

POST-MILLENNIAL BLACK AMERICAN EXPERIENCE: THE POETRY OF THE #BLACKLIVESMATTER MOVEMENT

Murenga Joseph Chikowero

University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA
chikowero@wisc.edu

ABSTRACT

One of the most exciting developments on the Black American literary scene in the post-millennial period is the emergence of a body of #BlackLivesMatter poetry, itself a cultural extension of the civil rights movement of the same name. Granted that the #BlackLivesMovement in its current form is less than a decade old, what follows are but preliminary thoughts on the poetics of this movement. Often experimental, the poetry of the #BlackLivesMatter movement is, for the most part, conceived as one of the polyphonic voices of the black civil rights struggle in its contemporary form. The poetry—often not published in traditional book form—is, I argue, one that is still searching for its own distinctive voice or, more accurately, voices while simultaneously celebrating its very experimental selves. And yet this is unapologetically in-your-face art with a powerful digital presence on increasingly important social mass media portals such as Twitter, blogs, Facebook and especially YouTube. Where traditional published poetry requires the committed reader to seek out the book, #BlackLivesMatter poetry finds the reader and audience on social media.

Keywords: black American literary scene; #BlackLivesMatter movement; civil rights movement

ROOTS OF THE SENTIMENT

#BlackLivesMatter, the broader contemporary black civil rights movement that animates the poetry of this genre, is not itself novel to the black American experience; the undercurrent of anger against generalised disenfranchisement and institutional racism in law enforcement and justice delivery is familiar to the student of Black American

UNISA  university
of south africa
PRESS

Commonwealth Youth and Development
<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/CYD>
Volume 15 | Number 2 | 2017 | #3312 | 13 pages

<http://doi.org/10.25159/1727-7140/3312>
Print ISSN 1727-7140
© Unisa Press 2017

letters across the disciplines. What is unique is that this is a movement that grew out of specific highly reported incidents of racial conflagration where black individuals, often unarmed and seemingly posing no threat, were the victims. It is, to use the words of the movement's co-founder, a response to what one poet and community activist describes as an ongoing epidemic of police violence. #BlackLivesMatter has been characterised by its co-ordinator, Alicia Garza, as “an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression” (2016, 184–5).

At the heart of the #BlackLivesMatter movement is the role of corporatised mass media; the killings of the African immigrant, Amadou Diallo, in 1999 and the black New Yorker, Sean Bell, in 2006 were both widely reported in mainstream and community news portals and discussed on social media. While the killings of these two black men by law enforcement officers were by no means unusual in the United States, the media infused a new urgency into the subject. Though originally launched in the aftermath of the not-guilty verdict handed down in the case of the murder of black youth, Trayvon Martin, by Caucasian adult male, George Zimmerman, in 2013, together with the Ferguson, Missouri uprisings in 2014, #BlackLivesMatter went viral, becoming “an animating declaration for a loosely coordinated assemblage of cultural forms and direct action tactics” similar in form to the Occupy movement against Wall Street institutions (McKee 2016, 185).

While the name #BlackLivesMatter (I am also alluding to the use of the # hashtag here) conjures up post-millennial sensibilities and possibilities, its origins are familiar to students of the Afro-American experience; the marginalisation of black lives in North America is at the core of this cultural movement. At once familiar and new, #BlackLivesMatter (I prefer the hashtagged #BlackLivesMatter here again) draws its energy from the traditional effects of racism—both casual and institutional—and from the immediate visibility of racism as it is reported in social media. The backdrop of the #BlackLivesMatter movement is the fact that racism has, of course, lived well beyond and despite the granting of civil rights by the federal government. #BlackLivesMatter’s co-founder, Alicia Garza (2016, 175), describes it as a social movement:

I created #BlackLivesMatter with Patrise Cullors and Opal Tometi, two of my sisters, as a call to action for Black people after seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin was posthumously placed on trial for his own murder, and the killer, George Zimmerman, was not held accountable for the crime he committed. It was a response to the anti-Black racism that permeates our society and also our movements. #BlackLivesMatter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black Lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.

THE SENTIMENT OF #BLACKLIVESMATTER POETRY

#BlackLivesMatter poetry is, at least at the thematic level, reminiscent of the Black Arts Movement championed by black cultural luminaries, such as Amiri Baraka, in the cultural revival of the 1960s. The poets associated with the #BlackLivesMatter movement are painfully aware of their blackness, which, in the eyes of white power structures, essentially signifies their otherness and consequently their victimhood. More than the Black Arts Movement's artistes, the artistes of this contemporary movement are aware of the limited achievements of the civil rights movement now associated with preachers and other activists of that period. While the nomenclature Black Lives Matter is fairly recent, the actual sentiment of continued victimhood of the average black American is as old as the story of the original black Africans brought into American servitude. It is a sentiment engendered in the socially conscious rap music of Tupac Shakur, NWA, Poor Righteous Teachers, Dead Prez, and others.

Like the rap lyric, #BlackLivesMatter poetry channels the power of black American spoken language, its lyricism, rhyme, and especially its capacity to carry multiple, potentially explosive and rebellious expressions or, as Kevin Powell (2000, 4) suggests:

there is a direct link between ... the Harlem Renaissance's Langston Hughes, the Black Arts Movement's Amiri Baraka, hip hop in that the "words" were (and are) literally taken from the mouths of people. ... Hip hop started at the bottom, and we bottom-dwellers know words—be it the words of a graffiti writer or an MC—are the one sure way to identify ourselves, to become visible, *to matter*. (emphasis added)

PERFORMING #BLACKLIVESMATTER POETRY

Precisely because it is part of the broader black civil rights movement with deep roots in the black American tradition of protest, #BlackLivesMatter poetry has a strong performative aspect—indeed a vast number of the poems are performed before live audiences. That performative element, I suggest, brings #BlackLivesMatter poetry close to the hip hop artistes who, from the late 1970s, have been verbalising the joys and aches of ghetto life. Says hip hop poet and scholar, Coval (2016, xviii),

Hip hop made poetry relevant. It was no longer this dreadful, dead-white-male-centred, highly dull piece to sleep through in English class. It was very much alive and in our Walkmen and notebooks. Hip hop wrote poetry about the block and aspirant, working class hopes ... A poetry designed to move the crowd, a poetics designed to relate to the crowd.

#BlackLivesMatter poetry, on the other hand, is focused on a familiar problem in contemporary American society. The "performance slam" within black performance poetry, which is unapologetic about the social justice intentions, identifies the poem as "socio-political action" (Bauridl 2015, 715). As is noted below, the poetry of this movement rages against an oppressive system, explores the roots of inequality, and even proposes pathways to a more equitable future.

Avery's poem, "Police Brutality Breeds Mob Mentality" (2016, stanza 1), flips the all too familiar official justification for the ongoing fatal shootings of racial minorities, suggesting instead that officialdom's heavy-handedness gives rise to deep distrust:

police brutality breeds
mob
mentality.

Avery (2016, stanza 2) is under no illusion that the epidemic of fatal encounters will end anytime soon. The inescapable reality is that there will be that next "encounter," that next statistic:

how
do
we
fix
the
world
before
the
next
fatality?

By alluding to "the next fatality," Avery points to both the long history of official brutality against minorities and the continuing reality of their criminalisation. Instead of expecting change as a result of what has already happened, Avery's poem suggests that the pathologisation of victims of officialdom's coercive apparatus is here to stay. Without envisioning a way out, Avery's poem ends on a sombre and decidedly hopeless note. The power of the poem, therefore, lies in debunking the myth of police violence against black Americans as an aberration.

The historical echoes regarding the worth of black life, once presented as entertainment by black comedians, have become staple news on mainstream media. Comedian Dave Chappelle (2009) once described the police disregard for black life in this unforgettable monologue:

See, black people are very afraid of the police. That is a big part of our culture. Don't matter how rich you are, how old you are ... we're just afraid of 'em. We got ... we got every reason to be afraid of 'em. You know what I mean? You a white lady. You ever been pulled over before? You know; and what do they say?

"Let me see your driver's license and your registration," Right? See? See, I'm just guessing. That's not what they say to us. You wouldn't believe what they say to us, either.

"Spread open your cheeks and lift your sack." Like, what the fuck?

"Excuse me?"

“You heard me. Spread open your cheeks and lift your sack.”

I got a driver’s license, too. There’s easier ways to prove who I am and shit. What does that prove? I can’t go to the bank like that; cash my check.

I’m not saying I don’t like police. I’m not saying that. I’m saying I’m just scared of ’em. Nothing wrong with that. Sometimes, we wanna call ’em, too. Somebody broke into my house once. This is a good time to call ’em, but I didn’t. Mmm. Mm-mm. House is too nice. It ain’t a real nice house, but they’ll never believe I live in it.

They’ll be ...

“He’s still here!

Oh my God.

Open and shut case, Johnson. I saw this once before when I was a rookie. Apparently this nigger broke in and hung up pictures of his family everywhere.

Well, let’s sprinkle some crack on him and get outta here.”

Evident in Chappelle’s comic routine is the anger and frustration of dealing with a system that thrives on humiliating and breaking specific members of the community with near impunity. Margaretta Sackor’s (2016) poem, “untitled 100,” goes beyond the angst of police violence to assert the humanity of black womanhood:

I am a woman, a black woman

Never black and then woman or

woman and then black

but somehow when judgement is being passed on my race

they seem to forget I am a woman

A woman with emotions and feelings

I am a black woman with a mindset

to be greater than I am perceived to be

Because this black woman has goals

Where many #BlackLivesMatter poems stridently attack police violence against persons of colour arising out of casual encounters such as driving stops, Sackor goes back to the seemingly unresolved issue in the African American experience—the worth of black life. While the system does not accord her respect, Sackor’s persona asserts that she is “A woman with emotions and feelings / I am a black woman with a mindset.”

The poem, “black.anathema,” by Jessica Edwards (2014) tackles the troubling reality of officialdom’s perceived violence not just against adult persons of colour but also against their children. Although their names do not show up in the poem, Trayvon Martin, then aged 13, and Tamir Rice, then aged 12, were two black boys whose tragic stories symbolised such violence. This poem goes as follows:

And I leapt from my slumber anxiously.

This time it was your face.

And like the ones that came before,

the natural order is reversed.

My soul mourning you prematurely,

clutching my empty womb bitterly.

The loss of a child by a parent is described as a reversal of life’s natural order where children are expected to bury their parents and not vice versa. With none of the anger of poems analysed thus far, Edwards’s poem focuses rather on the intense, personal bitterness of a parent losing a child in these contentious circumstances. The unnaturalness of such a death is captured thus: “My soul mourning you prematurely, / clutching my empty womb bitterly.” Edwards’s very choice of personalising the death of a child at the hands of state machinery ironically draws attention to what this is really about—a process not far removed from genocidal activity.

The poem, “skin color,” by Sylus Fox (2016) centres on two aspects of official violence against black Americans, namely, those relating to skin colour and privilege. Here is Fox’s descriptive poem:

All these colors I never saw before burn at my eyes

and I can’t take them away now that you pointed them out

skin color stands out like a sore thumb in the media

“Black man shot by local cop. Claimed the man had a gun.”

and everyone is trying so hard to have their opinions heard

but no one can hear them over the gun shots

and the crying families all over America who lost their sons

or their daughters. The ones who were denied

and I’ve sat here so silently in my privilege afraid to speak out

but enough is enough and it’s time to help

so I will stand beside every black family in america and
we will try to win this fight

In the poem, the line, “Black man shot by local cop. Claimed the man had a gun.” represents the typical official justification of police violence against racial minorities, and it also points to the casualness with which “officer-involved fatal shootings” of minorities are treated. The suspected presence of a weapon of any kind becomes an alibi to unleash deadly violence against the target, often without justification and yet without significant consequences for police officers involved.

While Fox’s racial identity is not stated, there is a strong suggestion that the poet is a white individual who has broken ranks with other privileged members of her society to express outrage at the banality of official violence against racial minorities. What the poet lacks in lyricism, she compensates for in clarity of vision; she is casting aside her former attitude of sitting “so silently in my privilege afraid to speak out.” Beyond speaking out, her specific vision is unknown and yet this is a powerful statement in a society where the coercive state apparatus was created by and for the benefit of the racial majority, often at the expense of all other minorities. The poet seems to look forward to a future where a socially conscious critical rainbow mass can stand up against this centuries-long mistreatment of minorities. The most radical aspect of Fox’s vision is, of course, that she is contemplating rejecting her role as the ultimate beneficiary of racially skewed policies and practices.

Micaiah Wheeler’s (2016) poem, “400 Years,” captures the 400 years of wail and lament of minorities, specifically black Americans. Wheeler bemoans the duplicity of a system that promises one thing for all citizens in word and segregates in practice:

400 years America,

For 400 years America we’ve been playing this game of cat and mouse, and for 400 years America, you refuse to give us the keys to the house.

For 400 years America, we’ve been asking to be free, and for 400 years America, you sat there and you promised me, all the freedom I could ask for, for just a small fee

(stanza 1)

The “cat and mouse” game is an allusion to the hypocrisy of a nation that claims to be the world’s gold standard on democracy and yet fails to extend full benefits of citizenship to racial minorities. Refusing “to give us the keys to the house” metaphorically captures the torturous and as yet unfinished business of black American citizenship. The line evokes painful memories of slavery when black lives mattered only as chattel, and of the post-slavery era when those lives were valued at three-fifths of a white life. While

the civil rights gains of the 1960s seemingly opened a new chapter on the value of black lives, the institutional violence in the forms of mass incarceration, poverty, unequal education and outright violence by officialdom debunks the myth of full citizenship and full-fledged democracy.

The contemporariness of Wheeler's (2016) poem extends to the controversy surrounding the national flag and performance of the national anthem. While the flag stands for freedom for those blessed with the full benefits of citizenship, for Wheeler, as for some sporting figures from black America, the flag evokes a different set of conflicting emotions that reflects the realities of black American existence:

For over 400 years America our sons, daughters, fathers, mothers have bled and for over 400 years tear after tear shed

The flags that represent you, make you free. But the same flags that represent you, don't represent me. The flags that say "all men are created equal" considered me an animal and there seemed to never be a sequel.

(stanza 3)

Further, Wheeler questions celebrating symbols of nationhood that explicitly spell out the otherness of the black American. Following in the tradition of sporting heroes and heroines such as Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, John Carlos and Tommy Smith, contemporary black and brown sporting heroes such as Colin Kaepernick have taken to expressing their continued racial attacks by custodians of law and order by boycotting the national anthem before the start of official National Football Association league games. Most public performances of the national anthem do not, of course, include the words of the fourth stanza:

400 years later and still "no refuge can save, the hireling and slave from
the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave" I am not blind, don't need a
stick or a stave, I am not foolish, I see the road that you have paved
America!

(stanza 4)

The lines "no refuge can save, the hireling and slave from / the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave" suggest that the founding fathers who adopted the anthem had no qualms about persecuting "the hireling and slave from / the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave." Wheeler argues that the official treatment of the black individual contradicts the value of freedom and endorses the continued persecution:

Aaron La Lux's (2016) "Hands Up Don't Shoot! (Shots Fired)" draws upon the arrest and subsequent death in police custody of Baltimore native, Freddie Gray, to interrogate the country's lofty claims to freedom. While Gray had a history with law

enforcement, the fact that he could be violently arrested and thrown into a police van without due care for his well-being underlines the state of racial inequality, suggests La Lux. By adopting the “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” slogan chanted by protestors in the wake of the Michael Brown killing by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, La Lux emphasises the immediacy of his message:

The ghost of Freddie Gray,
rest in a shallow grave,
they say this is “The Land of The Free”,
so why they still treat us like slaves?

The current policed state of the Police State,
gives serious cause for alarm,
I Can’t Breathe Hands Up Don’t Shoot!
see it’s the 21st Century there’s cell phones,
so now we have proof That that young black man was unarmed...

(stanzas 1 and 2)

La Lux draws a pattern between the seemingly unrelated killings happening in geographically dispersed parts of the country; Baltimore, Maryland, Ferguson, Missouri and New York City, New York. The third of these, the chokehold killing of Eric Garner for peddling untaxed loose cigarettes, seared the words “I can’t breathe” on the consciousness of the nation. These incidents, combined with hundreds other, less sensational ones, create a pattern of organised state violence for La Lux, resulting in what he calls a “police state.” La Lux laments the reality of almost daily killings:

See the situation in Ferguson,
it’s far from certain when,
conditions are worsen and,
the people are still hurtin’ and,
we don’t even have time to mourn,
before the police kill another one,
6 more kids killed since Michael Brown,

the problem didn't start with Ferguson.

(stanza 3)

From drawing a pattern of institutional violence against black Americans, La Lux invites the reader to stand back and interrogate the value system of a society that allows such blatant injustice to be reproduced in town after town, state after state, with such predictable yet tragic banality. Like the singer, Marvin Gaye, whose own brother's shocking treatment by a system that had shipped him to fight for it in Vietnam inspired him to sing "What's going on?" in 1971, La Lux similarly demands introspection:

Seriously,
 it's got me thinking "What's going on?",
 but I'm more Queen than Marvin Gaye,
 still straight away they shot another one,
 BANG,

(stanza 4)

For La Lux, the responsibility of the poet is not merely to draw attention to this pressing subject but to agitate for change. Writing, for La Lux, is a revolutionary act in and of itself:

I thought to provoke a riot instead I decided to make this thought provokin',
 if the pen mightier than the sword,
 then we need to write a way right away to get these closed cases re-opened!

(lines 7–11, stanza 9)

While advocating a socially engaged and revolutionary poetics, La Lux seems at once worried by the potential futility of his very action. He seems to acknowledge that the problem is not that the majority of Americans are unaware of the tragic reality of the relative worthlessness of black American life; it is rather that he might be preaching to the choir, that the system is not actually broken but was built to function exactly as it does. The suggestion is that words which fail to transform into positive action are self-defeating:

while we shout out,
 "Black Lives Matter!"
 they've got their clubs out,

like “Swing batter batter!”

(stanza 15)

Yet the enduring power of the word to stir and steer action seems to be confirmed by the fact that the call to action has spread to celebrity circles. Taye Diggs, a famous Hollywood actor and activist, exemplifies this by penning a poignant poem of his own to add to the multitude of voices against police brutality. After his parents tell him they have just seen on their TV screen a man being shot, presumably by police, the poet is swamped by conflicting thoughts:

Why would someone shoot that man

You both said guns were not good

Did the man steal or rob someone

Was he not doing what he should

Then I feel my mama’s anger

The straight stiff of her back

No she hissed through her teeth

Police shot him cuz he was black

I tilt my head with question

As Daddy enters still blue

But my skins dark just like the Man’s

Does that mean I’ll die too?

Ma and pa stare at each other

Blank scared looks on the front of their heads

Neither of them could say a word

As I imagine myself..... Dead.

(stanzas 9–12)

The possibility of dying in a casual incident involving an armed police officer hits home when the persona remembers that he stood a similar chance “cuz he was black.” The adoption of the spoken word by activists such as Diggs does suggest that the #BlackLivesMatter movement is “more than a mere meme or slogan; #BlackLivesMatter is a powerful performative speech act in its own right. ... In declaring something that should be self-evident, it asserts that the worth and status of black life is actually *not* secure, that its mattering or significance as a life should not be taken for granted as one kind of life among others protected under the universality of law and rights” (McKee 2016, 185).

#BLACKLIVESMATTER POETICS AND THE FUTURE

While the poetry of the #BlackLivesMatter movement offers fresh insights into the realities of contemporary black America, the movement has also been faulted for its naivety in assuming it can alter a centuries-strong condition. Elaine Brown, activist, singer and former chairwoman of the Black Panther Party, for example, argues that the assumption that the slogans associated with the movement, such as “hands up, don’t shoot,” “stop killing us” and “I can’t breathe,” strike a defensive, pleading tone. She dismisses it as smacking of “a plantation mentality” (Slater 2016).

From the foregoing, it is evident that #BlackLivesMatter poetry is at present experimental in form and style. Many of the poets are themselves young people whose lives are impacted daily by the violence as described above. The popularity of such poetry at public entertainment “poetry slams” can be regarded as further evidence of the experimental state of the poetry, and yet there is no doubt that this art form serves to provide a deeper insight into certain communities’ emotions than do most other strategies of investigation. While its future remains unknown, this hashtagged social-media-driven art form has succeeded in attracting mass conventional media and public attention.

REFERENCES

- Avery. 2016. “Police Brutality Breeds Mob Mentality.” Hello Poetry. Facebook, #BlackLivesMatter, October, 2016. Accessed October 10, 2016. <https://hellopoetry.com/poem/1786518/police-brutality-breeds-mob-mentality/>.
- Bauridl, Birgit M. 2010. “Contemporary ‘Black’? Performance Poetry.” *American Studies* 55 (4): 715–24. Accessed October 22, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41158724>.
- Chappelle, Dave. 2009. “Police Brutality.” YouTube. Uploaded by Davechappelletv, July 6, 2009. Accessed October 13, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFHpvPwq2i8>.
- Coval, Kevin, Quraysh Ali Lansana, and Nate Marshall. 2015. *The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop*. Chicago: Haymarket.

- Diggs, Taye. 2016. Untitled poem. Just Jared® Jr. Uploaded by Taye Diggs, July 30, 2016. Accessed October 9, 2016. <http://www.justjared.com/2016/07/30/taye-diggs-writes-powerful-poem-for-black-lives-matter/>.
- Edwards, Jessica. 2014. "black.anathema." YouTube. Uploaded by Jessica Edwards, October 26, 2014. Accessed October 7, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsoBIGYtRLI>.
- Fox, Sylus. 2016. "skin color." Hello Poetry. Facebook, October 5, 2016. <https://hellopoetry.com/poem/1780556/skin-color/>.
- Garza, Alicia. 2016. "A History of the Black Lives Matter Movement." In *Are All the Women Still White?: Rethinking Race, Expanding Feminisms*, edited by Janell Hobson, 175–85. New York, NY: State University of New York.
- La Lux, Aaron. 2016. "Hands Up Don't Shoot! (Shots Fired)." Hello Poetry. Facebook, September 2016. Accessed September 27, 2016. <https://hellopoetry.com/poem/1775073/hands-up-dont-shoot-shots-fired/>.
- McKee, Yates. 2016. *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-occupy Condition*. London: Verso.
- Powell, K., ed. 2000. *Step into a World: A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Sackor, Margaretta. 2016. "untitled 100." Hello Poetry. Facebook, October 2016. Accessed October 2, 2016. <https://hellopoetry.com/poem/1785683/untitled-100/>.
- Slater, Tom. 2016. "Black Lives Matter Has a Plantation Mentality." Spiked. Report on interview with Elaine Brown, October 19, 2016. http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/black-lives-matter-has-a-plantation-mentality-elaine-brown-black-panthers/18888#.WAj4H_krIdX.
- Wheeler, Micaiah. 2016. "400 Years." Hello Poetry. Facebook, December 2016. Accessed December 3, 2016. <https://hellopoetry.com/poem/1840196/400-years/>.