Introduction: The Novel and the Global Reach of Black Lives Matter

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The relationship between culture and politics is a fraught one—nowhere more so than in the realm of what we call, for lack of a better term, Black politics. Indeed, in recent years some of the fiercest and most illuminating debates about the status of culture in the political realm and vice versa have taken place among scholars of Black life, many of them novel scholars and, more generally, literary critics.[1] No doubt this has something to do with the paradoxical role that culture has played in Black political life, where it can appear to offer potential not available in the more narrowly defined electoral domain. As Kenneth Warren's scholarship has ably demonstrated, Black cultural politics emerged in the United States as an "elite-driven" strategy to combat Black disenfranchisement under Jim Crow ("Reply" 407).[2] Outside the United States, and particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, one finds a comparable history in which postcolonial liberation and the now-canonical fictions of the mid-twentieth-century African novel emerged more or less together. The African literary canon in retrospect appears as a record of expectation for political liberation and of disappointment that it did not fulfill all it promised.

This special issue of *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* offers a contemporary take on the relationship between Black politics and the novel, our journal's privileged cultural object, by considering the global reach of Black Lives Matter (BLM). The contributors to the issue treat BLM as a fresh opportunity to engage the question of how and whether local, national, and regional relationships between the novel and politics contribute to a Black politics of culture writ large. As such, this issue updates dynamics between US and postcolonial scholarship, which have long shared many of the same concerns but have not always approached those concerns in harmony.

In the United States, once Black participation in formal politics became all but impossible after the defeat of Reconstruction, many members of the Black intelligentsia posited the cultural arena not just as a viable alternative to the electoral realm but as a potentially superior one. Thus, Sutton Griggs could conclude his classic Black nationalist novel, *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), in which a band of Black separatists creates a shadow government within the state of Texas, by having the protagonist

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1 Although scholars have long debated the valences of "Black culture" as a political tool, the last several decades of the neoliberal era have given the debate a renewed sense of urgency. For overviews of the conflict written from perspectives largely sympathetic to advocates of Black cultural politics, see Iton (101–30) and Rasberry. Longstanding critics of culturalist approaches to Black politics include Adolph Reed, Cedric Johnson, and Kenneth Warren—critics who, perhaps not coincidentally, regard the rhetoric and politics of Black Lives Matter with considerable skepticism.

2 See also Warren's *What Was African American Literature?* (1–47).

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deliver an impassioned speech to his coconspirators urging them to abjure both violent direct action and electoral politics in favor of cultural production: "Our beloved President, in his message to this Congress, made a serious mistake when he stated that there were only two weapons to be used in accomplishing revolutions. He named the sword (and spear) and ballot. There is a weapon mightier than either of these. I speak of the pen. If denied the use of the ballot let us devote our attention to the mightier weapon, the pen" (164). Black cultural achievement, or so the thinking went, would compel whites and, by extension, the state to recognize Black people as full and equal citizens. With the passage and implementation of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which helped to exacerbate class tensions among Black Americans, one would expect this tendency to have lost whatever popular appeal it garnered in the segregation era. And yet, as Richard Iton has pointed out, "the negotiation, representation, and reimagination of black interests through cultural symbols has continued to be a major component in the making of black politics" in the post–civil rights era, much to the chagrin of hard-nosed leftists (5). Political scientist Adolph Reed's critique of the outsize role afforded popular culture in contemporary Black political discourse is perhaps the most chastening. "Cultural production," he writes in a pithy attack on the political pretensions of nineties rap music, "can reflect and perhaps support a political movement; it can never generate or substitute for one" (170). In this view, cultural workers who fancy themselves "the unacknowledged legislators of humankind," to borrow Percy Shelley's phrase, are simply "playacting" (Eagleton 126; Reed 170).

The idea that the novel could propel a political movement had considerable currency outside the United States in mid-twentieth-century postcolonial African literary circles. As neatly recapitulated by Madhu Krishnan in this special issue, the novel appeared as a tool for assisting anticolonial rebellion and postcolonial nationalism. But, as she notes, it also appeared tainted, an imported cultural form that could never authorize a legitimately African political subject or national identity. The challenge of indigenizing the novel features in both African and US literary criticism, to be sure, as does the lament about the elitism of the sort of novels favored by scholars. The tension between the novel's much-heralded promise and equally well documented limitations is precisely what makes the question about this literary form's relationship to political events evergreen. When we ask what the novel can tell us about BLM, and particularly about its capacity to reach beyond the borders of the United States where that activism began, we hope to be understood as recapitulating one of the most abiding questions of novel studies. By associating that question with what is perhaps the defining political movement of our day, we hope to show that what otherwise might appear a debate confined to (or stuck in the traffic between) African American and postcolonial literary criticism has relevance to anyone working on the contemporary novel or, more broadly, on the politics of the novel.

Even if we think of the novel as confined solely to the sphere of symbolic action, this literary and cultural form surely has more to offer political movements than the limited terms of reflection and support that Reed names. Here it is worth recalling the words of Georg Lukács: "Through the mediation of realist literature the soul of the masses is made receptive for an understanding of the great, progressive and democratic epochs of human history" (56). For Lukács, the tradition of critical

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realism mediates—both synchronically and diachronically—between political movements and the broader public, thereby creating the necessary subjective preconditions for radical social change. Viewed from this angle, novels do not simply reflect political movements but also anticipate them. Perhaps most important, literature has the potential to serve as a goad to progressive political movements. As Herbert Marcuse notes, "The institutions of a socialist society, even in their most democratic form, could not resolve all the conflicts between the universal and the particular, between human beings and nature, between individual and individual." But through "the aesthetic dimension" people nevertheless "encounter the appearance of that autonomy which is denied them in their society" (71–72). Because art always demands "the impossible," it can sometimes nudge and coax recalcitrant populations to expand their political expectations, maybe more acutely than elected officials or apparatchiks.

In the case of Black cultural politics, what further needs to be taken into account is how different artistic forms and genres interact with and inform Black political life, which the political scientist Cedric Johnson has helpfully defined as "the heterogeneous, complex totality of shifting positions, competing interests, contradictory actions and behaviors that constitute black political engagement historically" ("What Black Life"). The challenge for contemporary practitioners of Black cultural politics is to capture this heterogeneity, to demonstrate for essentialists of all sorts that there is no singular or uniform "Black life" but rather there are lives in a range that encompasses the globe. This is, of course, also a defining challenge for BLM, which is obliged to show how and whether it is a movement that can truly address all Black lives.

We understand this problem of representation as a staple of novel criticism and think that it is plausibly understood as a defining feature of the novel form. As Mikhail Bakhtin argues, the novel privileges "heteroglossia" and embraces "indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)" (7). With this definition in mind, one might be persuaded to conclude that the novel's very formal properties make it capable of producing sophisticated accounts of Black political life. You would not be wrong to imagine that in the post-segregation era the novel would have an advantage over the decidedly less dialogic modes of inquiry practiced by professional activists and political commentators. Where contemporary invocations in the United States of "Black voters" tend to imagine a monolithic bloc, the novel seems predisposed to render a multifarious population. Likewise, African fiction is self-evidently various enough in its plots and generic treatments to offer multifarious and competing accounts of local, regional, and continental populations. Given these attributes, it seems reasonable to conclude that the novel can teach readers how to think more critically about the push and pull of politics in Black people's lives around the world. Indeed, we with good reason can ask, might "the one bright book of life," as D. H. Lawrence (406) called the novel, provide a much-needed corrective to those impoverished accounts of Black political life proffered elsewhere?

The contributors to this special issue ask a more particular version of that question when they consider what the novel has to say and what it can tell us in the wake of a

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year that saw cities across the United States and around the globe erupt in protest over the police killing of George Floyd. Largely inspired by BLM, a self-described "movement-building project" launched by three activists in the aftermath of George Zimmerman's acquittal for killing the unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin, the protests appeared to suggest a level of mainstream public engagement with Black politics not witnessed since the sixties, if ever ("Herstory"). As Kinohi Nishikawa points out in his essay for this issue, "nearly three-quarters of counties that hosted a protest had populations that were more than 75 percent white." Similarly, many of the countries around the world in which BLM protests occurred do not have significant Black populations or communities. That said, no matter how much some of us might long for a return to the Black radical politics of that bygone era, when battles against Jim Crow and Western imperialism captured attention across lines of race and nation all around the globe, one thing is for sure: the sixties this is not.

In the United States and what used to be called the Third World, Black politics are no longer circumscribed by struggles for civil rights or indigenous control, assuming they ever were. In some ways the goal of the fights is clearer: stop police violence against Black people in particular and people of color in general. In other ways, both within the United States and in the larger world, things are more complicated. One key complication: the United States is on the verge of becoming a majority-minority state, and the streets as well as the nation's capitol have been the setting not only for BLM protests but also for rearguard actions involving white activists and elected officials who fear, in the vernacular of the day, "replacement." It has never been easy to generalize the sub-Saharan African political climate, meanwhile, but the geopolitical turn of China's deep involvement in the continent, the continued inequity in petro-states and mineral-rich polities, and the emerging theme of climate-change-driven conflict make it harder than ever to tell what would constitute liberation or whether that aspiration remains relevant as a goal. In the absence of the broad overarching themes of the 1960s, the essays in this issue rely on different approaches to framing the present for good reason.

The backdrop for the local, regional, and national political features that the contributors to the issue take on, moreover, is not the post–World War II order of the mid-twentieth century, which offered circumstances favorable to the growth of social democracy and the welfare state. The Cold War—with its many hot wars around the world—gave way decades ago to the geopolitical commonplaces of neoliberalism, among them fiscal austerity, financialization, privatization of state functions, and all the "fluctuating processes," as Michel Foucault influentially described them, "in which action is brought to bear on the rules of the game" and through which state governments and an array of transnational actors corporate and otherwise influence politics on the ground (*Birth* 259–60). If governmental flux and geopolitical variety constitute the increasingly familiar texture of politics in the second half of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first century, this era has equally witnessed a remarkable consistency in two aspects of rule—namely, policing and intensified and highly localized warfare. Under these circumstances, race still matters, but it matters differently.

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The recent high-profile police killings of poor unarmed Black citizens such as Floyd have made it painfully clear that neoliberal governance in the United States necessitates more diffuse and carefully calibrated, but no less barbarous, mechanisms of social control. Anyone who has been paying any attention at all to the intricate set of local and global dynamics that drives politics in sub-Saharan Africa might remark upon the seeming compatibility between the diffusion of political control and the barbarism of political method. What can the novel, given its traditional focus on the complexities and vicissitudes of the social totality, tell us about the valences of race during a period in which every political tendency can appear most intense and meaningful when it is examined in situ, on the ground, in a set of urban blocks or a highly particularized geographic region? In what ways has the novel presaged or responded to the diverse (but connected!) conditions that have given rise to BLM? How might novel criticism allow us to see BLM and related configurations in a new light?

The essays collected in this special issue respond to the questions we raise by using the novel to think through the potential of BLM. For several of the contributors, the novel as a form is capable of extending or amplifying the political promise of BLM by exporting its themes to new settings—and thereby extending its reach—by concentrating attention on key features—and thereby confirming BLM's direction—and by articulating a politics of the novel to advance a politics of the street. Kinohi Nishikawa, for instance, identifies "the structure of feeling associated with the summer of 2020"—shock, grief, anger, frustration, exhaustion, loss—running through Percival Everett's *Telephone*, a novel published by Graywolf Press in Minneapolis just weeks before Floyd's murder. For Priscilla Layne, "Novels in the age of Black Lives Matter focus on the social construct of whiteness, how whiteness is embodied, and how Black vulnerability is revealed in everyday life." She shows how the Black German writer Olivia Wenzel's autofiction presents "the experience of Black vulnerability without laying a claim to authenticity," thus making it possible to see certain features of BLM as problematic across the Atlantic. For Jesse McCarthy, the novel holds more radical potential still. He posits an "anticolonial novel" structured "around a stark antinomy" of "an immovable social order" that nonetheless can be brought down.

It is not clear to all our authors that the novel offers the means to serve such a revolution. Madhu Krishnan offers a pointed version of the question, asking, "what potential tensions arise when an essentially liberal and bourgeois form such as the novel attempts to contain the more radical, decentered, and collective vision of decoloniality necessitated by the Movement for Black Lives as an analytic and a program?" For Grace Musila, the questions reside less on the side of the novel than on the side of BLM. She interprets African fictions that "challenge the Black Lives Matter movement's narrow acknowledgement of anti-Blackness in Africa by demonstrating how, historically and currently, race remains an influential factor in African lifeworlds." Madhumita Lahiri asserts that "BLM has not been as easily translatable to countries where White hegemony operates in global but not in national terms. I would describe this impact on multiple White-majority countries as a kind of transnational success, but not a global one." She backs this assertion with readings of novels that "reflect in different ways concerns around

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racism, immigration, and state violence" and challenge their readers "to think about *kinds* of Blackness, right and wrong, rather than taking Blackness as a self-evident category of mobilization."

Nishikawa's contribution provides a metaphoric figure for the ambivalence about what, collectively, the critics in this issue and the novels they read tell us about BLM. Telephone, as Nishikawa writes, "the children's game where a secret message inevitably becomes distorted as it is passed along a line of players," captures the process wherein the concision of BLM's message—Black lives matter—becomes something messier and more complicated as it circulates both domestically and around the world. There is an obvious downside to this process if, indeed, what one wants from a political movement is a signal with no noise, an undistorted message whose impact can be known in advance. But Nishikawa learns from the fiction of Percival Everett that this is not necessarily what one should want. "By imagining how lack of correspondence between meaning and message could inspire, rather than foreclose, action," Nishikawa writes, "*Telephone* takes seriously the actual diversity of motives that constitute any call for change." We wanted this essay and this analysis to begin the special issue. We think it rightly points out that the novel's virtue lies in offering something other than a clear direction to follow or a taut rationale for action.

If, however, all that the novel told us about BLM's global reach is that it's complicated, it's uneven, or it's not always what the originators of BLM had in mind, that would be disappointing. We could probably have figured that out without reading much of anything at all. But that's not what the essays in this issue tell us. Instead, they bring back messages of potential. Unrealized, perhaps, but still: there are no dead ends in this scholarship, and that strikes us as important. It may be that BLM is not the last word on Black politics—it is surely too much to ask that it could be. It may also be that, with the novel's help, we can see how BLM opened doors that its organizers did not necessarily know they were opening. That novels offer surprises like this is, we are reminded, one reason we value them. If we don't read novels to discover new possibilities, the contributors to this special issue confirm, it's not clear why we would bother reading them. It's the novel's speculative quality that gives it something to say to politics. What does the novel have to tell us about BLM? One thing seems clear from the articles in this issue: The potential of BLM has not yet been fully expressed.

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