

## Which Black Lives Matter?

### Gender, State-Sanctioned Violence, and “My Brother’s Keeper”

*Xhercis Méndez*

The death of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of his murderer sparked a series of responses across the United States, including an explosion of social media, mass protests, the birth of grassroots movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), and state-sponsored initiatives such as My Brother’s Keeper (MBK). For many invested in the long struggle for black liberation, the acquittal symbolized the extent to which the American legal system was built on structural injustice and inequality, more often than not providing state support to vigilantes as long as those in the crosshairs were people of color. Martin was seen as yet another casualty in the war on black life and a reminder of the extent to which black lives were deemed disposable, killable, and structurally less worthy within the context of the United States. Indeed, his death, the trial, and acquittal served as yet another reminder of the structural inequalities that introduce violence into communities of color and the urgent need for a radical transformation in a system of legal and state governance that thrives on the demise of black life.

In response to Martin’s death and the outrage that followed the acquittal, the nascent BLM movement, spearheaded by three black queer women, Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi, proposed a grassroots movement that would broaden the scope of black liberation and address the wide array of struc-

*Radical History Review*

Issue 126 (October 2016) DOI 10.1215/01636545-3594445

© 2016 by MARHO: The Radical Historians’ Organization, Inc.

tural inequalities that produce violence within black communities. For instance, structural inequalities can best be understood as the sets of conditions (persistent poverty, lack of access to health care, school-to-prison pipeline) and institutions (the legal system, heteropatriarchy) that ensure some communities or group members are systematically denied access to their full rights as citizens and relegated to a lesser humanity. It refers to the conditions that produce some communities or group members as disposable and therefore more available for exploitation. The statement and approach put forth by BLM is noteworthy in that they have foregrounded the concerns of women of color, queer and gender-nonconforming folks of color, trans-folks, and differently abled bodies of color and ultimately centered the voices of those that have been historically marginalized even within the context of liberatory struggle. As a result, BLM seeks to address the diversity of structural inequalities impacting communities of color writ large. These are not limited to the issue of police brutality—they also include prisons, food security, anti-immigrant policy, transphobia, the assault on disabled community members, unequal access to health care and education, wage disparities, and reproductive justice for women of color.

In contrast, President Barack Obama responded to the collective outrage and protest by launching MBK, an initiative whose purpose was to primarily address the challenges facing young men and boys of color. In many ways, overlooking the broader community concerns being put forth by the women of BLM, the initiative was and continues to be an effort to address the *individual* barriers to social mobility for racialized males. These efforts have included providing mentorship and employment opportunities to create a path toward the middle class and creating policies that would work to minimize the disparities for youth of color.<sup>1</sup> Toward these ends, the initiative established a task force and issued a national call to businesses, individuals, nonprofits, and local agencies to come together, bring any and all available resources, and make concrete commitments to change the lives of young men and boys of color throughout the United States.

The response to MBK was and continues to be overwhelming. After only one year, the Obama administration reported raising over \$300 million to advance the vision and objectives of MBK. In response to the call, “more than 60 superintendents of the largest urban school districts have pledged to develop aligned strategies. And nearly 200 mayors, county executives, and tribal leaders have accepted [the] challenge to develop locally driven, comprehensive cradle-to-college-and-career strategies aimed at improving the life outcomes [for young men of color].”<sup>2</sup>

As the attention to structural inequality continues to grow, grassroots movements such as BLM and state-sponsored initiatives such as MBK have proposed not only different framings of the problem but also necessarily different approaches to the solution. While throughout this article I reference the BLM movement, I focus primarily on MBK for two reasons. First, many who are wary of grassroots protest have hinged their hopes on MBK as a state-sponsored initiative that seems to be a

“step in the right direction.” Second, and more important, as a federally sanctioned response MBK has the resources and potential to create necessary change, making it all the more pressing to hold its aims accountable.

For these reasons, this article seeks to consider to what extent MBK misses a real opportunity to improve the lives of youth of color by recycling much of the problematic logic, reasoning, and assumptions of its 1965 predecessor, the Moynihan Report, the controversial government document that aimed to reduce poverty in black communities through an initiative to “reintegrate” the black family.<sup>3</sup> As a matter of accountability for a program with such potential impact, certain key questions must be raised, such as how rehashing central aspects of the Moynihan Report works to derail us from examining the intersectional forms of institutionalized and state-sanctioned racialized gender violence prevalent in the contemporary moment, the very issues that the BLM movement is calling attention to. In other words, to what extent does MBK keep us from examining and altering the structural forms of violence that consistently wreak havoc in the lives of both young women and men of color, regardless of gender identity? To what extent does MBK fall prey to assumptions that reinforce structural inequalities, regardless of intention, thus laying the ground for an oppositional sexual politics by creating yet another set of conditions whereby men and women of color are pitted against each other in a competition for access to resources? And in what ways does MBK serve as strategy to contain and restrict protest and ultimately transformation? Altogether, these concerns carry new significance in the context of continued protests against state-sanctioned violence targeting black lives and black life.

### **My Brother’s Keeper: Moynihan All Over Again?**

In an effort to address the “persistent opportunity gaps” that prevent boys and men of color from achieving their full potential, MBK unfortunately recycles key assumptions of the Moynihan Report. In both reports, women of color are presumed to be faring better in terms of education and jobs than their male counterparts.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, women of color have been excluded from the projected program to address racial inequality and structural disparities. Moynihan argued that the United States needed to focus on improving opportunities for African American men because “ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. . . . A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage.”<sup>5</sup> For Moynihan, the relative success of black women not only hindered the progress of black men but also served as a measure of the pathology of black families. MBK, it seems, is built upon some of the same assumptions.

The claim that women of color are faring better and that they therefore do not need resources directed at improving their lives simply isn’t true. The statistics proclaiming the relative success of women of color compared with men of color

come at a time when black girls are being suspended from school at six times the rate of white girls and women of color have become the fastest rising prison population.<sup>6</sup> According to a Prison Policy Initiative report, the women's prison population has nearly tripled since the 1990s, the majority of whom are women of color.<sup>7</sup> To assert the relative success of women of color in the contemporary moment is to overlook the series of physical and nonphysical forms of violence that women of color face, including but not limited to being funneled into the prison system at alarming rates, persistent poverty, racialized gender wage gaps, and being marginalized within state institutions such as public schools and health care systems. Indeed, these are the structural inequalities that BLM has identified as hindering the progress of youth and communities of color.

One of the reasons that this misperception persists, as eloquently highlighted by the African American Policy Forum brief "Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality against Black Women," is that there are presently no accurate databases collecting accounts of how state institutions also target women of color.<sup>8</sup> The brief's authors contend that the tendency to focus on young men of color leaves us with an incomplete picture of state-sanctioned violence. For example, similar to the cases of young black men who have been murdered with impunity, black women have also been assaulted for "driving while black," being poor, and having mental health issues. The brief brings together cases that illustrate the ways in which black women have also been construed as "dangerous" and "criminal," in addition to more intersectional concerns such as being penalized for defending themselves against domestic violence and having their sexualities policed.<sup>9</sup>

As the brief's authors note, not only are there no readily available databases detailing the particularities of how black women are profiled by police, but there are no databases documenting how black women, as well as nonblack women of color, are vulnerable to other forms of state-sanctioned violence, such as sexual assault and being profiled as sex workers by police.<sup>10</sup> This is not to suggest that men of color are not victims of structural racial inequality; rather, the assumption that they are the *primary* victims allows us to understand only a very small portion of the overall problem. The insistence that women of color on the whole suffer "less" from, or fare better within, structural racial inequality not only keeps us from examining the intersectional forms of institutionalized and state-sanctioned racialized gender violence prevalent in the contemporary moment but also justifies policy initiatives that can only lead to partial solutions.

Moreover, the assumption that women of color are "faring better" creates the conditions for an oppositional sexual politics that undermines collective efforts, such as those of BLM, to improve the conditions of communities of color more broadly. This is a concern in both black and nonblack communities of color. It is also an example of how MBK falls prey to assumptions that reinforce, rather than dismantle, structural inequalities. MBK lays the ground for an oppositional sexual politics

by paradoxically putting women of color in the position to argue that they are indeed doing as badly (or perhaps worse) than men of color in order to access state support, resources, and be deemed worthy of investment. Women of color who attempt to correct this misconception are accused of undermining efforts to improve the lives of men of color. *They* become the enemy, not the structural dynamics that pit men and women of color against each other in the battle for resources.

For instance, Roland S. Martin has argued that those pushing to make MBK more inclusive to minority girls “look silly,” especially when the Obama administration has established the White House Office on Women and Girls to address the impact of policy on women and girls.<sup>11</sup> And yet, as Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and others have pointed out, the White House Office on Women and Girls has no initiatives that directly deal with the challenges facing girls and women of color (not to mention queer, gender-nonconforming, or trans folks of color who fall outside of both MBK and any initiatives coming out of the White House Office on Women and Girls), nor do they have nearly the same level of resources, cache, and mobilization as does MBK.<sup>12</sup> On the whole, the myopic focus on men and boys of color in the effort to address structural racial inequalities illustrates the extent to which women of color’s lives continue to be marginalized and devalued. Grassroots activists that form part of BLM and the “Say Her Name” brief have consistently identified this as a problem that will only lead us to partial solutions. While I agree that not all initiatives need to be inclusive of everyone, any initiative that claims to address the structural disparities that keep youth of color systemically marginalized needs to also *center* women and girls of color.

It is here that indigenous (Aymara) lesbian feminist Julieta Paredes’s argument becomes particularly instructive. In her book *Hilando Fino: Desde el Feminismo Comunitario*, Paredes begins from the assumption that “women are (minimally) half of everything.”<sup>13</sup> She stresses this because she and others in her community noticed that when women are being discussed they are treated as though they comprise a minority sector among larger and or more important concerns. An example of this would be to say, “We are going to create policy for the indigenous, for peasants, and for women,”<sup>14</sup> as though women were not also indigenous or peasants. Applying this understanding to MBK, we can argue that if MBK is about telling young people of color that their lives matter, then it is important to remember that women of color do not comprise a smaller or even negligible portion of the people negatively impacted by systemic inequality.

### **Missing the (Structural) Forest for the (Individual) Trees**

In addition to leaving women of color out of the articulated vision to address opportunity gaps and structural inequalities, Obama’s promotion of MBK reframed the persistence of poverty in terms of the “absence of fathers” (the breakdown of the black family, in Moynihan’s terms) and lack of male role models in communities of

color.<sup>15</sup> Implicit in this rhetoric is the idea that the integration of individual men of color into the economy will somehow increase marriage rates for heterosexual African American couples, resolve the issue of “absent fathers,” and in the process decrease the level of opportunity gaps for youth of color. Toward these ends, MBK focuses on “fixing” individuals within communities of color. As a result the list of goals primarily focuses on improving the boys themselves, by getting them to read better by the third grade, keeping them from dropping out of high school, and encouraging them to pursue postsecondary education and training.<sup>16</sup> However, the focus on young men of color’s individual improvement circumvents the need to address the structural inequalities that introduce both physical and nonphysical forms of violence into their lives or the multiplicity of ways in which black lives are systemically marginalized and targeted for demise throughout the United States.

For instance, MBK fails to address the racialized gender wage gaps that have women of color at the bottom of the global economy and that keep youth of color in conditions of poverty in the first place. In addition, it does little to address the structural dynamics that allow black youth to be assaulted by police while in school (e.g., the teenage girl assaulted at Spring Valley High School in South Carolina by officer Ben Fields) or that have led to the deaths of black children at the hands of police, such as Tamir Rice and Aiyana Jones. It fails to address the fact that the life expectancy for black transwomen is thirty-five years of age. It fails to address the sets of conditions that criminalize black queer, gender-nonconforming, and trans youth of color for carrying condoms, profiling them as sex workers and funneling them into the prison system precisely because they are not “easily” integrated into the heteronormative global economy.

Finally, MBK fails to address the fact that even when its stated objectives are met, it is not enough to protect black youth. Certainly, in the case of Trayvon Martin, in whose memory MBK was launched, having an active father and growing up in a middle-class neighborhood were not enough to either prevent his murder or hold his murderer accountable. As Jamelle Bouie notes in his article “The Flaws of My Brother’s Keeper,” young men like Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis “didn’t die because their parents weren’t involved enough; they died because they lived in a country where their lives were feared and devalued.”<sup>17</sup>

Rather than proffering a solution for structural inequality, MBK seems to be more about recycling Moynihan’s strategies of containment and discipline. Moynihan was particularly concerned with the black liberation struggles of the time that were not opposed to mass militancy and armed self-defense as a means for liberation. He expressed concern that without a resolution to the deep and deepening levels of poverty being experienced by black communities, as well as other communities of color, impoverished communities of color would turn to “more dangerous” alternatives such as the Nation of Islam (what he referred to as the black Muslim doctrines) and Chinese communism.<sup>18</sup> In addition to the social movements taking

place within the US, the anticolonial and black liberation struggles taking place on an international scale were also being tracked by Moynihan. With these movements in mind, he wrote that world events would undoubtedly be affected by how successfully African Americans were “peacefully assimilated” into American society, and he urged America to decide if the “Negro [would] be her liability or her opportunity.”<sup>19</sup>

In what seems to be a haunting regurgitation of Moynihan’s logic and concerns, Obama argues that America’s future depends on us caring about the successful integration of men of color into the economy. According to Obama, these men and boys are “our future workforce. . . . [They] are going to be taxpayers. They’re going to help build our communities. They will make our communities safer. They aren’t part of the problem, they’re *potentially part of the solution*.”<sup>20</sup> Although seemingly positive, similar to the Moynihan Report, I would argue that MBK is invested in containing and disciplining what are perceived to be “dangerous” protestors and a “criminal” masculinity on the verge of bubbling over. On the one hand, the initiative seeks to contain and appease the outrage of protestors by offering men and boys of color the carrot of future employment and by telling them that “their lives matter,” even as these things fail to address the immediate conditions of poverty and violence in their lives. At the same time, although the focus on young men and boys of color may be psychologically satisfying in that it suggests somebody cares, it also serves a disciplinary function. While the funneling of youth of color into postsecondary education carries with it no guarantee of employment, it almost certainly carries with it a guarantee of debt. The current economic crisis is such that fewer and fewer jobs are available to those graduating with postsecondary educations. Without a significant restructuring of the economy, we end up with an initiative that makes youth of color increasingly exploitable by adding new layers of debt to their already precarious circumstances.

Obama claims that MBK is about introducing a new value system that will redefine who we are as a nation and that will transform liberty, justice, and equality for all into more than rhetoric. But ultimately it misses the mark. By recycling many of the problematic assumptions and values of the Moynihan report, MBK sacrifices a very real opportunity and requirement to address the structural inequalities undermining the well-being and future of youth of color, especially as it relates to black life and lives.

### **Departing from Moynihan’s Logic:**

#### **Reframing Black Liberation as a Collective and Communal Project**

Even in the face of state initiatives that undermine collective struggle, black feminists, gender-nonconforming and queer folks of color, and men of color invested in broader conceptions of black liberation have, since the Moynihan Report, done the work of promoting communal alternatives that are open to and include all black lives. For instance, the open letter widely circulated on the Internet, the “Letter of



Two Hundred Concerned Black Men Calling for the Inclusion of Women and Girls in ‘My Brother’s Keeper’” respectfully asked Obama for a vision of racial justice that also included black girls and women and that would not express empathy and commitments to “only half of [the black] community.”<sup>21</sup> In an inspiring attentiveness to how such initiatives often prioritize one marginalized group at the expense of others, the letter stated,

As African Americans, and as a nation, we have to be as concerned about the experiences of single Black women who raise their kids on sub-poverty wages as we are about the disproportionate number of Black men who are incarcerated. We must care as much about Black women who are the victims of gender violence as we do about Black boys caught up in the drug trade. We must hold up the fact that Black women on average make less money and have less wealth than both White women and Black men in the United States just as we must focus on the ways in which Black men and women are disproportionately excluded from many professions.

The letter went on to suggest that “if the denunciation of male privilege, sexism and rape culture is not at the center of our quest for racial justice, then we have endorsed a position of benign neglect towards the challenges that girls and women face that undermine their well-being and the well-being of the community as a whole.” Thus, challenging the long history of state sponsored initiatives purporting to “save” black men at the expense of black women, the letter called for an expansion of the initiative to include the heterogeneity and multiplicity of circumstances negatively impacting black communities as a whole.

In addition to the letter signed by “Two Hundred Concerned Black Men”—arguably one of the more successful efforts to challenge state-sponsored initiatives that pave the way for oppositional sexual politics and undermine collective struggle—is the BLM campaign. The BLM movement has been self-defined as a strategic effort to revitalize the politics of black liberation but in a way that takes up the complexity and diversity of black life. This movement draws from the lessons of the black liberation struggles of the 1960s, as well as from black feminisms and queer of color activism, to promote a much broader vision of black liberation and communal inclusion. According to its founders Cullors, Garza, and Tometi, BLM is a political project that

goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all. Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been



marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, as they assert, if black lives matter, then *all* black lives matter.

As a result, the BLM movement has pushed the debate on racial inequality to include how systemic poverty, anti-immigrant policies, prison, the assault on black children and families, transphobia, and state-sponsored experimentation on differently abled bodies also constitute forms of state violence targeting black bodies that need to be centered and addressed. BLM, unlike MBK, is clear that any program or initiative that purports to improve the lives of youth of color cannot solely focus on “fixing” individuals but must address the concerns and structural inequalities impacting communities of color as a whole. Challenging the tendency to primarily center males of color in the discussion on racial inequality, their approach takes into account how racialized gender violence manifests differently depending on your body, how you choose to inhabit that body, and how others read your body. More importantly it reframes black liberation as a communal project that refuses to leave anyone behind.

### Notes

I extend my sincerest gratitude to my reviewers, Erica Ball, Nikolay Karkov, and Ganessa James, for their thoughtful feedback and reflections on this article.

1. Arne Duncan and Broderick Johnson, *My Brother's Keeper Task Force: One-Year Progress Report to the President* (Washington, DC: My Brother's Keeper Task Force, 2015), introductory letter, n.p.
2. *Ibid.*
3. See Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965).
4. *Ibid.*, 31.
5. *Ibid.*, 29.
6. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “The Girls Obama Forgot: My Brother's Keeper Ignores Young Black Women,” *New York Times*, July 29, 2014.
7. Aleks Kajstura and Russ Immarigeon, “States of Women's Incarceration: The Global Context,” Prison Policy Initiative, [www.prisonpolicy.org/global/women/](http://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/women/) (accessed December 1, 2015).
8. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and Andrea J. Ritchie, “Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality against Black Women” (New York: African American Policy Forum, 2015), 4.
9. *Ibid.*, 8–24.
10. *Ibid.*, 4.
11. Roland S. Martin, “Black Elites Look Silly over ‘My Brother's Keeper’ Criticism,” *Roland Martin Reports* (blog), June 21, 2014, [rolandmartinreports.com/blog/2014/06/roland-s-martin-black-elites-look-silly-over-my-brothers-keeper-criticism/](http://rolandmartinreports.com/blog/2014/06/roland-s-martin-black-elites-look-silly-over-my-brothers-keeper-criticism/).
12. Crenshaw, “Girls Obama Forgot.”
13. Julieta Paredes, *Hilando Fino: Desde el Feminismo Comunitario* (La Paz: CEDEC, 2008).
14. *Ibid.*, n.p.
15. Moynihan, *Negro Family*, 35–38.

16. “The President Speaks at the Launch of the My Brother’s Keeper Alliance,” YouTube, posted May 4, 2015, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=c9\\_RYZ\\_54A4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c9_RYZ_54A4).
17. Jamelle Bouie, “The Flaws in My Brother’s Keeper,” *Daily Beast*, February 27, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/02/27/the-flaw-in-my-brother-s-keeper.html>
18. Moynihan, *Negro Family*, 1.
19. *Ibid.*, prelude, n.p.
20. “President Speaks,” emphasis added.
21. See “Letter of Two Hundred Concerned Black Men Calling for the Inclusion of Women and Girls in ‘My Brother’s Keeper,’ May 28, 2014,” posted at *NewBlackMan (in Exile)* (blog), [newblackman.blogspot.com/2014/05/letter-of-200-concerned-black-men.html](http://newblackman.blogspot.com/2014/05/letter-of-200-concerned-black-men.html).
22. Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi, “About the Black Lives Matter Network,” [blacklivesmatter.com/about/](http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/) (accessed December 1, 2015).

