# Black Bodies and Black Voices: Wright and BLM

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*BLM (Black Lives Matter) has been a long time in the making in the African American community. The writers of the Harlem Renaissance were conscious of their skin colour and its impact on their lived experiences. Richard Wright insisted it was impossible, for a black man, to write without taking the "color line" into consideration. He argued that colour needed to be foregrounded before any meaningful interaction could be initiated between the African American community and mainstream white society. In this paper I propose to analyse the relationship between the history of slavery and systemic racism seen in America today. The historian John Meecham calls slavery America's "original sin". The narrative of slavery is predicated upon seeing the black slaves as objects without a past and culture. Paradoxically, this dehumanisation of the slave resulted in a dehumanisation of the white master as well. I propose to critically analyse the essays White Man, Listen! (1957) and Twelve Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States (1941) to highlight the politics, and the consequences, behind this strategy of mainstream white society. This discrimination continues to bar the entry of the African American into public spaces, but, more importantly, actively subverts every attempt by him to be seen as an equal. The normalisation of the stereotype of the "criminal" African American man condemns him even before a crime has been committed. Thus, the paper will analyse the consequences*

*of this 'othering' on the psyche of the African American. The strategies that Wright posits to counter this stereotyping, their viability, and the way they prefigure the BLM will be the focus of this paper.*

**Keywords:** Criminalisation, Black Codes, slavery, systemic racism, BLM

The American experience of slavery was highly racialised: Africans were transported in huge numbers through the Middle Passage to cultivate crops, like cotton, sugar, tobacco, coffee etc. in the South for export. In 1619 the first African slaves were sold in Jamestown and were treated as chattel by their owners. Slavery became entrenched in America when the Chesapeake region was transformed for tobacco cultivation (Walvin 100). There were four million slaves and half a million free black men in America when the Civil War broke out (Winch Introduction). The institution finally crumbled with the Emancipation and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, 1865 which outlawed chattel slavery and involuntary servitude. The 13th Amendment states that "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted" (constitution.org). Though it was intended to 'cover those forms of compulsory labour akin to African slavery', it was used to transform slavery into penal servitude, where the conditions were often worse than slavery. Southern states, with their reliance on free labour, utilised this idea: blacks that had been emancipated were charged with petty crimes and imprisoned. They found themselves stripped of the very freedoms that the Constitution gave them and were forced to work as indentured labour on farms and factories around the country. The fear and repugnance of much of White America, at the thought of mass emancipation, meant that "penal slavery" found ready acceptance. At the same time, many southern states enacted Black Codes restricting the freedoms of the African Americans. Mississippi, for example, required that freed blacks possess a written contract of yearly employment; if they left before the end of the contract, they would forfeit their wages and could be arrested. Other states (South Carolina, for eg.) had laws wherein the blacks had to pay an annual tax if they were not a farmer or a servant.

Similarly, vagrancy laws often meant that African Americans could be charged with loitering, arrested, sentenced, and forced to work as plantation labour. Thus, the emancipated blacks found themselves in an unenviable position: their lived reality of systemic oppression was at odds with the 'freedom' they had attained in the Emancipation Proclamation. Angela Davis writes: "The 13th Amendment, when it abolished slavery did so except for convicts. Through the prison system, the vestiges of slavery have persisted" (Gilmore 196).

Thus, even as the Reconstruction began, the trope of the black man in America evolved. In the pre-Reconstruction era the slave was seen as a shirker, a procrastinator, and as someone who would pretend to be obedient but was very wily and cunning. The only way that he could be made to behave in a civilised manner and perform the tasks allotted were through an excessive use force and punishment. This representation of the African American evolved in the Reconstruction era to account for his "free" status before law. He was no longer simply the 'lazy' slave; he was the 'vicious, violent, disobedient' criminal who was a threat to the peace of the community he lived in. The arbitrary nature of the Black Codes helped in cementing this image of the African American male in the consciousness of White America. A more dangerous iteration of this image was of the black man was as an overtly sexualised being with a propensity for rape and violence. Often, to the dismay of White America, this male gaze would transgressively fall on the white woman, threatening her purity. The 'lazy' slave morphed into the image of the 'criminal' black man. The criminalisation of the black man in the popular imagination had begun. Thus, he became a target of vigilante justice, radicalised violence, and state-sponsored criminalisation. This narrative of the criminalisation of the black male body coupled with the possibilities of racial transgression through sex with a white woman was detrimental to the physical well-being of the African American male. Black men began to be seen as threats that needed to be quelled by law enforcement agencies. This criminalisation of the black man is reflected in the rates of incarceration. While the incarceration rate for white males jumped from 262 (in 1960) to 678 (in 2010) per 100,000 males; the incarceration rates of black men increased from 1313 in 1960 to 4347 in 2010

per 100,000 males (Drake 2013).

In his writings Richard Wright emphasised the predominant role of colour in all racial encounters in America. He argued that the black man's struggle for identity was rejected by white America, since its own existence was predicated upon this act. The prosperity of white America, and indeed the idea of "American exceptionalism" were built on the foundations slave labour. Any recognition of current racial injustices would result in an acknowledgement of past racial violence. This, however, would undermine the narrative of American exceptionalism. *While Man, Listen!* (1957) and 12 *Million Black Voices* (1941) need to be seen in this perspective.

Wright employs the oral tradition of the sermon in *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) to articulate the self-consciousness of the African-American as a people. The book was written in the backdrop of demands for military desegregation in light of World War II. While the mainstream narrative during the war years was to create a cohesive American identity, *12 Million* highlights how this cultural citizenship was denied to the African American: demands for a desegregated military were rejected outright. The book employs the documentary format to dramatise the history of black America from the moment its ancestors were ripped from the Black continent. It is also a photo-montage of the Great Migration: he brings the black body into the public sphere of white American life and argues for its right to belong there. In the book Wright takes on the role of the 'preacher-narrator' (Riley 118) to foreground the segregation experienced by black America and its role in the creation of the African American consciousness. His use of "We," while talking of the experiences, draws the reader into the story. The pronoun highlights the problematic relationship between the idea of American exceptionalism and racial discrimination that is part of American Life. The act of exposition both reveals the trauma and affirms it as well. In other words, the experiences of slavery, Jim Crow laws and resistance are universalised. Emphasising the central role of African Americans in the creation of America, Wright writes, "We black folk, our history and our present being, are a mirror of the manifold experiences of America. What we want, what we represent, what we endure is what America is. If we black folk per-

ish, America will perish" (*12 Million* 146). A salient feature of the book is that even as he recognises the collaborative role of both blacks and whites in America to solve racial injustices (support for the Scottsboro boys, for example), he is aware that the distinctive consciousness and awareness of African American is shaped by their interactions with white America. Thus, he puts these interactions under the microscope and reveals the racial bias the predicates these interactions.

*White Man, Listen!* (1957) constitutes a series of lectures that Wright delivered in Europe and offer a scathing commentary on the dehumanising impact of racial discrimination on the psyche of black America. It details the consequences of the interaction of the Western world with Africa and Asia. He rejects the notion that Western art is superior arguing that African American art talks of lynchings, racial prejudice, Jim Crow and slavery since "from the Negro's point of view, it is the right, the holy, the just that crush him in America" (*White Man* 130). The book underlines how the discourse of whiteness in America is constructed on an unquestioning acceptance of an idea of blackness that is problematic and regressive. Wright placed himself as a black Western intellectual. He rejected the boundaries of segregation and constructed a racialised identity interacting with racism in its overt and subtle forms daily. Though the book is problematic in the way the writer baldly blames the natives of the colonies for their subservient position in their own homelands; it is remarkable in the way it locates him as a black intellectual in a white America. Thus, even though he says "I'm Black," he's also "a man of the West" (*White Man* 48). He occupies two locations: a black man, and a "western" intellectual. This intersectional positioning allows him to recognise the manner in which the west defines itself vis a vis the black man and thereby challenge its racial pride. He says that "the Negro is America's metaphor" (*White Man* 74) since his dislocation from his past and his current economic, social and political disfranchisement gives him unique insight into the politics of the narrative of 'freedom' of the West. He goes on to say that the term "Negro" signifies "race hate, rejection, ignorance, segregation, discrimination, slavery, murder, fiery crosses and fear" (*White Man* 79).

In the works mentioned above Wright lays out the strategies to undermine illegitimate domination and political subordination while interacting with mainstream White America in order to claim 'freedom' and 'equality'. He rejects notions of criminality as residing in the black body. Instead, he argues that the African American needs to recognise the politics behind this construction and challenge it. He also rejects all notions inferiority in terms of the tools employed while narrating the black experience. Wright insists that the violence perpetrated on the black man in the present, is a product of slavery. He will never escape it until he questions the basic premise of criminality and justice. The Black Lives Movement (BLM) employs similar arguments in its demands for racial justice. BLM, it is generally agreed, began as a hashtag #BlackLivesMatter in July 2013, when George Zimmerman was acquitted of fatally shooting 17 year old Trayvon Martin. Zimmerman used the "Stand Your Ground" defence, passed 2005 in Florida which allowed for the use of deadly force in self-defence. BLM gained national recognition and has been organising protests against the frequent killings of black men around the country at the hands of law enforcement officers: Tamir Rice (Cleveland), Eric Garner (New York City), Michael Brown (Ferguson, Missouri) in 2014; Walter Scott (South Carolina), Dylann Roof (South Carolina) in 2015; Alton Sterling (Baton Rouge), Philando Castile (Minnesota) in 2016; Jacques Clemmons in 2017; and, Ahmaud Aubrey (Georgia), George Floyd (Minneapolis) in 2020 to name a few. A common feature in all these killings has been the use of excessive force by police officers in their interactions with black men. The arbitrary nature of these killings where black men are killed simply because of the apprehension that they might pose a threat to the physical well-being of an armed police officer, is indicative of the deeply entrenched idea of the criminality of the black man in the imagination of modern America.

Activists of BLM suggest that this violence is reflective of the systemic violence that is an integral part of American society. Police officers do not hesitate in using excessive force simply because the criminalisation of the black body had been deeply entrenched in the society. In order to counter this violence, they hold marches and demonstrations. This act of physically occupying public spaces main-

streams state sanctioned violence perpetrated on the body of the African American. BLM is a grassroots organisation with no clear 'leader.' It is an effective movement because it argues, like Wright, that the African American take pride in his black heritage; that the violence of the present be seen as a continuation of the Jim Crow laws of the South; questions the representation of law enforcement agencies as arbiters of peace and, finally, that mainstream America recognise the role of systemic, institutionalised racism in the false representation of the black man as inherently criminal and destructive. Wright utilised the documentary format in 12 Million to represent the black experience through images. BLM utilises a similar strategy: protestors hold posters not just denouncing violence, they foreground the consequences of the criminalisation of the black man on the black body through the frequent murders at the hands of law enforcement. Protestors carry photographs and posters of the innocent men who have been brutally murdered simply because they were perceived to be threats for occupying the public space they were. Activists utilise social media to post real time videos of these murders which give a lie to the narrative of criminalisation. Will Smith said that "racism is not getting worse, it's getting filmed" (youtube 6:12). BLM has succeeded in placing racism and the criminalisation of the black body front and center. It is forcing people to look at the interaction between these agencies and the black body: there is increasing criticism of the methods employed by the police, such as reinstating 'stop and frisk', racial profiling, no-knock warrants, stand your ground laws, three strike rule and the like in America today. The success of BLM can be measured by the conversations around these laws, talks of defunding the police, restructuring of police departments and demands for criminal liability of individual police officers when they commit these 'crimes'. Police actions have increasingly come under the scanner. Cat Brooks of the Anti-Police Terror Project (APTP), "charged that the six men shot and killed by Oakland police in 2015 were murdered" (Allen-Taylor 24). Brooks went on to includ Richard Linyard, another black man, in this group, who "according to Indibay online newspaper, "police claim suffocated to death after he squeezed himself between two buildings during a police chase" (Allen-Taylor 24).

In conclusion, one can state that Wright's insistence on looking at the American experience through colour holds as true today as it did during the Harlem Renaissance. The mechanics of questioning and subverting the construction of the black man that BLM uses is very similar to the ones he employed in his works. The idea of resistance, articulation, representation and rewriting of history is central to both in an attempt to delegitimise the criminalisation of the black man and reclaim his humanity.

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