

Returning back to the recent controversy surrounding Minaj's cover art and the public charge of "debasing" the historic achievements of black Civil Rights, rarely does the question "*whose* civil rights do we speak for, and on behalf of?" accompany such a discourse. Such narrowed vision and confined logic has historically undergirded the necessary, yet at times exaggerated concern over the role/utility of violence in the ongoing struggle for human rights. Again, the question as to *whose* violence, and to whom relative safety is afforded (and not) indeed changes the parameters of what otherwise appears as an innocuous question of routine ethical consideration. Such necessitous nuances, as minor *and* major as they are, are substantial queries of great ethical and social weight, especially among demographics disproportionally encumbered by overlapping points of social difference (e.g., Women of Color, LGBTQ folk, etc.) whose contributions to Civil Rights and Black Power were summarily hidden and ignored in the documentation and telling of these histories. As such, formative leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement advocate for a "leaderless" leadership style, not out of a lack of concern for the pragmatics of organized and structured engagement, but precisely so as to ensure focused energy towards the "politic," the *how* of the movement, rather than the "identity" (i.e., the leaders), the *who* of such a massive undertaking. Taken together, those yet to be persuaded of such a purposefully fragmented approach to tactic and vision, "what then holds all of this together?" might find hints of strategic productivity to such acerbic queries in the *past* of the movements' prudent

9 Christopher M. Driscoll, *White Lies: Race and Uncertainty in the Twilight of American Religion* (Routledge, 2015), Chapter Two.

10 The Civil Rights Movement, here, refers to 1954-1968, legal recognition, federal protection, citizenship – making blackness legible.

11 The black power movement, here, refers to the Late 1960s – early 70s, making the particularity of blackness legible on its *own terms*.

12 Nicki Minaj, "Lookin' Ass Nigga," Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2mwNbTL3pOs Accessed August 11, 2016.

13 Brandon Soderberg, "Nicki Minaj's Malcolm X Controversy: What Her Critics Got Wrong," *Spin.com*, February 21, 2014. http://www.spin.com/2014/02/nicki-minaj-malcolm-x-lookin-ass-nigga-controversy/ Accessed August 11, 2016.

14 Alexander G. Weheliye, "Pornotropes," in the Journal of Visual Culture Vol. 7, No. 1 April 2008, 65-81.

present approximations and organizational decisions. Take for instance that black people, in America, remained intransigently problematized due to white folks' inability to wrestle with their historic, and present-day inability to come to terms with the *presence* of the ocular *absence* mapped onto black bodies, in the U.S. and the world over. And this fundamental state of *being* a problem while being a full subject in the *not-yet*, exceed the capacious possibilities and failed impossibilities of any one single leader, solitary history, or amassed group effort. In the end, all that ever *really* were, and remain, are evinced in that which still is: black bodies in motion, moving about in time and space, under the threat of constant assault and surveillance. Summarily, with this knowledge in hand, the Movement for the Matter of Black Lives underscores that movement *forward* remembering recognition of the inherited heritage of prior historical moments, keeping at the fore the heritage inherited in for in movement towards *complexity* (i.e., social difference)

Going With the Flow: Moving *Beyond* The *Moment* in Movement

The question of "what" moment is a necessary one, yet, rendered ineffective if distracted by a grocery list approach which threatens the boldness of the current Black Lives Matter movement by turning it in on itself through preoccupation with itself. Such an interrogation stands to obliterate its much needed political complexity, especially the manner in which it productively distrusts the law just as much as it does the pernicious logics of white supremacy. As hip hop historian, Jeff Chang reminds us in 2005's *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation*:

Generations [movements] are fictions.

The act of determining a group of people by imposing a beginning and ending date around them is a way to impose a narrative. They are interesting and necessary fictions because they allow claims to be staked around ideas. But generations are fictions nonetheless, often created simply to suit the needs of demographers, journalists, futurists and marketers.[15]

The question of *is* Black Lives Matter a moment *or* a movement is a query tethered to, and rooted in, ideas of bygone eras (for we know that the past is always somehow present), and their strategies/tactics of social protest. We might find ourselves on more solid and productive ground by shifting the "what" of such a recursive social thought so that the "movement" in the "what moment is this" is freed up from binary assumptions in a manner appreciative of the dialectic resolution offered by the rich heritage and tradition of DuBoisian double-consciousness. With conceptual fixity aside, in this way, movement = structure *and* rupture, and awareness of the present/futures' past (or, at the least its haunting *trace*) and irreducible difference of the "now" (i.e., current historical moment) prevents and avoids the catastrophes often accompanying the thin veneer of anachronistic and histrionic logics. In fact, enabling the "free movement" of flow is only possible by refusing easy road of immobile certainty and immovable permanence which continue to "fix" black life the world over.

Unlike the manner in which the (histories and motivations of) Civil Rights and Black Power movements are far too often homogenously historicized, narratives depicting the birth of the Black Lives Matter Movement are frequently characterized as emergent, unanticipated, and without a strategy. In the wake of George Zimmerman's acquittal, the formation of the Black Lives Matter Movement emerged among an unsuspecting hashtag added to the tragic cacophony of black rage and pain. The shockwaves of Zimmerman's exoneration left many in America feeling racially defeated and socially overwhelmed. The painful days that followed were indeed hard to watch, and worn thin with unending despair. Above all, the *zeitgeist* of the early days of the Movement for Black Lives remained far-flung from political realization, a reality best captured in the bold and telling words of Black Lives Matter co-founder Alicia Garza, "we didn't have a strategic plan."[16] A movement that resists notions of "single leaders," Garza notes, "We have a lot of leaders … just not where you might be looking for them. If you're looking for the straight black man who is a preacher, you're not going to find it."[17] Garza's words above animate the vitality and necessity of flow vs. fixity.

The tragic two-ness of the ostensible permanence of American racism undergirding the notion of blacks as a *permanently-fixed* American underclass rests at the impasse of not "human" enough to be thought of as a *be* [*with* or *as* a problem] – and – the affirmatively rebellious post-civil rights reliance on the *flow of black life*. A flow, a movement able to square with the complexities of life in the liminality of interstices – ebbing and flowing among hyperlegibility, and illegibility, all seemingly at once. A look back to the category "human" and the historically unsubstan-

15 Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (Basic Civitas, 2005), 1.

16 Alicia Garza, Qtd. In "#BlackLivesMatter: The Birth of a New Civil Rights Movement," Elizabeth Day, *The Guardian*, July 19, 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/19/blacklivesmatter-birth-civil-rights-movement Accessed August 11, 2016.

17 Ibid.

tiated idea that humans *can* do "good" – this flow of black life reflects and refracts the contingencies of History, as such. That is, it bears catastrophic witness to the violence done in the service of a category which, without reservation, required (and still does) black sacrificed surrogates. It seems not only far-fetched, but also, almost "supernatural" to place so much hope in a category that is *and* remains a "not-yet" for so many in America today. For these people, the "not-yet," responsible historicizing is required as a precondition of accountability and equitability regarding *how* the category "human" emerges and comes into being while others remained, and still do, in the distant "not-yet."

Evinced in the starting point of its hip hop inflected efforts, Black Lives Matter acknowledges the complexity of identity, uses the method of intersectionality to recast home and build new strategies/tactics of social protest, and to remake history by resituating the *who* at the center of the *what*. These among other areas are enabled through a dexterous effort to build innovative and global cultural "commutes" and "bridges." For example, the spontaneous use of social media as a mode to express black rage, and the inclusion of a #hashtag, the founders of (what became) the Black Lives Matter movement seemingly *knew* where to go to express black pain and rage. Undeniably, the power of the #hashtag indeed created something anticipatable.

As a result, the e/affect of this movement is largely characterized by the recurrence of black angst, and sometimes black catharsis – a sentiment depicted as "too" nihilistic and hopeless by the generations before. In both form and content, it resists neat and tidy structures and depictions, and master-plans. The reliance upon unconventional and contested approaches makes room for the decentralization of singular leaders and therefore, authority. After all, is this not how the contested category of "human" works the very moment one person's escape becomes another person's surrender? When bodies conceived as *not* (yet) fully human begin to show signs of their capacity *as* human? Ostensibly, this is when all hell seems to break loose. Thus, the question concerning the complexity of the full humanity of blackness then becomes suspended between the being of non-being as they become revictimized through the rhetorical violence of "all lives matter" or some other form of policing the sheer notion of their problem with their problem-status. Hence, it begins to (really) *matter* whether black life is rendered as moment or movement, insomuch as *flow* between the two options becomes emblematic of the tensions *and* terrors facing the West.

Where We Are Heading, *for the mo*[ve]*ment* …

In ending where this essay begins, DuBois offers words frustratingly contemporary considering they were penned in 1920:

> The present problem of problems is nothing more than democracy beating itself helplessly against the color bar, purling, seeping, seething, foaming to burst through, ever and again overwhelming the emerging masses of white men in its rolling backwaters and held back by those who dream of future kingdoms of greed built on black and brown and yellow slavery.[18]

Much like hip hop, Black Lives Matter is a refutation of refutations, a refusal to accept dehumanized refusals any longer. Neither offer any promise of a solution. Neither suggest any resolve or glorious new beginning. But what they might signal is the end of a white world's ability to deny its victims a voice, even if victimization has no end in sight. These "black and brown and yellow" voices have the means of flow at their disposal. Whether or not this ensures an end to "future kingdoms" predicated on "slavery" will be determined, perhaps, only upon the world hearing and seeing this flow. In many ways, both hip hop culture, and the current movement for the full humanity of Black Lives does not resolve, nor offer a theologized hope regarding the current the state of affairs for black bodies, rather the question of the "what next" remains suspended between the continued "movement" for change rooted at the interstices of black immobility and debility. Reflecting upon the temporality of the "what" in the query "what moment is this" – the great cultural critic Stuart Hall reminds us that:

> Moments are always conjunctural. They have their historical specificity; and although they always exhibit similarities and continuities with the other moments in which we pose a question like this, they are never the same moment. And the combination of what is similar and what is different defines not only the specificity of the moment, but the specificity of the question, and therefore the strategies of cultural politics with which we attempt to intervene.[19]

Neither movement *nor* moment, Black Lives Matter is conjuncture wherein its membership, its activists know where to go, while also knowing well where *not* to go, all while remaining aware that there is yet and still a somewhere in the nowhere to go. So long as the long journey of white denial of the fullness of black and brown humanity remain alive as a cornerstone and relic of the ever "advancing" and "progressing" West, the screams from the East, this time will tarry as the *matter* of Black Lives Matter. In the meantime, only an active hoping against hope can keep the perchance of a Baldwinian "Next Time" at bay from the anticipated "Never Again." ■

18 DuBois, *Darkwater*, 33.
19 Stuart Hall, "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture" (1993).