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The Thread: Reflections on #Blacklivesmatter and 21st Century Racial Dynamics

Kelley Deetz

This piece is dedicated to Malcolm X who would have been 90 years old today.

"I believe that there will ultimately be a clash between the oppressed and those who do the oppressing. I believe that there will be a clash between those who want freedom, justice and equality for everyone and those who want to continue the system of exploitation. I believe that there will be that kind of clash but I don't think it will be based on the color of the skin." –Malcolm X

I think America is *starting* to wake up. Alarms of racial violence and unjust verdicts have saturated the social media. These things are not new, but they have finally become news and worthy of note. The social fabric of this nation is twisting and tearing in new ways, but in similar directions. As a scholar and professor of Black history I am maddened by the chaos. This moment provokes rigorous analysis. My mind is rapidly tracing moments, mentally referencing scholarship and chronicles that weave into this everlasting narrative. This is all too familiar, while being completely unlike anything in the past. The familiar is the consistent abuse of Black bodies and spirits by white authority figures, and the routine excusing of such acts. It is the ebb and flow of cognitive dissonance and civil unrest, manifested in protests, marches, chants, radical iconography, semiotics, kinesics, rhetoric, and a series of high-profile incidents that keep gaining international attention. America is catching fire, *again*. This fire is not new--it never went out. This is the same fire that burned in the souls of enslaved African folk throughout the Diaspora, inspired resistance, revolts, and revolutions. This same fire was in Sojourner Truth, Nat Turner, Denmark Vessey, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman, and helped them fight against slavery, and in Ida B. Wells-Barnett who battled exhaustively against Lynchings, and in the countless organizers who shut down Jim Crow. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X had this same fire, but chose to direct it in different ways for the same cause. This fire is burning and powerful and ever so familiar. The fight for civil rights began when that first captive African was put on a ship to sail to a land where he would become systematically, legally, and institutionally oppressed for centuries.

Resistance is inseparable from oppression, and protests are undoubtedly chaotic. However, this particular moment is more opaque than ever, and trying to simplify the dynamics can be challenging. Racism fed into laws, and laws dictated civil rights. It was transparent and targetable. The successes of the modern Civil Rights Movement are clearly seen in the legal sphere, as the government established equality through legislation. However, laws only enforce boundaries, they don't change ideologies. The CRM did little to eradicate racism. The racist white students who spit on, beat, and screamed at black students as they integrated public schools went on to have children and undoubtedly passed on legacies of hate. These legacies are hundreds of years old, and continue to inform ignorance as we've seen recently in multitudes of cases.

Television played a pivotal role in the modern Civil Rights Movement as it allowed the non-violent tactics to play on the moral sensibilities of mainstream America. The 21st century has more sophisticated media sharing, without the control that the 20th century ensured. Grassroots movements are at our fingertips as we hashtag and tweet ourselves into mass momentum. Videos capture manifestations of our racist nation as they record the brutal unjust murders of Oscar Grant, Eric Garner, and Walter Scott. There is no mistaking the current state of chaos in this nation. One second on twitter and you know: this historic fire is raging.

America was never post-racial, and the mythical idea that was is quickly unraveling. We are in a state of moral and cultural turmoil and nothing is clear except that we live in a highly racialized and racist country that is struggling to measure its pulse. The modern Civil Rights Movement gave way to the popularization of Liberal cultural norms. Political correctness became the standard. No longer was it acceptable to say racist words, tell racists jokes, or more recently, even refer to race. The Liberal-born move to become a "color-blind" society fed off good intentions, but failed miserably as it inadvertently promoted a more sophisticated form of racism in our nation. Color-blindness is a privilege of whiteness, and one that carries little to no residence or respect in communities of color. If you can truly not see color you're disrespecting the rich cultures around you and choosing to ignore the dignity and pride that historically oppressed groups have sewn despite centuries of abuse.

Ironically, “color-blindness” epitomizes the height of white patriarchal demands; something that Liberals often demonize.

The #Blacklivesmatter campaign is impressively strong. With the current state of racism in this nation, we must approach the challenges with new tactics. We need to think critically about our demands. The left has shown us that “eracism” bumper stickers didn’t erase anything, and forcing a lexicon onto a complicated and deeply historical social problem only masked the beast. How do we slay this “beast” within the confines of our constitution? How can we support free speech and then punish that very freedom? We must believe in equality and justice for all. Neither of those are given. We are a nation who is highly stratified according to class, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion. No law can fix this-- behaviors and beliefs fix this.

America’s dirty secret keeps rearing its head because it’s never fully been acknowledged nor has it been properly addressed through education. This is an era where states like Arizona, are actively omitting ethnic studies curriculums, while college police tackle black professors as if they were enforcing the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. Police aren’t held accountable because latent racism cannot be tested by the means they employ.

The recent police murder of Baltimore citizen Mr. Freddie Gray made this fire explode in ways that forced justice to come to the table. Protestors began employing terms with deep roots in the rhetoric of race and revolt; #blackspring compares the U.S. strife to that of the #Arabspring, an association that surely terrifies conservative Americans. They took on #baltimoreuprising to signify the slave uprisings that generations of blacks participated in and that led to the liberation of Haiti. The replacement of the word “riot” with “revolt” is of a similar vein. These words have historical currency and evoke the memories of the ancestors, and the long legacy of struggle in the African Diaspora.

The city of Baltimore yields an incredibly complex stage to discuss race, power, police, and justice. Americans like binaries and simplicities. *This is not simple.* Six police officers- three white, three African American, were charged for Mr. Gray’s murder. Intersections of power, race, place, and class worked in twisted ways. It is this intricacy compiled with generations of

institutionalized racism, oppression, and poverty that make Baltimore such a complicated place for teasing out simple narratives for public consumption. Baltimore, in so many ways is Oakland, Detroit, Chicago, etc. It is the essence of the disease that is racism in the 21st century. Race in 2015 is highly complex and deeply rooted in the fabric of our nation. Whose responsibility is it to teach Americans to think critically? How do we move forward when so few folks refuse to look back? What does Baltimore say about the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow?

To be continued . . .

Some recent pieces on Malcolm X and #Blacklivesmatter:

What Would Malcom X Think? (by his daughter Ilyasah Shabazz)

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/21/opinion/ilyasah-shabazz-what-would-malcolm-x-think.html?_r=0

Do Black Lives Matter: Rectifying Malcolm X with Post-Racial America:

<http://genius.com/Edward-ongweso-jr-do-black-lives-matter-rectifying-malcolm-x-with-post-racial-america-annotated>

How Malcolm X's Teachings are Being Revived 50 Years After His Assassination:

<http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2015/02/21/3625590/malcolm-x-taught-me/>