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# Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations

## The Rebirth of Black Rage

by Mychal Denzel Smith

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There are two quotes from September 2, 2005, that have become fixtures in our cultural and political language, and each sums up the ways in which Americans with differing perspectives came to view the disaster of Hurricane Katrina. The first is from George W. Bush: Five days after Katrina tore through the Gulf Coast region, the president landed in Louisiana facing heavy criticism for his administration's slow response to the devastation. Touring the state with FEMA director Michael Brown—the only person who'd been more heavily criticized for the government's inadequate response—Bush turned to the man he'd placed in charge of disaster relief and said, “Brownie, you're doing a heckuva job.” Part of Bush's appeal had always been his folksiness, but it offered no solace here. His comment only served to further exemplify his ineptitude.

The other quote—what Bush would later call the worst moment of his presidency—came at an unexpected time from a rather unexpected source.

Later that same evening, after Bush's “heckuva job” comment, NBC did what television networks do during times of disaster and hosted a celebrity telethon. Faith Hill, Harry Connick Jr., Claire Danes, Hilary Swank, Lindsay Lohan, Leonardo DiCaprio, and others stood before an audience of millions, accompanied by the pictures of despair that were still streaming from the gulf—New Orleans in particular.

Also invited was Kanye West, one of the more popular entertainers in the country at the time. He was paired with Mike Myers, famous for his performances as Austin Powers and as the voice of *Shrek*. Myers read from a teleprompter about the suffering in New Orleans, attempting to build up sympathy before the big ask. When it was West's turn, he deviated from the script and started speaking from his heart.

“I hate the way they portray us in the media,” Kanye said. “You see a black family, it says, ‘They're looting.’ You see a white family, it says, ‘They're looking for food.’ And, you know, it's been five days because most of the people are black. ... America is set up to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off, as slow as possible.”

Myers attempted to rebound, returning to the teleprompter script. The folks in the control room at NBC must have been hoping that West would do the same. Perhaps they weren't familiar with his brash reputation, or perhaps they thought he would rein himself in, in service of charity. But Kanye wasn't done: He still needed to deliver what would become one of my generation's greatest moments of live television. Speaking as if he were reading from the teleprompter, his cadence straddling the line between stiff and natural, he looked straight into the camera and said, “George Bush doesn't care about black people.”

Had this happened even five years earlier, it would have been newsy fodder for comedians and might even have made its way into some year-end retrospectives. But it would also have receded more easily into a cultural footnote, a had-to-see-it-to-believe-it moment in television. In September 2005, however, millennials were already taking more direct control of our media diets; we were deciding for ourselves which moments were fleeting and which were definitive. YouTube had launched earlier that year and was already starting to catch on; the idea of the Internet providing video on demand was becoming more of the norm. I was back on campus for my second year of college when this telethon aired, and for weeks afterward, if someone mentioned that they had missed Kanye's declaration, another person would open a laptop, conduct a quick Google search, and pull up the video for a crowd of onlookers. Facebook, founded the previous year, didn't yet support video links, but we could all post on one another's walls some variation of jokes involving West, Bush, or not caring about black people. With these new technological possibilities, and the most succinct political statement of the year, West was able to further ingratiate himself with a generation of young people who already loved his music, but who now had, in him, our first relatable expression of black rage on a national stage.

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Black rage, as a political message, had all but disappeared from the cultural and political landscape by the time my generation came of age. The aspirations of the black political class had shifted from the anger that animated the civil-rights and Black Power era to seeking

influence through electoral politics, where black rage does not translate into votes. Jesse Jackson had gone from agitator and organizer to presidential candidate, while Oakland, New Orleans, Chicago, Baltimore, New York, and many other cities had voted their first black mayors into office, and Douglas Wilder, in my home state of Virginia, had become the nation's first elected black governor. The Rev. Al Sharpton could still command media attention, but his expressions of rage were diluted by his celebrity-activist status and the larger-than-life persona that made him a prime target for caricature.

The world of hip-hop that West came out of had also long since excised political anger in favor of narratives of material wish fulfillment. Of course, there were always artists like Dead Prez and the Coup, groups with a radical, socialist Black Power message, but the days of Public Enemy and NWA selling millions of records of uncut black rage and becoming part of mainstream American culture were no more. Whereas Ice Cube had once crashed the *Billboard* charts with an album featuring the song "I Wanna Kill [Uncle] Sam," by the time Kanye West reached prominence, most rappers were searching for an "In da Club" clone.

That's what was important about West's "George Bush doesn't care about black people" comment. This kind of rhetorical expression of black rage was marginalized throughout most of the relatively prosperous 1990s, when there was no longer a Reagan or a Bush to serve as an identifiable enemy, and the nation's children were being taught that racism was essentially over because we were committed to celebrating multiculturalism.

The second Bush proved an easier foil than his Democratic predecessor, but his historic appointments of Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice gave him the sort of symbolic cover we've come to accept as evidence that racism is a nonfactor. In 2001, when Bush took office, a Gallup poll showed that 32 percent of black people believed that "relations between blacks and whites" would eventually be worked out, and by 2004 that number had risen to 43 percent.

Black rage, at its most potent, cuts through that kind of bullshit. Black rage announces itself at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, and says, "Ain't I a woman?" Black rage stands before hundreds of thousands at the Lincoln Memorial and says, "America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'" Black rage says to the Democratic National Convention, "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired." Black rage says "Fuck tha Police" and "Fight the Power."

At its best, black rage speaks to the core concerns of black people in America, providing a radical critique of the system of racism that has upheld all of our institutions and made living black in America a special form of hell. But that anger has not only drawn attention to injustice; it has driven people to action, sparking movements and spurring them forward. At the very least, the public expression of black rage has allowed communities and people who have felt isolated in their own anger to know that they are not alone.

This is what West's telethon moment did. It was replayed over and over, adopted as slang, fit to whatever situation one was in, because it gave language to the pain we felt watching the nightmare in New Orleans play out after Hurricane Katrina made landfall. When the levees broke and the water rose, a city full of black people attempted to wade through it alone. The sick, the young, the elderly were being left for dead in one of the most wealthy countries in the world. The media spoke of people attempting to survive as if they were savages (a study by linguist Geoffrey Nunberg showed that in articles that used either "refugee" or "evacuee" to describe the survivors, "refugee" was far more likely—68 versus 32 percent—to appear in stories that also mentioned "poor" and/or "black" people). And you couldn't help but think, because you knew it was true, that had this been a city with a larger white population, there wouldn't have been so much death and destruction, or at least there would have been greater relief.

When West said, "George Bush doesn't care about black people," he wasn't just speaking about George W. Bush. It was an indictment of an America that doesn't care about black people and that elected a president to carry on the tradition.

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There was a sign, a few years later, that the black rage to which Kanye gave voice might turn into a movement. In 2007, young people of color led the charge seeking justice for the Jena Six, a group of teenage boys in Jena, Louisiana, who had been charged with attempted murder for what amounted to a schoolyard fight. Thousands of young black people used social media to raise awareness of their case, with new Facebook groups dedicated to justice for the Jena Six appearing nearly every day during the summer of 2007. Hundreds traveled to Louisiana, and thousands marched on the day that Mychal Bell was to be sentenced; he had been convicted of lesser but still serious felony charges that could have sent him to prison for up to 22 years.

Thousands of students organized protests on their college campuses in solidarity. Al Sharpton called it the “beginning of the twenty-first-century civil-rights movement.” At the time, it truly felt that way.

But then Barack Obama happened.

In 2008, young black people turned out to vote for Obama at historic levels, helping to ensure that he would become the first black president of the United States. But this meant the activist energy that had been building since Hurricane Katrina, and had caught a bit more momentum with the Jena Six, was being redirected to electoral politics and the messaging of Obama's candidacy. Black rage was being channeled into black hope. On its face, that isn't entirely bad, but the particular brand of black hope that Obama represented was one that muted black rage, and its possibilities, altogether.

This was first evident in Obama's famous speech on race. During the 2008 campaign, the then-senator had to address the controversy that had arisen around his attendance at the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, presided over by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. The pastor was in the spotlight after tapes were uncovered by ABC News in which he was heard saying things like “God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme.” Obama's association with Wright was used by his opponents to paint him as some kind of secret black radical, obviously unfit for the presidency. Obama needed to distance himself from the pastor who had officiated at his wedding and baptized his children.

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He accomplished this in what has become known as the “Philadelphia race speech.” In it, Obama denounced Wright's inflammatory rhetoric, saying that his words had the “potential ... to widen the racial divide” and that he obviously didn't agree with everything his former pastor had to say. But he also said that Wright was like family and that the Obamas couldn't disown him.

The speech was regarded as an instant classic, a treatise on race in America that we all needed to hear, from the first viable black presidential candidate in our history. But it was also the first major speech by the first viable black presidential candidate to throw water on the flames of black rage.

“That anger may not get expressed in public, in front of white coworkers or white friends,” Obama said. “But it does find voice in the barbershop or the beauty shop or around the kitchen table. At times, that anger is exploited by politicians, to gin up votes along racial lines, or to make up for a politician's own failings. ...

“That anger is not always productive; indeed, all too often it distracts attention from solving real problems; it keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity within the African-American community in our own condition; it prevents the African-American community from forging the alliances it needs to bring about real change.”

But black rage is about holding America accountable. It does not distract “attention from solving real problems”; it illuminates those problems and asks America to confront their roots. If black rage has prevented alliances from forging, those are likely not alliances that would have yielded much in the way of progress anyway.

As president, Obama continued to blunt the edge of black rage, at a time when the reasons for that anger were stacking up in plain sight. In fairness, his job as president is not to represent black America—and if he were ever to register any type of anger in office, the already racist coverage that follows him would only worsen. That doesn't, however, mean that he needed to make black anger seem unjustified or undignified. As president, he speaks with a different moral authority for many people. Because he is the first black president, that moral authority is all the more highly regarded when he is speaking about race.

When Henry Louis Gates Jr. was arrested in front of his own home, Obama's response was to call him to the White House garden for a beer summit with the arresting officer, thereby sending the message that racial profiling is, meh, not that big a deal. It didn't even matter that this happened to a celebrated Harvard professor and PBS documentarian who serves as an avatar for black mainstream assimilation and acceptance—or that Gates himself had been enraged. Obama's solution was to calm the black anger down, come together over a pint, and talk it out.

This invalidation of black rage felt even more insidious when Obama used the tragedy of Trayvon Martin's death and the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman to reinforce ideas about black male criminality. In his remarks following the verdict, Obama at first did what no other president has had the capacity to do: He spoke about Martin's death in very personal terms, including the experience of being racially profiled and living with the burden of the stereotypes attached to young black men. It represented the best of what having a black

president has meant. But then he pivoted and said, "I think the African-American community is also not naive in understanding that, statistically, somebody like Trayvon Martin was probably statistically more likely to be shot by a peer than he was by somebody else."

False moral equivalencies of this kind are a pattern for the president when discussing race. Whereas Obama was uniquely positioned to relate Martin's story to his own, as the first black president, he has also been uniquely positioned to speak with authority on the ways that racism has built America. But even when he's risen to the task, Obama has done so by making the perceived moral failings of black Americans as much a part of that story as racism itself. His rhetoric provides further ammunition for those who believe that black people's anger at racism is unjustified.

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But Martin's death and Zimmerman's acquittal also represented a turning point. The generation that heard Kanye West say "George Bush doesn't care about black people," then pushed the vote for the first black president, then watched America continue to not care about black people, simply has had enough. As the deaths of young, unarmed black people continue to become headlines, and social media holds more hashtag funerals, the hope has turned to despair, and the despair into rage. That rage consumed the streets of Ferguson when Michael Brown was killed; it set fire to the streets of Baltimore when Freddie Gray was killed; and it sent Bree Newsome up the flagpole at the South Carolina state Capitol to bring down the Confederate flag in the wake of nine people being killed in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Black rage is back, cutting to the core of white supremacy and demanding that America change.

This movement, known across the country and the world as "Black Lives Matter," has pushed an agenda to address police violence, racial profiling, and racial inequality onto the national political stage. When black rage is felt, organized, and radically expressed, this is what it does best—shift consciousness and make the needs and concerns of black America part of the body politic. It has made presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton take notice, and it has even moved Obama. At the 2015 NAACP convention, the president delivered his strongest speech yet on criminal-justice reform, calling for the end of mass incarceration, the reduction or elimination of mandatory-minimum sentencing, the restoration of voting rights for the formerly incarcerated, the end of rape in prisons, and more—without the added moralizing about sagging pants, missing fathers, and "acting white" that he'd grown so fond of.

An opportunity may have been missed in those post-Katrina days, when the words "George Bush doesn't care about black people" still buzzed. But a decade later, the resurgence of black rage in the political sphere is finally ready to make America face its racist past and present. Or burn it down trying.

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