



## **The Bernie Grant Memorial Lecture 2015**

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In the film *The Matrix*, Morpheus (played by Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo (Keanu Reeves) a stark choice. He can either gain a greater understanding of the complex forces that comprise the world in which he lives; or he can continue in a state of imperilled ignorance as though they do not exist. "You take the blue pill and the story ends," promises Morpheus. "You wake in your bed and you believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill and you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes."

Generally speaking America prefers the blue pill. Most wealthy western countries do. In America's case it starts with the founding myth that the nation was found, not on genocide and slavery, but freedom and democracy. And since then there has been the unrelenting pursuit of progress. Sure there have been bumps in the road. The few hundred years of slavery, the decades of Jim Crow, the internment of the Japanese, McCarthyism. Some bumps were bigger than others but the general understanding has been that they were rumbling on the right direction.

When I first went there in 2003 I bought a school history text book, *America's Promise*, so I could know what they all know. I know England's myths. I was raised with them. I've seen the way it eases itself into its murky history like an



old man into a cold bath. I know what you have to remember and, more importantly, what you have to forget, if you want to put the Great in Great Britain. I know that power has many parents but that the brutality it takes to acquire it is an orphan. That's why so much of black history month takes place in the passive voice. India was colonised; Rosa Parks was kicked off the bus; People were denied service at the lunch counter. Things were done but nobody did them. There was racism – nobody denies that – but apparently no racists.

Anyway, the final chapter of America's Promise ends with this rallying cry. "The history of the United States is one of challenges faced, problems resolved, and crises overcome. Throughout their history Americans have remained an optimistic people, carrying this optimism into the new century. The full promise of America has yet to be realised. This is the real promise of America; the ability to dream of a better world to come."

Such are the assumptions beamed from the torch of Lady Liberty, coursing through the veins of the nation's political culture and imbibed with mothers' milk. America, many will tell you, is not just a land mass but an ideal – a shining city on the hill beckoning a bright new tomorrow and a dazzling dawn for all those who want it badly enough. Almost everyone, across races and ethnicities, buys into that to some degree.

Take the blue pill and the story of the last few years that has brought the Black Lives Matter movement into existence can be interpreted any range of ways: the necessary slaying of unruly street thugs by honourable police officers; a series of incidents in which young people and rattled officers have produced unfortunate but inevitable outcomes. Or even outrageous examples of individual police exercising unnecessary and unlawful force on minority



communities. All these conclusions would qualify for the blue pill simple reason that in their various ways they would understand them as one-offs. They suggest the shootings were possibly flawed responses, but essentially isolated incidents the significance of which does not spread beyond their own borders. Glitches in the matrix, but not a challenge to the matrix itself.

But take the red pill and you are forced to recognise that there can only be so many isolated incidents before we must establish a pattern and that the nature of that pattern will not only shape our understanding of those incidents but frame our ideas about how a society operates.

'The way we see things is affected by what we know and what we believe,' wrote John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*. "The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled."

And what is truly unsettling about these high profile police killings is that they don't contradict what takes place daily in America but simply illustrate it.

What was unsettling was those who questioned the wisdom of protesters in those moments where the protests turned violent in Ferguson or Baltimore or elsewhere must at least acknowledge that the issue of police killings of black people would not be a nationwide talking point had there been no violence. That there would have been no federal investigation into Ferguson by the US attorney general without those riots. To quote the title of the cabinet paper, written by the then Conservative environment secretary, Michael Heseltine about the uprisings in Liverpool and elsewhere in the early eighties: "It took a riot". And that if it takes a riot for America to remember the names of children killed by police officers then that tells you more about the country than it does about the rioters.

Indeed what became clear following the Department of Justice report into the



Ferguson police force was just what a state of day-to-day tyranny people in that suburb were living under.

To cite just a few examples: between 2007 to 2014, one woman in Ferguson was arrested twice, spent six days in jail and paid \$550 as a result of one parking ticket for which she was originally charged \$151. She tried to pay in smaller instalments - \$25 or \$50 a time - but the court refused to accept anything less than the full payment, which she could not afford. Seven years after the original infraction she still owed \$541 – this was how the town raised its revenue. It was not a glitch in the system; it was the system.

Then there was the man pulled out of his house by the police after reports of an altercation inside a home. As they dragged him out he told them: “You don’t have a reason to lock me up.”

“Nigger, I can find something to lock you up on,” the officer told him.

“Good luck with that,” the man responded. The officer slammed the man’s face into a wall and he fell to the floor.

“Don’t pass out, motherfucker, because I’m not carrying you to my car,” the officer is claimed to have said.

This last story happened the same month Brown was killed. Were it not for the disturbances following Brown’s death, there would have been no investigation – not only would we have heard nothing of these things but, because no light had been shone on them, the Ferguson police would be carrying on with the same level of impunity. This was a small midwestern suburb few had heard of – unremarkable in every way, which is precisely what makes the goings on there noteworthy. If it was happening there, then it could be happening anywhere.

“Terror,” the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai writes in his book *Fear of Small Numbers*, “is first of all the terror of the next attack.” Most African Americans, of course, are not shot by the police. But few believe that what happened there could not happen to them. The terrorism resides not just in the fact that it happens, but that one is braced for the possibility that it could happen to you at any moment.

“Living in a state of terror was new to many white people in America,” the late Maya Angelou told me when I interviewed her in 2002 in reference to the September 11 attacks of the previous year. “But black people have been



living in a state of terror in this country for more than 400 years.” Evidently they still are.

What is unsettling is that there are places in America where young people are not supposed to die. Movie theatres. Schools. College campuses. Their deaths prompt great moral panic if little change.

And then there are areas where they are expected to die. The shooting of a teenager in poor black neighbourhoods often earns little more than a paragraph in the local paper. Beyond their communities, their passing prompts little more than a weary, familiar sigh. To exist as a working class African-American is to be vulnerable: to live in a poor, black area simply renders you collateral.

So each time these kids are shot we are told to wait until the facts came out before rushing to judgement. But “to suspend judgment,” wrote James Baldwin when covering a trial in 1982, “demands that one dismiss one’s perceptions at the very same moment that one is most crucially – and cruelly – dependent on them.”

For the facts are out there.

We know that a black person is killed every 28 hours by the police or someone working in security.

We know that black kids are 21 times more likely to be shot by police than white kids.

We know that police stopped and frisked more than 4 million people in New York in a decade, most of them black and Latino, and, according to their own figures, 90% of them were innocent.



We know that at current rates one in every three black boys born in 2000 will go to jail.

We know that black youth do not use drugs at a greater rate than white youth but are far more likely to be incarcerated for drug crimes.

We know that Black male life expectancy in Washington DC is lower than male life expectancy on the Gaza Strip

We know that Black infant mortality in Chicago is on a par with infant mortality on the West Bank

We know that black pre-schoolers (that's four year olds) are four times more likely to be suspended than white pre-schoolers.

We know that there are more people in the US penal system than were imprisoned in the Soviet gulag at its height.

We know that because felons lose the right to vote there were more African American men disenfranchised in 2004 than in 1870, the year male franchise was secured.

We know that there are more African American men in prison on probation or on parole in the US now than there were enslaved in 1850.

"You already know enough," wrote Sven Lindqvist in *Exterminate All the Brutes*. "So do I. It is not knowledge we lack. What is missing is the courage to understand what we know and draw conclusions."

And so it's difficult not to come to the conclusion when we see what happened to Michael Brown, and Eric Garner and Tamar Rice and Vonderrit Myers and Kajieme Powell and Oscar Grant and Freddie Gray, and Trayvon Martin and on and on, is that these are not statistical aberrations but systemic abominations. "A system cannot fail those it was never meant to protect,"



wrote WEB Dubois. That this is not a glitch in the matrix. This is the way the matrix was designed.

So the grand jury deliberations, trials and convictions into these murders are not just about the fate of a few police officers and a few dead black people - it's about the value of black life. It passed judgement on whether there was a price to pay for summarily removing people from the planet or whether it's the cost of doing business when one person has a badge and a gun and the other has too much melanin.

Under slavery, an owner would have to be reimbursed for a slave who was deemed unreasonably slaughtered. Under Jim Crow they would leave lynched bodies hanging to warn others of the price of transgression – real or imagined. When Michael Brown's body was left lying lifeless on the streets of Ferguson for four hours before the police collected it, it was an ugly metaphor for the contempt for black life in this post-civil rights, post-industrial moment – dispensable, despised and discarded.

Just take a step back for a moment and think through the hashtag #blacklivesmatter. You wouldn't have a hashtag that said #blackmencanplaybasketball or #blackmusicmatters because only the most deluded would ever challenge that. But the reason #blacklivesmatter has resonated so widely is because it succinctly summarises where we are. We can celebrate a black president, black professors, black astrophysicists, black tennis players all we want. But the issue of the sanctity of black life has still not been settled.

The red pill is a very bitter pill to swallow and the rabbit hole is deep and dark. That these uprisings should have come in the midst of a slew of 50<sup>th</sup> anniversaries from the civil rights movement – The Mississippi Freedom



Summer, The Civil Rights Act, The Voting Rights Act, the March on Washington and so on – is sobering – particularly for those who still believe that America is a land of unrelenting progress.

Jus two years ago the, while arguing that the US Supreme Court to dump key elements of the Civil Rights Act, Bert Rein said of Southern racism: "There is an old disease, and that disease is cured. He won the case. The act was gutted. But those who go in search of this cure will find it quite elusive.

The discrepancy between black and white employment is the same as it was 50 years ago The discrepancy between black and white wealth is greater; the discrepancy between black and white incarceration is greater. Black children across the South now attend majority-black schools at levels not seen in four decades.

This is not to say that we have literally reverted to a bygone era. "No man ever steps in the same river twice," goes the proverb. "For it's not the same river and he's not the same man." We have a black president, a black attorney general and a black editor of *The New York Times*; there's a growing trend to interracial relationships; suburbs are becoming more diverse. If the civil rights movement had been about getting black faces in new and high places, its work would now be done. But it wasn't. It was about equality. And the problem is not that we still have a great deal of progress to be made or that progress is too slow—it's that we are regressing. And there is no place in the myth for regression.

Hence the title – Black Lives Matter in the Age of Obama. For on the night of the grand jury verdict which decided that Darren Wilson did not even have a case to answer Obama did what presidents do in moments of strife. He came on television and declared "We are a nation based on the rule of law so we



need to accept that this was the special jury's decision to make.”

The sight on a split screen, of the first black president appealing for calm on one side, and alienated black youth looting and burning on the other – lays bare the limits of what constitutes success in the post civil-rights era. What does it mean to say that everyone is equal regardless of race in a nation where economic and social inequalities are not just endemic but actively encouraged as part of the national myth about success?

So these public executions of black civilians comes at a time when there is an unprecedented number of Black elected officials, corporate executives, movies stars and athletes (in tennis and golf as well as boxing and basketball).

So for Black America in many ways these are Dickensian times – they're the best of times and the worst of times. Never have so many been doing so well and never have so many been doing so badly. When Obama catapulted to national attention during the 2004 Democratic convention he wrapped himself in the flag with the claim: “for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible”. But it is no less true that in no other Western country would 205 Black people have been shot dead already this year. In no other Western country would Black America's poverty, poor health, poor housing and incarceration be possible.

Indeed the class and economic disparity is even more pronounced among African Americans than it is among whites. For whites, the richest among them have 74 times more wealth than the average white family. But among African Americans, the richest families have 200 times more wealth than the average Black family.

With these levels of inequality within Black America a reckoning is in order



about what we mean by black power. Do we mean the broad uplift of a historically oppressed community or the elevation of a handful of prominent, high profile individuals. So long as the system of oppression remains in tact the identity of those administering it holds only symbolic relevance.

In fact having black people at the helm who don't change helps deflect accusations of racism. People become fixated on what an organisation looks like rather than what it does. As a result the principal of fighting anything structural racism becomes eclipsed by a desire to look different and act the same. Those who start out campaigning for equal opportunities end up settling for photo opportunities.

When I interviewed the Black radical Angela Davis in 2007 she told me: "The

Republican administration is the most diverse in history. But when the

inclusion of black people into the machine of oppression is designed to make that machine work more efficiently, then it does not represent progress at all.

We have more black people in more visible and powerful positions. But then

we have far more black people who have been pushed down to the bottom of the ladder. When people call for diversity and link it to justice and equality,

that's fine. But there's a model of diversity as the difference that makes no difference, the change that brings about no change."

Obama has insisted that the US is "a nation of laws." This is no doubt true.

Without further clarification and qualification it is also meaningless.

The trouble is that the United States, for far longer than it has been a "nation of laws", has been a nation of injustice. And in the absence of basic justice

such laws can amount to little more than codified tyranny. It was no less a

nation of laws when they jailed children as young as 6 in Birmingham,

Alabama or massacred Native Americans and stole their land. The question is

whom these laws are supposed to serve and protect, by what means and to



what end.

“The law,” wrote James Baldwin, “is meant to be my servant and not my master, still less my torturer and my murderer.” And so the call for law and, at certain points, in times of revolt, order, has no meaning without an assessment of the order that prevailed. Those who call for law and order must understand that there is no order because men with badges have been acting lawlessly. What peace can there be when an 18 year old can be shot dead while walking down the street with his hands up in a surrender position. What order are we to observe when a man selling cigarettes on the street can be strangled to death. The truth is that almost all the significant gains that black people have made towards full citizenship, in America, and indeed across the world, have come not by observing the law but by breaking it.

It is through this chasm, between the official claim to an impartial legal system and the legacy of endemic racial injustice, that so many of these trigger-happy police officers make their escape, with the flames of the ghetto in hot pursuit. For when so few policemen are indicted, let alone convicted, of killing black people they comprise not a special category, but a protected and elevated one. In this “nation of laws” those charged with enforcing the law evidently operate above it, while the judiciary exists not to mediate between the police and the public but to defend them from the public. Once again, this is not a bump in the road. This is the road.

So this is not a morality play in which a decent, black people are slain by malicious, white cops. The inherent nature of the injustice was not systematic but systemic. If we are to believe the DOJ report into Ferguson the entire system was corrupt and somehow Darren Wilson came out unscathed. This is why the efforts to both defile the assailants character and even defend the



characters of the dead are so wrongheaded.

The Right concentrate on character defamation. Brown was a thug, they say. He allegedly stole cigarillos. He deserved to die. Tamar Rice shouldn't have been playing with a gun in a park. Where were his parents. And Black people brought into this too. At Brown's eulogy Al Sharpton emphasised. "Blackness has never been about being a gangster or a thug," Sharpton continued. "Blackness was, no matter how low we was pushed down, we rose up anyhow."

But here's the thing. Thugs have rights too. Thugs are human beings too. #Thugslivesmatter. In this nation of laws the penalty for stealing cigarillos is not summary execution. And those who don't understand that but who claim to be on the side of justice will forever be trying to justify why someone was not worthy of a bullet rather than protecting any person's right to walk the streets in safety. Were this an isolated episode we could talk in terms of individuals. But it's not. They are structural. So these personalities are at best secondary if relevant at all.

You can't fight white supremacy by behaving better. Indeed we know from movements passed that it was when we filled the jails and taking to the streets that things started moving. These young kids can pull their pants up all they like – and frankly I wish they would – they still won't be able to outrun a cop's bullet.

Similarly the police officers in question do not need to be evil. They just need to operate in an institution where the chance that you will sanctioned be for killing a black youth is minimal and in a culture where armed white people can cite their fear of unarmed black people as a defence. A fear so intense that they have to shoot them. Have to. Since, apparently, no other possible



outcome was possible. Such fears do not come from nowhere. To assume that when you see a black man you see a criminal is rooted in the fact that black men have been systematically criminalised.

So what now. What next? What we have seen so far have been very popular mediated interventions and eruptions that have, significantly, gained global attention. But popularity isn't the same as efficacy. It has found an audience. It has yet to develop a program.

This is in no small part as much about the moment as the movement. In the post-civil rights era racism, much like neo-liberal globalisation, has become a force without a face. Black people can be whatever they want to be, individually, so long as it's not equal as a group. We can have a black president so long he does not stand too openly and too closely alongside black people. We can revel in him singing Amazing Grace so long as he has ditched his radical black preacher and is singing at a black funeral.

This is why comparisons between this moment and the civil rights era fall short. Back then there were clear targets. when they marched over Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965 in Selma they were marching for the vote. When they went on the freedom rides in 1961 they were trying to integrate interstate travel. When they marched in Birmingham in 1963 they were opposing segregation.

Today the signs are down, the abstract rights exist, the physical barriers are gone. And yet equality has not arrived. Racism is so utterly embedded in our institutions – from the courthouse to the schoolhouse – that to unpick one part is to make the whole thing unravel. So literally where do we march? To the jail; to the police stations; to the courts; to the governors' mansion? And when we get there what do we demand? An end to racism? What would that even



look like? Police cameras? How much good did that do Eric Garner?

These are problems to which we don't have the answers. What is encouraging is that we are starting to ask the right questions. At least we are mobilised, even if we don't exactly know where we're going. The blue pill is a sedative. It puts you to sleep believing a cure is round the corner only to wake up and find that nothing has changed. The red pill offers some clarity but no cure. It shows you how deep the rabbit hole goes but it cannot show you how to get out.