

**A Gale of Two Cities:
New Orleans, Baltimore and the Power of Liberal Anti-Racism**

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"Herein lies the match that will continue to ignite the dynamite in the ghettos: the ineptness of decision makers, the anachronistic institutions, the inability to think boldly, and above all the unwillingness to innovate. The makeshift plans put together every summer by city administrations to avoid rebellions in the ghettos are merely buying time."

Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967)

Throughout the late sixties, black ghettos in many American cities were engulfed in annual summer riots, often touched off by incidences of police harassment and abuse. Against this backdrop of seasonal rioting, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton penned their best-selling 1967 book, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*. "White America can continue to appropriate millions of dollars to take ghetto teenagers off the streets and onto nice, green farms during the hot summer months. They can continue to provide mobile swimming pools and hastily built play areas," Carmichael and Hamilton warned, "but there is a point beyond which the steaming ghettos will not be cooled off." The book was read and debated amid the 1967 Newark rebellion, which provoked president Lyndon B. Johnson to convene the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to study the root causes and develop suggestions for preventing future unrest. The official report issued by the Kerner Commission, as it came to be named after its chair, Illinois governor Otto Kerner, famously concluded that "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal."¹

Almost fifty years later, the spirit of the Kerner commission's characterization of American society continues to possess organizers and supporters of the movement for black lives, which have spread like prairie fires from Ferguson to Baltimore, and from the University of Missouri to dozens of college campuses nationwide. *Nation* columnist Mychal Denzel Smith concludes that black rage lies at the heart of these contemporary struggles and he locates its tap source in the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster, where the catastrophic failure of the greater New Orleans levee system and neoliberal disaster planning combined to create mass misery throughout the region.² For over a week, Americans looked on in horror, disbelief and indignation as thousands of desperate New Orleanians and other Gulf Coast residents waited for rescue and assistance, and neither the Bush White House, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, nor state and local officials seemed prepared or willing to respond in a manner fit for an advanced industrial society. Upwards of 1800 people perished, and more than a million were displaced from the Gulf Coast, a mass exodus that surpassed the Dust Bowl migrations of the 1930s.

Kanye West may have offered the most memorable statement of the nascent black rage Smith identifies, when the rapper went off script during a live telethon for Katrina survivors. "America is set up to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off, as slow as possible," West said, before punctuating his impromptu speech with the charge that "George Bush doesn't care about black people." His conviction that racism was the primary motive for the death and misery in New Orleans has been rearticulated and expanded in a small library of academic books, essays, memoirs and documentary films over the past decade. Smith even claims that for his cohort of black millennials, West's words were "our first relatable expression of black rage on a national stage" that has since inspired resurgent black political activity from the election of Baraka Obama

to the anti-police brutality protests. Given the media optics of the Katrina crisis, where thousands of black residents crowded the Superdome in search of relief, it is not surprising that so many concluded the disaster was caused by institutional racism, the result of decades of systematic discrimination in education, housing and jobs. Despite its power as a moral criticism, the racial justice frame, however, falters as social and historical analysis, especially in regards to the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster.

Within the context of New Orleans, the anti-racist frame neglects the precise determinants of who lived and died during that harrowing week after the Katrina disaster, dynamics that were shaped by class, age and social isolation more than race per se.³ Whites were, in fact, overrepresented among the dead. Neither does the frame capture the variegated class experiences of recovery in New Orleans, which do not map out neatly onto the “two nations” thinking that so many abide. This framing fails to capture how the contra-flow evacuation process worked effectively for middle class blacks with access to cars, credit and social networks beyond the city, as it had for whites of similar means. The property owner-centered reconstruction programs supported by city, state and federal governments also helped middle class homeowners, black and white, to restore their homes and lives, while the same governing coalition pushed a wave of mass evictions and public housing demolitions that created hardship for black working class residents, making it more difficult for them to return and creating a housing crisis that still endures.

There are other problems with Smith’s account of contemporary anti-racist politics to be sure. As is often the case with emerging political tendencies, there is a tendency to forget and even diminish what came before. Smith writes about the nineties as an era of mass quiescence among blacks—“This kind of rhetorical expression of black rage was marginalized throughout most of the relatively prosperous 1990s,

when there was no longer a Reagan or Bush to serve as an identifiable enemy”—but this account forgets the Rodney King beating and 1992 Los Angeles rebellion, the racial melodrama surrounding O.J. Simpson’s 1994 murder trial, the protests against New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s zero tolerance policing regime, especially after the killings of Amadou Diallo and Patrick Dorismund, and all manner of localized and national resistance to Clinton’s neoliberal reforms and to capitalist globalization. Despite these and other analytical problems, Smith’s thoughts on how we might periodize the emergence of contemporary anti-racist struggles are helpful.

The 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster and the “Black Spring” events of Baltimore 2015 serve as useful bookends, both for understanding the tenure of Barack Obama as a national political figure, and the growth of new liberal anti-racist politics. The election of Obama, the post-racial meaning that was assigned to his victory and the waves right wing attacks by the Birthers, the Tea Party movement, Congressional Republicans and internet racists all helped to crystallize and elevate anti-racist struggle as a central axis of debate and analysis for many on the Left. As an analysis that might help us to understand the actual political forces at play in our world, however, Smith’s “black rage,” and other similar, contemporary articulations of liberal anti-racism, Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*, Ta-Nehisi Coates’s “The Case for Reparations,” #BlackLivesMatter, etc. falter, illuminating certain social injustices, while concealing deeper political and class contradictions.

This paper explores the origins of the new anti-racism, and its power to mobilize various publics in a way that is aesthetically militant, but not necessarily oppositional in substance. As Smith says “black rage is about holding America accountable. It does not distract ‘attention from solving real problems’; it illuminates those problems and asks America to confront their roots. If black rage has prevented alliances from forging, those

are likely not alliances that would have yielded much in the way of progress anyway.” Smith, like so many others, disparages interracial popular struggle, but fails to see the ways that various modes of anti-racism—ranging from fighting micro-aggressions in the workplace, defending Obama against internet trolls, boycotting the Oscars, and certain tendencies within the contemporary struggle against police violence—constitute a form of class politics, a black bourgeois politics that prioritizes uplift, recognition and incrementalism over popular struggle and social democracy and as a consequence, can be accommodated to neoliberal capitalism. Condemnations of police violence and institutional racism can just as easily create traction for black-led philanthropy and non-profit work, all-male charter schools, minority appointments, Go Fund Me drives, and mentoring programs for the urban poor, as it can for some more substantive forms of redress, like the demilitarization of police departments, citizen review boards with real power, and public works projects that mobilize the unemployed to redevelop abandoned and blighted urban neighborhoods. Identity politics of the sort that Smith and others advance does not reckon with the complexities of class power and political economy, and the process of policy reform in real time and space. As this review of various historical developments from black power to the Baltimore protests illustrates, there can be no genuine, left egalitarian opposition in our times that conforms to neoliberal multiculturalism.

I.

Carmichael and Hamilton’s writing reflected the deep skepticism many black power militants held towards the liberal policies undertaken by local and national leaders. Johnson’s War on Poverty had not gone far enough, many argued, to address the deplorable housing conditions, chronic unemployment and crowded and under-

funded schools separating black inner city life from white suburban prosperity. They charged: “It is ludicrous for the society to believe that these temporary measures can long contain the tempers of oppressed people.”⁴ Like many of their contemporaries, Carmichael and Hamilton saw black urban life as being hemmed in by institutional racism, not merely overt forms of interpersonal prejudice and discrimination, but more subtle and systemic practices like redlining, restrictive covenants, and predatory lending. Liberal strategies might placate the simmering discontent among black ghetto dwellers, but unless systemic changes were made, the alchemy of racism, underdevelopment and desperation would inevitably give way to rebellion. “And when the dynamite does go off,” Carmichael and Hamilton wrote, “pious pronouncements of patience should not go forth. Blame should not be placed on 'outside agitators' or on 'Communist influence' or on advocates of Black Power. That dynamite was placed there by white racism and it ignited by white racist indifference to act justly.”⁵

Carmichael and Hamilton’s words echo across the decades and for some, they may appear as relevant to our own times, in the aftermath of the April 2015 Baltimore riots and mounting protests against police brutality, as they did during the late sixties. In the face of routine police violence against unarmed black citizens, many activists embrace a similar view of the contemporary United States, not as the post-racial meritocracy touted by some on the Right, but as an endemically racist and highly unequal society. Like an acoustic echo however, that resounds into a void, we should be careful not to mistake Carmichael and Hamilton’s interpretation of their own historical context as speaking directly to our own times. Ghettos, riots and pervasive inequality defined the late sixties and the contemporary moment, but during the

intervening years that separate our respective epochs, the political and social terrain has shifted in critical ways.

Carmichael was the charismatic leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee who announced the slogan black power to the world during the 1966 Meredith March Against Fear, which was taken over by prominent civil rights leaders after James Meredith was shot by a white vigilante and hospitalized. Hamilton was an Oklahoma native who participated in the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, before earning a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago. Together they set out to operationalize the notion of black power, to move it from a pithy slogan to a practical approach for realizing black progress. At certain turns they draw on the language of internal colonialism to describe the conditions of black oppression, and then on other pages, the text drifts back towards a view of black political empowerment rooted in well-established notions of ethnic machine politics, which they saw as the *realpolitik* of American city life, and the most effective path for blacks to take as white suburban exodus gave way to majority black voting publics in many cities.⁶ Black Power militants called for revolution, aligning themselves with Third World liberation movements, and their sharp criticisms of American society and heady rhetoric of armed struggle incited fear in reactionary whites who equated black self-assertion with black domination. In practice, however, black power would increasingly come to mean black control of political and economic institutions, what started as an antidote to racial integration—the “thalidomide drug of integration” for Carmichael—became its elixir.⁷ More black representation in civic life, business and popular culture has not abolished the conditions of structural unemployment, uneven development, and racial injustice that Carmichael and Hamilton confronted, but rather it has provided a means of more effectively managing these social contradictions under late capitalism.

In a pointed analysis of contemporary African American politics, Keeanga-Yahmatta Taylor contends that the “uprising in Baltimore has crystalized the deepening political and class divide in black America . . . a new development in the black freedom struggle that historically has been united across class lines to fight racism.”⁸ I agree with the spirit of her criticism, but question the assertion of novelty, the emergence of a discrete class politics within black life where it was less pronounced, if not nonexistent before. While it is true that by the mid-1950s a broad consensus had developed within the black population, North and South, around dismantling the legal edifice of Jim Crow segregation, the very use of the term, the “black freedom struggle,” a neologism adopted by many contemporary academics, papers over the range of ideological positions and material interests animating black public life at every historical juncture.

Even the mid-century moment of broad support for desegregation was defined by the presence of strong criticisms of liberal integration and the strategy of non-violent resistance by black nationalists who favored political and economic independence, and by the arguments of a veteran cohort of black unionists and former Communists who insisted that black advancement and the fight for social democracy were inextricable.⁹ Throughout the Jim Crow era, different African American political tendencies and constituencies have disagreed over how to advance the race, and fight racism for that matter, cleavages that would sharpen after the passage of landmark civil rights legislation, and the rise of black power militancy. Although there is a tendency within both academic treatments and popular reminiscence of the black power movement to emphasize its most revolutionary aspirations, hindsight should encourage a more sobering account. Black power meant different things to different people, and in retrospect the period saw the defeat of black political radicalism—both ideologically

and by force—and the triumph and consolidation of a mode of black political life amenable to liberal democracy.

The class contradictions that Taylor identifies were woven into the genesis of post-segregation black politics, its unique prerogatives and institutional constraints, and are a function of how black elite commitments to their core electoral constituencies have been modified amid the shifting electoral calculus and ideological direction of the Democratic Party since the late 1980s. Urban population shifts within most American cities after the Second World War, historic civil rights reform, and Great Society liberal statecraft combined to produce a post-segregation black political elite. This turn to black ethnic politics reflected in the writings of Carmichael and Hamilton and many of their contemporaries was encouraged and shaped by Johnson era social policy, namely the Community Action Programs of the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act and later Model Cities legislation which extended technical expertise, political access and resources to the most well-positioned and articulate segments of inner-city black populations.¹⁰

Writing during the dawn of the Nixon era, Bay Area-based writer and activist Robert Allen was especially perceptive in grasping the nascent political realignments occurring underneath the most militant overtures of black power organizations, and the role that a new black professional and managerial stratum would play in the emerging political-economic order. Allen concluded “the white corporate elite has found an ally in the black bourgeoisie, the new, militant black middle class which became a significant social force following World War II. The members of this class consist of black professionals, technicians, executives, professors, government workers, etc. . . . Like the black masses, they denounced the old black elite of Tomming preachers, teachers, and businessmen-politicians.”¹¹ “The new black elite seeks to overthrow and take the place of this old elite” and to accomplish this, Allen continued, “it has forged

an informal alliance with the corporate forces which run white (and black) America.”¹² Limited but significant political integration has changed the face of public leadership in most American cities, with some having elected successive black-led governing regimes. The crucial development revealed in the rubble and smoke of Baltimore worth noting here is the ascendant power of a bloc of neoliberal black political elites. Unlike their predecessors who operated within the waning days of the New Deal Democratic coalition, this newest cohort of black politicians is more integrated institutionally and ideologically into a New Democratic universe, and not beholden to the movement pressures that defined black political life during the sixties and seventies.

The election of Barack Obama to the presidency in 2008 represented both a Jackie Robinson-like political milestone, and perhaps more consequentially, the triumph of a refined New Democratic politics, liberal in terms of multicultural representation and inclusiveness, but strongly committed to neoliberalism, the ideological rejection of social democracy and left egalitarian interventionism, in favor of the active promotion of forms of regulation that enhance capital flows and profit-making.¹³ Carmichael and Hamilton thought that black political control would yield more effective empowerment, sweeping aside half-hearted reforms of white liberals to deliver real change in the lives of black urban dwellers. Almost five decades after their clarion call, actually existing black power has come to serve as a means of legitimating and advancing urban neoliberalization, the rollback of public goods and services, and maintenance of a pro-market order which relegates the unemployed, the undereducated, and the undocumented to a life of subsistence in the low-wage economy and often in the informal sector. The role that black political elites play in promoting non-profit, privatized solutions to unemployment, poverty, failing schools and socio-economic inequality more generally, and the effect that identitarian assumptions about political

affinity have on public debate are the most formidable barriers to developing a popular movement capable of transforming the prison state, and resolving the on-going policing crisis.

II.

In April 2015, the death of 25-year-old Freddie Gray brought the policing crisis to a national stage, and into President Barack Obama's back yard, making Baltimore the latest epicenter of national protests over police brutality, vigilante violence against blacks and the build-up of the carceral state. Discontent over anti-black violence had been growing with a number of well-publicized police and vigilante murders of unarmed blacks, and local protests began to congeal into a national phenomenon after the 2012 killing of 17-year-old, unarmed Trayvon Martin at the hands of a self-appointed neighborhood watchman, George Zimmerman. The initial non-arrest of Zimmerman, and ultimately, his acquittal enraged many who saw this as another instance of lethal racist targeting and further evidence of a broken legal system. The police killing of unarmed teen Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri sparked multiple waves of street protests and rioting during the fall of 2014. The apparent inexperience of the Ferguson police force in handling large crowds of demonstrators, and their repression of peaceful protestors escalated the conflict. The undeserved deaths of scores of other black citizens at the hands of police has united previously disparate forces, local campaigns against police violence, the families of victims, long-standing civil rights organizations and newer formations like #BlackLivesMatter, the Dream Defenders, We the Protesters and the Black Youth Project among others, around reforms that might end police brutality and the prison state, and address broader problems of racial inequality. The often-cited figure by activists is that police or vigilantes kill a black person every 28 hours. Reformers have called for

demilitarization of police forces, reductions in spending on policing, and mandatory body cameras for patrolling officers, among other measures.

Gray suffered a severe spinal cord injury while being transported by Baltimore police and lay in a coma for seven days before succumbing to his injuries on April 19. A cell phone video taken during Gray's initial arrest records him wailing in agony. At least one bystander reported that Gray's body was bent "like a pretzel" by police who ignored his requests for medical assistance. In the amateur footage, at least one of his legs appears to have gone limp. The officers drag him for a short distance before standing Gray on his feet and then lifting him into the awaiting police van. A second cellphone video, taken by bystanders near the corner of Mount and Baker Streets, shows the arresting officers removing Gray from the van and placing leg shackles on him. When the wagon arrived at the western district police station, Gray was unresponsive and not breathing. As the news of his death spread, marches and peaceful demonstrations were met by heavier police presence, with skirmishes and full-scale riots spreading across the city's west side. Officials estimated some \$9 million in property damages. There were 150 reported vehicle fires and sixty structures were burned. Of the 250 people arrested, about half were released without being charged.

In comparison to other urban rebellions in recent memory, such as those in the Mount Pleasant section of the District of Columbia in 1991, South Central Los Angeles in 1992, Cincinnati in 2001, and even Ferguson, the Baltimore conflict was rather small in scale and duration. The April 2015 events seem especially tame when compared to the 1968 Holy Week riots that rocked the city after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1968, order was restored through the deployment of nearly 11,000 National Guard and federal troops, and in the end, six people lay dead, 700 injured, and 5800 arrested.¹⁴ A thousand businesses reported property damages totaling \$12 million

in insured losses.¹⁵ The core underlying problem that defines the urban context that Carmichael and Hamilton confronted, and that of our own times is the problem of relative surplus population, where a growing segment of the proletariat struggles to meet necessity due to structural unemployment. Unlike newly arriving southern black migrants who found stable work and the promise of a better life in the factories, steel mills and ports of many American cities during and after the Second World War, from the sixties onwards, subsequent generations have faced a context of industrial contraction, fiscal abandonment and carceral discipline.

Freddie Gray's life was in many ways typical of many young black working class men struggling to survive in a context of violence, few jobs, and constant police surveillance. Gray lived in the Gilmor Homes, a public housing development in the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood. During his early years, Gray's family lived in such squalid conditions that he and his sisters tested positive for elevated, toxic lead levels in their blood. Such poisoning from peeling paint was so common in their social world that many referred to the settlement payments Gray and others received as "lead checks."¹⁶ Gray and his siblings struggled with education and health issues. An asthmatic, Gray asked for an abuterol inhaler during his fateful arrest. Conservative media pundits emphasized Gray's multiple arrests—the twenty court cases against him, most of which were drug-related and non-violent offenses— but neighbors recalled a gregarious personality who loved football, and possessed an infectious smile and playful sense of humor. The picture that emerges from the testimonies of those who knew him best is of a young man who loved his family and friends, did his best to take care of them financially and emotionally despite the losing hand that American society dealt him.

Geographer and for much of his adult life, a long time Baltimore resident, David Harvey once remarked that the city was “for the most part, a mess. Not the kind of enchanting mess that makes cities such interesting places to explore, but an awful mess.”¹⁷ Of course Baltimore was not always in such a dismal state, not even for its black residents. Like many American industrial cities, it has followed what is by now, a familiar arch of development, from a Fordist city with a densely populated streetscape of ethnic enclaves through an age of suburban residential expansion and prosperity after the Second World War, and then into an epoch of shuttered factories and shifting investment to the financial, tourism and media sectors.¹⁸ Industrial contraction in Baltimore has hit the city’s black population hard, especially when so many black workers secured gainful employment at one time in the city’s steel mills, shipyards and docks. In 1970, Bethlehem Steel employed 30,000, but by the turn of the twenty-first century, less than 5000 were needed to maintain the same levels of productivity as before.¹⁹ In a similar manner, containerization and the increased use of automated loading have greatly reduced the need for living labor in the docks of Baltimore and other cities worldwide.²⁰ The twentieth century era of the mass worker has been replaced by an hour-glass economy with promising careers, material comfort, security, entertainment and leisure for the mostly white, educated professional classes on the uppermost end, a shrinking core of unionized, well-paid and relatively secure wage labor in the center, and on the bottom, deteriorating infrastructure, failing schools, contingent, low wage service sector employment, or precarious informal work for the reserve army.²¹

By the time Gray entered this world, Baltimore had become a showcase of post-Fordist urban redevelopment, having begun the process in the seventies of renovating its derelict wharfs, warehouses and port infrastructure in the city’s waterfront into a

picturesque and coveted ensemble of tourist attractions. By the early 1990s, the Inner Harbor featured an aquarium, science center, chartered boat rides, a festival plaza, multiple restaurants, shopping arcades, numerous hotels and condo buildings, and within a short walk, Orioles Park at Camden Yards, the home field of the city's National Baseball League franchise. In the mid-eighties, Baltimore elites began the conversion of Baltimore Gas and Electric Company's defunct Pratt Street power plant into an entertainment destination, a process that has undergone revolving tenancy and numerous cycles of boom and bust, all heavily subsidized by the public coffers.²² The Inner Harbor provided Baltimore with a popular face of success, but as in so many cities, beyond the boundaries of its refurbished downtown lay an altogether different reality.

The reorganization of Baltimore's economy, subsidization of downtown tourism and financial sectors, and national shift towards workfare and prisonfare have produced a landscape of spectacular wealth and leisure amenities for urban bon vivant on one hand, and residential apartheid and precarity for the city's mostly black poor on the other. Beginning after the Second World War, the exodus of more affluent whites and later blacks from the central city to the suburbs of Baltimore County and beyond created new patterns of segregation. Loïc Wacquant has characterized these contemporary spatial configurations in terms of hyperghettoization as a way of distinguishing the racial ghetto of the twentieth century with its internal class diversity, from the conditions we find in places like Sandtown-Winchester today, which are class exclusive zones where the black poor are relegated and policed.²³ In 2012, the unemployment rate for Baltimore City was 13.9%, but in Gray's Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood the rate was 24.2%.²⁴ And when riots erupted after his death, the city's unemployment stood at 8.4%, even though the national rate was falling. His

neighborhood was 97% black, and 35.4% of the households lived in poverty.²⁵ Lester Spence points out how the city's spending priorities, its preference for incentivizing pro-corporate growth over neighborhood development and public goods and services, contributed to the 2015 crisis. The city has heavily subsidized local corporations like Under Armour, supporting the construction of their downtown headquarters with \$35 million in tax increment financing.²⁶ Spence notes that as funding for public parks and recreation in Baltimore has stagnated, spending on policing has surged. While the city spent around \$165 million on policing in 1991, it now spends \$445 million.²⁷ These spending patterns and policy priorities are not unique to Baltimore, but are reflective of a general tendency that has come to define American political life over the past three decades. In the face of growing inequality rooted in technological obsolescence, the elimination of the need for large quantities of living labor, American political elites and publics have come to support the extensive use of policing and incarceration to manage relative surplus population, and abandoned public works and the use of progressive state intervention to insure some modicum of material necessity and equality for all citizens.

III.

In the ruins of West Baltimore, the contradictions of the Obama administration's neoliberal approach to contemporary inequality have been forced out into the open and at the same time, the way in which the conflict was effectively managed reveals the social power of black political integration. Even before his election, Obama engaged in a form of underclass mythmaking, one that gestured towards racism and economic structures, before emphasizing the behavioral roots of contemporary inequality, and calling for greater parental responsibility, patriarchal authority and bourgeois aspiration as curatives to urban inequality. The notion of the underclass is essentially

the view that black poverty is distinct from white poverty and the result of peculiar cultural deficits, i.e. lack of a work ethic, the prevalence of female-headed households, the lack of delayed gratification and so forth. This ideology has its origins in the Cold War liberalism of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who served as Assistant Labor Secretary in the Johnson Administration, but over the past few decades has been adopted by generations of conservative Republicans, black nationalists, liberal academics, New Urbanists and New Democrats.²⁸ Despite the perception by many of his legions of supporters and as many right wing critics who perceive Obama as politically left—either a New Deal Democrat or closeted socialist, on matters of contemporary racial and urban inequality, his public statements have been consistently conservative, emphasizing the dysfunctional behavior of the poor, and proffering market-oriented solutions. In Obama’s hands, underclass moralizing has achieved renewed hegemony. Obama’s blackness, the optics of his patriarchal, heteronormative family life, and his skill at emoting with black audiences have allowed him to restore the legitimacy of conservative ideas that were threatened during the aughts, as a growing chorus of forces publically criticized the power of global capital, and the military adventurism and domestic disaster that defined the administration of George W. Bush.

At the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Obama offered a full-throated celebration of American exceptionalism. He acknowledged the difficulties faced by contemporary American workers, but overall his speech elided class as a significant determinant in American life. According to Obama, “in a generous America you don’t have to be rich to achieve your potential.”²⁹ He diminished the role of the state as a guarantor of equality of opportunity, and instead elevated popular conservative themes of individual responsibility and self-governance in a manner that swept aside the historical and contemporary demands of working class and popular struggles for

protection from volatile market forces. “The people I meet in small towns and big cities, in diners and office parks,” Obama claimed, “they don’t expect government to solve all their problems. They know they have to work hard to get ahead and they want to. Go into the collar counties around Chicago, and people will tell you they don’t want their tax money wasted by a welfare agency or the Pentagon.”³⁰ He then recited now familiar conservative talking points regarding contemporary racial achievement gaps in education, namely the view that anti-intellectual culture and the lack of parental involvement are to blame. “Go into any inner city neighborhood, and folks will tell you that government alone can’t teach kids to learn. They know that parents have to parent,” Obama continued, “that children can’t achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white.”³¹ Where his predecessors might have been dismissed for their social meanness—recall Reagan’s welfare queen mythmaking—Obama has been able to convey the same ideas about the black poor as distinct and uniquely deprived, but with a sense of sincerity and persuasiveness that resonates with some black audiences, while comforting broader publics.

In his numerous Father’s Day speeches, often delivered from the pulpits of black churches, he calls on black men to be more responsible parents and role models. His delivery has the appeal of a closed-door chat with his core racial constituency, “his people,” but like the speeches of any other modern president, such words are circulated widely within the American public. Obama’s uncanny ability to speak in multiple registers and to different audiences simultaneously was a crucial ingredient in his national electoral success, and has been critical in maintaining the hegemony of the underclass myth during uncertain economic times. Time again, whenever the

problems of chronic inner city poverty and violence have confronted him, Obama has resorted to skillful and charismatic deployment of the underclass ideology.³²

Obama's response to mass shooting incidents provides an insightful comparison to his unique approach to black urban violence. Obama has delivered more speeches in the aftermath of mass shootings than any other president. After the October 1, 2015 massacre at Umpqua College in Oregon, he delivered his most impassioned call for tighter regulation of gun sales, sounding angrier and more resolute than in his 14 previous addresses in the wake of mass gun violence. He has treated mass shootings as matters of national concern, but sans political pressure, he has been less likely to address routinized urban gun violence, and more apt to frame the problem as one of a specific stratum of U.S. society. In the face of both forms of gun violence, he makes a plea for reform of gun laws, e.g. more stringent background checks for gun consumers, often pointing out the powerful role of the gun lobby and an obstinate Congress in maintaining the status quo, before calling for the latter's support in reforming the current system to improve public safety. A consistent theme in his speeches on gun violence is sickness. A key difference, however, is that in the case of mass shootings, he emphasizes the fragile mental state of the lone gunman and calls for parents, teachers, and community members to watch for early warning signs, and find help for the depressed and those in need of mental health services. When he turns to address the problem of urban violence however, his emphasis is on cultural sickness, the alleged pathologies of the black urban poor as a whole.

More than once during Obama's tenure, the problem of urban violence has hit close to home as his adopted hometown of Chicago has faced waves of street violence. In 2009, less than a year into Obama's first term, Derrion Albert, a 16-year-old honor student was killed in a melee between two rival gangs near Fenger High School in

Chicago's Roseland neighborhood. The incident was captured on cell phone video and the gruesome image of the innocent bystander being bludgeoned to death with a rail tie, stood in stark contrast to news coverage of the Obamas traveling to Copenhagen to make a case for the city of Chicago's Olympic bid.³³ At the start of his second term, Obama was faced once again with another highly publicized murder of an innocent black teen. This time 15-year-old Hadiya Pendleton was gunned down while sitting with her friends in a park less than a mile from the Obamas' Hyde Park home. Pendleton had performed at the President's second inauguration a week earlier as a majorette in her high school marching band. First Lady Michelle Obama represented the White House at Pendleton's funeral, and delivered the eulogy. After the Black Youth Project circulated a petition urging the President to come to Chicago to give an address on gun violence, he conceded, delivering a speech at the Hyde Park Career Academy in February 2013.

His Hyde Park speech alluded to the role of economic conditions and called for a modest increase in the national minimum wage, before turning to his familiar combination of remedies, more effective parenting, school privatization, and behavior modification. In a fashion that one would have expected from Reagan Republicans a few decades prior, Obama diminished the potential impact of public intervention, and valorized the role of civil society and the market. "When a child opens fire on another child," he said, "there's a hole in that child's heart that government can't fill— only community and parents and teachers and clergy can fill that hole."³⁴ "There's no more important ingredient for success," Obama continued, "nothing that would be more important for us reducing violence than strong, stable families—which means we should do more to promote marriage and encourage fatherhood."³⁵ In the realm of education, he lauded his former chief of staff and Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel's

program for rewarding high performance pre-schools, and without explicitly endorsing charterization, he celebrated the work of some Chicago High Schools, and urged the need to “redesign” schools for success.

IV.

Obama’s public remarks in the wake of Freddie Gray’s death and ensuing protests extended these same interpretations and policy themes, despite pressure from anti-police brutality forces who wanted him to give a sterner rebuke of police violence. During a White House Rose Garden press conference with visiting Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, a reporter asked Obama whether the unfolding events in Baltimore constituted a national crisis. In an extended response, he praised the peaceful protestors, “the kind of organizing that needs to take place if we’re going to tackle this problem” and condemned looters, calling for the restoration of order, and arrests and punishment for “the handful of criminals and thugs who tore up the place.”³⁶ Obama then lauded the work of his task force on policing, a grant program to assist local departments in purchasing body cameras, and other measures, but he emphasized the limits of his authority— “I can’t federalize every police department in the country and force them to retrain.” He also, as he has in the past, resorted to the “few bad apples” explanation of police brutality, arguing that this is the fault of a small minority of disturbed or poorly trained individuals, not a problem endemic to the institution of policing itself. He then concluded on the familiar ground of underclass ideology, describing the environment of substance abuse, absentee fathers, desperation and joblessness, where we “send police in to do the dirty work of containing the problems that arise there.” Acknowledging again the difficulty of securing support from Congress for the kinds of reforms he would like, in this case more investment in urban

communities, Obama then pivoted towards the neoliberal model— “we can make a difference around school reform and around job training, and around some investments in infrastructure in these communities trying to attract new businesses in.”³⁷ Obama, of course, was not alone in these sentiments. His words authorized the dominant mode of thinking about poverty, a view that thrives at the grassroots as well.

Further evidence of the underclass hegemony could be found in the overnight rise of Toya Graham, from an unemployed single mother into a national cause célèbre during the Baltimore riots. Graham became a media sensation when she publically slapped her son multiple times after finding him among a group of masked protestors outside Mondawmin Mall in West Baltimore. Numerous cable news and talk show appearances, a Go-Fund me campaign to raise money for Graham and her children, and job offers from Black Entertainment Television, Under Armour and other companies soon followed. Although her son said he was there because he and many of his friends had been mistreated by police, his political views were drowned out in celebrations of his mother’s heavy handed parenting. For some, Graham represented the kind of parent that was missing in the lives of too many young black men, the strong disciplinarian who is willing to embarrass her progeny in order to keep him out of harm’s way. The focus on disciplinary parenting, and the charitable response of foundations and corporations are long-standing approaches to addressing inequality that have gained an outsized role within the context of neoliberal dismantling of public goods and services. And as Carmichael and Hamilton made clear when faced with similar efforts to placate rebellion, these strategies do not alter the economic practices and fundamental conditions that produce obsolescence, and inequality.

In retrospect, the historical significance of the 2015 Baltimore riot lay not in its scale, nor the ways this conflict galvanized the national protests against police brutality,

but in how well the Baltimore events were mobilized by conservative reformist political tendencies, perhaps best represented in the Obama administration's My Brothers Keeper alliance, and the local One Baltimore initiative launched by the city's black governing regime.

Obama responded to the Baltimore crisis by christening his My Brother's Keeper Alliance, a non-profit expansion of the initiative he had created the year before. The program would draw on \$80 million in private investments from corporate donors including Sam's Club, Pepsi Co., and Sprint among a long list of others, and focus on improving the lives of boys and young men of color by targeting literacy education, improving graduation rates, workforce preparation and programs designed to keep young men out of the criminal justice system.³⁸ Obama named pop singer and school privatization advocate John Legend as the honorary chairman of the alliance. Obama unveiled the new project at Lehman College in the Bronx, and coopted the language of #BlackLivesMatter, repeatedly asserting "you matter" to the group of young men gathered for the press conference.³⁹ This is yet another manifestation of the approach that has been the hallmark of the Obama administration, soft overtures to left social criticism combined with pro-market solutions.

Michelle Obama's Let's Move campaign and its focus on eliminating food deserts, neighborhoods without access to green grocers, represent another dimension of this New Democratic urban agenda. The First Lady's campaign has worked with corporations like Walgreens pharmacy to open up expanded fresh fruit and vegetable sections within stores servicing the poorest communities. Such initiatives are met with great fanfare in communities that have endured decades of disinvestment, but these efforts are more public relations success than substantive advance. Within these and other initiatives launched by the Obama White House, issues of hunger, poverty, crime

and public health are isolated and treated as exceptions to the sacrosanct liberal market system, rather than being viewed as consequences of contemporary conditions of flexible accumulation. These marquee neoliberal projects certainly address human need, but on a limited scale and in a manner that does not directly alter or affect the larger investment decisions of corporations and financial institutions, nor the urban redevelopment projects supported by local and national elites, which are far more consequential in shaping the context of housing affordability, the quality and availability of work, wage structures, quality education, and the character of public safety that defines the existence of millions of urban dwellers. Local responses in Baltimore mirrored those of the White House in their pro-market form and political effects. Local responses in Baltimore mirrored those of the White House in neoliberal form and political effects.

Even before Maryland State's attorney Marilyn Mosby issued indictments against the six officers involved in Freddie Gray's arrest, a broad alliance of national and local elites, celebrity philanthropists, Baltimore Ravens football players, old guard race men, small business owners, corporate and foundation board members, civic boosters and activists rallied around peaceful demonstrations and acts of volunteerism as the most legitimate means for addressing the poverty and violence in the city's toughest neighborhoods. In the days after Gray's death, as images of burning buildings and youth overturning cars flooded social media and televised coverage, the non-profit organization, Big Brothers Big Sisters saw a 3000 percent increase in inquiries by volunteer mentors.⁴⁰ Baltimore officials also launched the One Baltimore initiative to coordinate charitable work. Ironically, this official campaign usurped the name of the One Baltimore coalition, a group of grassroots organizations, unions and churches who had rallied a year prior to protest the efforts of Veolia North America, a water

privatization corporation, to secure a consultant contract with the city.⁴¹ This latest One Baltimore initiative formed by elites amid the riots, however, was decidedly pro-privatization, formed as a means of coordinating non-profit and philanthropical resources and relief efforts in the riot-torn city.⁴² City officials also created the Baltimore Business Recovery fund, to connect local businesses and firms affected by the riots to various sources of local, state and federal aid for reconstruction. If the experience of New Orleans after the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster provides any indication of trajectory, we should expect these initiatives to absorb elements of the potential opposition and further erode support for genuinely public solutions to poverty and urban violence. Even more than New Orleans, Baltimore has long been a hub of national black political activity, due to its large and long-standing black middle class and proximity to the nation's capital.

V.

In New Orleans, city elites embarked on a property-owner centered reconstruction that drew heavily on an extensive network of NGOs to carry out renovation and new builds of single family homes. Equally consequential, various non-profit think tanks, education entrepreneurs, for-profit schools and temporary staffing organizations like Teach for America (TFA) united to overhaul the city's school system into the nation's first all charter school district.⁴³ The weakening of both public housing and public schools in the city over the course of decades, and the lore of local corruption all provided traction to privatization efforts. Furthermore, the fact that the neoliberal model was able to produce tangible results for some constituencies, in a context of diminished public goods and services, helped to cement support from a broad, multiracial swath of the city's weary natives, disgruntled activists, newcomers

and enterprising investors around an agenda of educational experimentation, volunteerism, and entrepreneurship. What has emerged in the post-Katrina context is an integrated, pro-growth coalition where the numbers of black politicians is somewhat diminished due to the loss of black population in the city. As in other places, black political and business elites, however, continue to play a crucial role in legitimating the processes of neoliberalization, softening the potential opposition among black neighborhood and activist constituencies, by their presence and sometimes through direct appeals to concerns about black advancement. An illustrative case in point is the fate of public housing in post-Katrina New Orleans.

With public housing residents displaced by the flooding, a diverse coalition of wealthy developers, architects, local politicians, housing officials, as well as some former residents, nonprofits and grassroots organizations coalesced around the demolition of last remaining public housing complexes in the city, the Big Four (the St. Bernard Development, the Lafitte, the B.W. Cooper and the C.J. Peete) and the Iberville, and their replacement with mixed income developments.⁴⁴ In the wake of these changes, New Orleans renters face an especially dire housing crisis where monthly rent costs have soared past the national median, and some 16,000 families remained on the waitlist for public housing units as the city marked the tenth anniversary of the disaster.⁴⁵ The fight to preserve public housing and neighborhood public schools are central axes of conflict operating on the ground in the post-disaster city, battle fronts which do not fall neatly along black-white lines as many academics and pundits have incorrectly surmised. The political conflicts over these public goods, and the saturation of post-disaster New Orleans with charitable and voluntarist activity also revealed the ways that the advance of non-profit organizations has had the effect of transforming and conflating the meaning of left political activism in some corners.

Rather than policy-oriented activity aimed at contesting and altering state power, some have come to view non-profit work that furthers privatization as compatible with left activism. Ferguson #BlackLivesMatter activist DeRay McKesson's intimate ties and political commitments to school privatization organizations like TFA and the New Teacher Project, suggest that the same confusion reigns within the ranks of anti-police brutality forces as well.⁴⁶ McKesson and Johnetta Elzie, co-publishers of the newsletter, *This is the Movement*, were listed among *Fortune* magazine's World's 50 Greatest Leaders. This coziness with both neoliberal and corporate power does not square with the expressed left militancy of many #BlackLivesMatter activists. Although the forces aligned against police brutality have framed the problem largely in terms of institutional racism, often using civil rights and black power texts as palimpsests of their analyses of contemporary American society, the power of the humanitarian-corporate complexes in New Orleans and now Baltimore require critical analyses of black political history and contemporary conditions, and political strategies reoriented towards progressive public intervention.

If there is an Achilles heel of the contemporary fight against police brutality, it is the insistence of many advocates that what we are witnessing is the resurgence of Jim Crow racism. Michelle Alexander's popular book, *The New Jim Crow* characterized the contemporary prison build-up in these terms, emphasizing how the punitive policies of the War on Drugs adversely and disproportionately affected blacks.⁴⁷ James Forman, Jr. and Marie Gottschalk have offered persuasive critiques of Alexander's analysis, and illuminated the ways that the origins and motives of the contemporary carceral state cannot be reduced to a reincarnation of Jim Crow racial animus—a point that Alexander herself ultimately concedes.⁴⁸ As I have described here, the conditions facing many working class blacks in U.S. cities are not only dissimilar from those confronting more

affluent segments, but their plight is due to discrete, historical conditions, i.e. technological obsolescence, hypersegregation and zero-tolerance policing and prisonfare as the dominant means of managing surplus population. Still, the Jim Crow analogy has proven to be a powerful and enduring trope for many activists, one that recalls the nation's undemocratic history and rattles popular claims that the country has reached a post-racial epoch where colorblind meritocracy prevails. The Baltimore uprising spawned an outpouring of civil rights and black power era allusions in the mainstream press and memes on social media that recalled the now common comparison of contemporary police violence to Southern lynch law, references to the 1965 Watts uprising, James Baldwin's epistolary *The Fire Next Time*, the iconic images of armed Black Panthers, and King's poetic description of a riot as "the language of the unheard." There are a number of problems with the Jim Crow analogy, but foremost is the way it obscures contemporary dynamics, namely the fact of black political integration and the role that different forces within the black population play in legitimating the current project of urban neoliberalization.

The Ferguson case lent itself to popular assertions of a resurrected Jim Crow. Like the case of the Jena 6 which drew thousands of protesters to a small central Louisiana town to support the case of black high school students who were expelled after a conflict with white classmates, and the killing of Trayvon Martin, who was killed in the courtyard of a middle class subdivision in Sanford, Florida, the town of Ferguson was reminiscent of the kind of southern backwater town that most Americans associate with the Jim Crow regime, one where black life is managed by superordinate whites who control the economy, city hall, the police force and the courts. Ferguson was an especially stark case where blacks remained disempowered even though they comprised a numerical majority of residents. Baltimore and other metropolitan areas

pose a problem for this type of nostalgic, identitarian thinking, and for any politics that might be predicated on achieving social justice through hiring programs, and culturally-relevant training as a remedy to police violence and unethical conduct. In Baltimore, the force of popular protest was effectively corralled by local and national black elites through the rapid mobilization of the humanitarian-corporate complex, which works as a soft disciplinary power in tandem with the repressive state apparatus.

There is potential to build a broad-based movement capable of abolishing poverty, ending zero-tolerance as the normative mode of policing, and rolling back the prison state. The current neo-black power rhetoric is ill suited to achieve these ends. The work of #BlackLivesMatter and other organizations carries a certain moral force, and inhabits a mode of liberal social criticism descendant from the civil rights movement that is familiar to many Americans. Anti-black racism, however, does not adequately explain the current crisis of police violence where blacks are overrepresented, but not the sole victims. In 2015, there were 1,138 people killed by police in the United States, and of that number 573 were white, 302 were black, 194 were Latino, 24 were Asian or Pacific Islander, 13 were Native American, and the race/ ethnicity of the remaining 27 was unknown.⁴⁹ Rather than prompting some version of “all lives matter” post-racialism, these facts should encourage greater discernment on the part of activists and citizens who wish to create a more humane, and just state of affairs regarding policing. The new Jim Crow rhetoric posits universal black injury where in fact, police brutality and the carceral state are experienced more broadly across the working class. In a social context where the unemployed, the homeless, those who work within the informal economy, or who live in areas of the city where that economy is dominant are more likely to be regularly surveilled, harassed and arrested. Some black lives matter, and others do not. Some white lives matter, and others do not. Likewise, Obama’s

approach to urban violence, and the elite response to the Baltimore riots all indicate interracial support for neoliberal policies, which are a root cause of worsening conditions for black and brown inner city residents, and segments of the black middle class whose livelihoods have been negatively affected by the rollback of public employment. If the various localized campaigns against police brutality are to congeal into a viable movement, activists need to devise a new language, one capable of connecting the policing crisis to the underlying problem of structural unemployment, and of uniting people across different social layers in protracted campaigns with the capacity to make concrete policy reform. Otherwise, more mentoring programs, police-community basketball leagues, ribbon-cuttings for mixed-income housing developments and urban entrepreneurship incubators will serve the same function as the “mobile swimming pools” and “hastily built playgrounds” of the late sixties, “merely buying time” for those who benefit from the status quo, and forestalling the advancement of a real progressive urban agenda, one capable of achieving social justice for the greatest number.

NOTES

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People getting shot in the back of the head over a piece of pound cake and then we run out and we are outraged (saying) ‘The cops shouldn’t have shot him.’ What the hell was he doing with the pound cake in his hand?’ History has proven Cosby to be an utter hypocrite, as dozens of women have come forward with testimonies that he drugged and raped them. At the time of his 2004 “Pound Cake” speech, as it has come to be known, however, he remained a highly respected public figure who was for decades the seemingly unimpeachable portrait of the wealthy black patriarch. Through both his fictional family, the Huxtables on the long-running *Cosby Show* sitcom, and real life family with his longtime wife Camille, Cosby projected the perfect model of black middle class aspiration for the Reagan-Bush years. It is not surprising that Obama found consonance in Cosby’s words. He asserted in an interview with Oprah Winfrey, “Bill Cosby got into trouble when he said some of these things, and he has a right to say things in ways that I’m not going to because he’s an older man. But I completely agree with his underlying premise: We have to change attitudes. There’s a strain of anti-intellectualism running in our community that we have to eliminate.” See, “The O Interview: Oprah Talks to Barack Obama,” *O, The Oprah Magazine* November 2004, 248-251, 288-292.

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