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## *Collective Love and The Politics of Othering*

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## Introduction

What is Collective Love? It is the contentedness of the human soul, experienced when a person has the full and unqualified embrace of society. It is an idealistic concept whereby the constitutional promise of human rights is realized through the offering of unconditional love, human validity, and incorporation of culture without the demand for assimilation. It is essential for us to understand white America's increasing denial of Collective Love and what pervasive and eroding effect this denial has on Black American communities. Humanity's feeling of worthiness rests upon this contentedness; yet in the United States, white people in power have withheld societal acceptance by denying Collective Love. This has effectively situated Black Americans as Other. Numerous individuals and marginalized groups around the world experience social and cultural exclusion and alienation. However, I use the terms "Other" and "Othering" in the context of Black Americans and their specific American experience. Others find themselves reaching for but not quite grasping opportunities they keep hearing about, and rights they keep reading about. Obstacles and barriers to democracy and freedom are routine for the Other. I will argue that the American political machine continues to evolve its methods of denying Collective Love to restrict the societal progress of the Other.

In the context of our current socio-political crisis, it is my contention that: (a) Black Americans have not only been denied the basic rights of citizenship, but also, since slavery, have been afflicted with a sense of battered identity, a sense of nothingness; (b) This condition of erasure has been preyed upon and manipulated by the white political power structure to situate Black Americans forever in opposition to the status quo of the nation they call home; (c) The election of America's first Black president tapped an overflowing reservoir of white supremacy, unleashing a flood of inhumanity toward Black Americans; (d) Our current state of divisiveness demands a response that will ultimately serve to provide equity in its most finite form: reparations for slavery in the form of a free education. Our perceived American exceptionalism has shamefully hindered our ability to actualize the hard-won battles for justice fought by countless Black Americans. I conclude by advocating for a shared narrative of accountability and forgiveness: that the state dutifully contributes to that narrative

by providing free college for Black Americans. This move would work to balance the scales of inequality, heal the hopelessness, and recognize the greatness within Black American individuals and communities.

## **Love Withheld**

The institution of slavery laid a toxic and lasting foundation of hopelessness in the minds and hearts of many Black Americans. The loss of self that slavery imposed upon Black Americans manifested in a crisis of identity that has transcended time and affected the fate of generations. The philosophy of WEB DuBois seeks to understand the magnitude of Black American identity. His seminal text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, recognized the structures aligned against Black Americans while also addressing the critical question, “How does it feel to be a problem?” (DuBois, 1903 [1994]) DuBois describes the alienating sensation of “double-consciousness” which refers to the challenge of “always looking at one’s self through the eyes” of a racist white society. DuBois states, “In those somber forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself, —darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission” (DuBois, 1903 [1994]). The framework of this conflicting identity stripped Black Americans of their culture, while also resulting in a new kind of power which motivated Black Americans to live within the strength of their own hearts and souls while seeking justice.

This psychological warfare is the birth of Othering. DuBois’ argument situates the history of Black Americans in the context of slavery and oppression; yet his critical question of perception and his eloquent description of life as a Black American is largely ignored in American political discourse. In the opening of his book, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*, critical race scholar Derek Bell makes the following prophetic statement about the fixed characteristic of domination in American society, “Slavery is, as an example of what white America has done, a constant reminder of what white America might do” (Bell, 2002). The extension of Collective Love addresses this pervasive injustice head on. The continued dismissal of the history of the Black American struggle questions the legitimacy of our American democracy.

## **Love Leveraged**

From an early age, American children learn democratic principles emphasizing that all people are equal; Americans have equal rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. However, these rights have been kept inaccessible to Black Americans. Our Founding Fathers lit the beacon of hope, yet the beacon remains on the horizon. Because white Americans control the

phenomenon I refer to as Collective Love, Black Americans are subject to structural marginalization through the disproportionate enforcement of laws and political exclusionary tactics. A pattern of political give and take, counter measures and pushback, can be seen throughout American history, illuminating the systemic Othering of Black Americans.

First, the tragic failure of Reconstruction in the post-Civil War era (1865–1877) provides evidence of the resistance to incorporate Black Americans emerging from slavery, and demonstrates how far white Americans in power would go when faced with giving up what they believed was their God-given right—ruling over Black people. As Eric Foner notes:

...the advent of African-Americans in positions of political power aroused bitter hostility from Reconstruction's opponents. They spread another myth—that the new officials were propertyless, illiterate and incompetent. As late as 1947, the Southern historian E. Merton Coulter wrote that of the various aspects of Reconstruction, black officeholding was “longest to be remembered, shuddered at, and execrated.” The era reminds us that the liberation of four million people from bondage did not suddenly erase the deep racial prejudices born of slavery, nor assure lasting political or economic equality for the former slaves (Foner, 2015).

Thus began an evolution of systems devised to diminish the personhood of Black Americans, regardless of fact, and regardless of law, while also establishing the intellectual validation for societal Othering (Reed, 2015). School curricula carried the message nationwide of purported horrible things that had been done to “innocent” white people of the South during Reconstruction. Eurocentric literature and history books were written to frame Black people as unfit for American citizenship (Wong, 2015). This faux scholarly indoctrination provided a false sense of American exceptionalism (Wong, 2015). Furthermore, the selective editing of American history and the exclusion of strong Black leaders such as Sojourner Truth<sup>1</sup> and Ida B. Wells<sup>2</sup> erased Black American culture, and perpetuated the idea that Blacks were not Americans and therefore not worthy of Collective Love (Morrison, 1992). The period between Reconstruction and World War II (1877-1945) was fraught with unpunished violence and terrorist lynching tactics against Black Americans. Montgomery, Alabama's Equal Justice Initiative conducted a years-long investigation into this retaliatory period, stating:

Many African Americans who were never accused of any crime were tortured and murdered in front of picnicking spectators (including elected officials and prominent citizens) for bumping into a white person, or wearing their military uniforms after World War I, or not using the appropriate title when

addressing a white person. People who participated in lynchings were celebrated and acted with impunity (Equal Justice Initiative, 2015)

Before the establishment of the first Jim Crow laws, the American government had successfully maintained total social and political power over Black Americans through fear and race-based violence, police intimidation, and lack of representation<sup>3</sup> in the political sphere (Janken, 2001). However, if the status quo was to be maintained, new strategies needed to be devised to ensure the continuation of social control by the racial caste system. Michelle Alexander writes in her investigative book on the racial caste system in America, *The New Jim Crow*, “The new racial order, known as Jim Crow...was regarded as the ‘final settlement,’ the ‘return to sanity’ and the ‘permanent system’” (Alexander, 2011).

The societal pendulum swung back during the Civil Rights Era (1954-1968) as Black Americans achieved legal successes in *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Loving v. Virginia*. The passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965), ended racial segregation and legalized the Black vote. However, this would turn out to be yet another false beacon of hope. Martin Luther King Jr. expressed the daunting and dangerous nature of men in power and the compliance of their American audience. According to King, writing from his jail cell in Birmingham,<sup>4</sup> “We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people” (King, 1963). King highlighted the divisiveness of mind, heart, and soul between white Americans and Black Americans. This divisiveness was also reflected in the political structure of elected officials. To this day, Congress has yet to reflect the appropriate proportion of Black Americans; therefore, representation of Black interests has not been fully actualized.

The most damaging white political pushback to the Civil Rights Era was the implementation of social policy measures that enforced Othering. The War on Drugs, implemented by president Richard Nixon in 1971, resulted in strict sentencing policies, exacerbating racial disparities in incarceration rates (Alexander 2011). A convenient consequence of the War on Drugs was the disenfranchisement of Black Americans who, once charged with felonies, became shut out from Collective Love. Evidence does not support that Black Americans use or sell illegal drugs more frequently than whites (Alexander, 2011). However, Black Americans were policed and sentenced more harshly than their white counterparts. This disproportionate enforcement left 80% of young Black American men with criminal records and their voting rights stripped (Alexander, 2011). For this reason, de facto legalized discrimination

ensures that the Other (those targeted by the enfranchised power structure), are kept from enjoying the rights and privileges of mainstream society. The goal of Collective Love is destroyed once more by the white political machine.

## Forced Love

For some, the 2008 election of Barack Obama signaled a powerful, post-racial shift in our nation. Surely, we had reached readiness for inclusion. Obama's mantra of "hope and change" resonated with a nation fatigued from Bush-era lies, war and the worst economic recession since the Great Depression. Yet to think that this election could change the hearts and minds of a nation and fully restore Black hope was naïve. For those on the Left, with young people voting in droves, the implementation of America's first Black president was a resounding declaration of progress. Could this down-to-earth, eloquent man of truth help us heal and lift our nation up, finally realizing our American potential by achieving unity in our society? Unfortunately, the Left mistakenly believed that their structuralist policies<sup>5</sup> were providing adequate prospects for all Black Americans (West, 1993). This blind spot prohibits and undermines genuine progressive thought and actual inclusion.

For those on the Right, the election caused panic, as the people they had Othered grabbed the ultimate seat of national power. On the night of Obama's inauguration, ranking GOP members of Congress met privately and conspired to stonewall the new president (Khan, 2013). Very soon, the white power structure, rooted in racism, demonstrated once again its control and domination of Black America through a very public Othering of President Obama. This noisy and distracting articulation struck a nerve in certain Americans who felt their voices had been hushed by political correctness, and gave them unabashed permission to take the gloves of civility off. A grotesque cyclone of racism was unleashed. The comments section of the broadly read conservative website, *New Republic*, in response to Obama's eleven-year-old daughter Malia appearing in public wearing summer shorts and a peace symbol t-shirt, described her as "Ghetto street trash," and "a typical street whore", and asked, "Wonder when she will get her first abortion?" The thread was accompanied by a photo of Michelle Obama speaking to Malia that featured the caption, "To entertain her daughter, Michelle Obama loves to make monkey sounds" (Goodison, 2009). Thus, we entered into a new era of politics, one which embraced blatant racism and denied any attempt at bipartisanship.

Both responses, Left and Right, remain unequivocally inadequate. The Left soothes itself with altruistic narratives of racial and societal progress. In this false understanding of Black American alienation, leftists miss the point. The ignorance surrounding the importance of Black American culture reinforces postmodern political thinker and cultural critic bell hooks' preference



for the term “white supremacy” over “racism” as a descriptor for modern liberal ideology (hooks, 1995). In her landmark book, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, hooks explains the critical necessity of this position:

... “white supremacy” is a much more useful term for understanding the complicity of people of color in upholding and maintaining racial hierarchies that do not involve force (i.e slavery, apartheid) than the term “internalized racism”—a term most often used to suggest that black people have absorbed negative feelings and attitudes about blackness. The term “white supremacy” enables us to recognize not only that black people are socialized to embody the values and attitudes of white supremacy, but we can exercise “white supremacist control” over other black people (hooks, 2015).

Cornell West also demonstrates the shortcoming of this liberal ideology stating, “their focus on structural constraints relates almost exclusively to the economy and politics,” while it also fails to acknowledge that “...structure and behavior are inseparable, that institutions and values go hand in hand” (West, 1993). The liberal focus on structural remedies such as housing, welfare, and Affirmative Action, cloud the more important dilemma: the Othering of Black Americans. This is especially problematic since the success of social progress relies so heavily on the racial education of the Left. Conservative responses rely on bootstrap ideologies, the notion that opportunity is readily available. This purposefully repudiates Black American culture and the messaging serves to push a false agenda: one that proclaims that we are now living in a post-racial society. A pollster with special expertise on race opined just before the election that “a Black man [cannot] be president of the United States of America. However, I think an exceptional individual who also happens to be Black can be president of the United States of America. Perhaps then, race had not been overcome, so much as temporarily succeeded” (Lopez 2010).

As race-related crimes in the United States surged, Obama made heartfelt assertions aimed to shed light on the sameness of Black American victims. In his recent exposé for *Atlantic Monthly*, “My President Was Black,” Ta-Nehisi Coates spoke about the inability of white Americans to accept Obama as their leader, stating that “Obama’s comments after the killing of Trayvon Martin—‘If I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon’—helped make that tragedy a rallying point for people who did not care about Martin’s killer as much as they cared about finding ways to oppose the president” (Coates, 2017). I assert that this political stance was not a result based on the quality of ideas, but on the color of Obama’s skin. Coates goes on to explain “the badge” of white political power and the endless attempts to de-legitimize Obama:



For the preservation of the badge, insidious rumors were concocted to denigrate the first black White House. Obama gave free cellphones to disheveled welfare recipients. Obama went to Europe and complained that “ordinary men and women are too small-minded to govern their own affairs.” Obama had inscribed an Arabic saying on his wedding ring, then stopped wearing the ring, in observance of Ramadan. He canceled the National Day of Prayer; refused to sign certificates for Eagle Scouts; faked his attendance at Columbia University; and used a teleprompter to address a group of elementary-school students. The badge-holders fumed. They wanted their country back (Coates, 2017).

I argue that the orgy of Obama Othering, which had been translated to Americans through nonstop media messaging, pushed us into a societal race war. As Americans witnessed the political tactic of Othering Obama in their living rooms, they also began to bear witness to police brutality against Black Americans. Video testimonials of gross acts of injustice, and the subsequent lack of legal ramification, serve as confirmation that we are not a community rooted in love. The establishment of the Black Lives Matter movement and the All Lives Matter response points to a nation in crisis, trying to cope with the fallout of electing our first Black American president. There is no need to look further than the rise of the outspoken and unapologetic bigotry associated with the thunderous rise of Donald Trump to prove that the white political machine feels threatened.<sup>6</sup> We have reached a watershed moment, which begs the question, what now?

## Love Realized

Has this commitment to political Othering functionally eliminated our ability to heal? Can Americans give up traditional sources of identity in order to shape a nation whose “exceptional” nature should rest only on the authentic extension of the phenomenon I define as Collective Love? Bridging the gap of trust will require an understanding of white privilege, as well as the implementation of structural remedies to reform important social institutions. It will be necessary to extend restitution that acknowledges the ill-gotten gains of the political white power structure, and attempts to balance the scales of opportunity for Black Americans. The debate over reparations is an ugly and outdated one. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word “reparation” three ways: (a) The action of making amends for a wrong one has done, by providing payment or other assistance to those who have been wronged; (b) The compensation for war damage paid by a defeated state; (c) The action of repairing something. While all three definitions are appropriate, (b) is especially salient to conversations relating to reparations for slavery in America.

However, opponents to reparations argue that any extension of financial goodwill are wasted on a population not affected by slavery or the Jim Crow laws of past centuries. They often view remediation as an unfair penalty to innocent individuals and an undeserved benefit to potential recipients (Hutchinson 2007). The failure here, as I have argued, has to do with our inability to see reparations as a remedy for gross civil rights violations and the psychological damage each generation of white political power has perpetrated. Through this lens, reparations then become a compelling, even necessary, benefit for an ailing contemporary society.

There are substantial and legitimate global examples of the power of restorative justice. A groundbreaking example is the way in which South Africa rectified its history of apartheid. The Truth and Reconciliation Committee, established by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former political prisoner (and first Black president of South Africa) Nelson Mandela, is an example of the monumental human potential for healing. In his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Archbishop Tutu explains the pragmatic understanding demonstrated by Judge Mahomed as he delivered his Constitutional Court<sup>7</sup> judgment:

The families of those whose fundamental human rights were invaded by torture and abuse are not the only victims who have endured “untold suffering and injustice” in consequence of the crass inhumanity of apartheid which so many have had to endure for so long. Generations of children born and yet to be born will suffer the consequences of poverty...of homelessness, of illiteracy and disempowerment generated and sustained by the institutions of apartheid and its manifest effects on life and living for so many. It will take many years of strong commitment...and sensitivity to “reconstruct our society” so as to fulfill the legitimate dreams of new generations exposed to real opportunities for advancement denied to preceding generations...developing for the benefit of the entire nation the latent human potential and resources of every person who has directly or indirectly been burdened with the heritage or the shame and pain of our racist past (Tutu 1997).

Money is not enough. We need to work toward Collective Love through the power and opportunity of a college education for all Black Americans. This opportunity guarantees a start to healing the hopelessness and celebrating the pride of individuals and communities in Black American culture. This solution would also address Black detachment from American society by eliminating political, economic, and societal roadblocks. Black Americans born into a nation that guarantees free college could, from an early age, safely set their sights on the beacon of hope that is constitutionally promised to all (not just some) Americans. This type of policy initiative marries Left and Right ideologies, providing

structure and a guaranteed opportunity to achieve the American Dream. Reparations enacted through college education for Black Americans has the power, I contend, to actualize the American promise over time.

## Love Collective

If a multicultural mindset becomes entrenched in the American psyche, the discourse on what I name as Collective Love can authentically begin. In 1982, Black feminist and civil rights activist Audre Lorde spoke at the celebration of Malcolm X at Harvard University. Here, I draw humble inspiration from Lorde's discourse on binary and the force of unity:

You do not have to be me in order for us to fight alongside each other. I do not have to be you to recognize that our wars are the same. What we must do is commit ourselves to some future that can include each other and to work toward that future with the particular strengths of our individual identities. And in order for us to do this, we must allow each other our differences at the same time as we recognize our sameness (Lorde, 1984).

From a Socratic point of view, our American cultural understanding is limited only by the questions we refuse to ask, and the answers we are unwilling to listen to. This philosophical approach demonstrates the problematic power embedded in ignorance and the redemptive nature of true knowledge. Socrates believed that people did not gain new knowledge per se, but could be brought to a recognition or discovery of knowledge through questioning (Nilson, 1998).

If we turn our mutual energy first towards disabling our ignorance, and then (and only then) situate ourselves outside of the problem, we will be able to look back with concrete knowledge of our shared humanity. Further, if we are to fully engage in civility we need to recognize our common humanity, so that we may honor and embrace Black American culture and heritage. In the powerful opening chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois articulates the cultural contributions that both white and Black Americans have to impart:

In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face (DuBois 1903).

The bona fide actualization of this idea of Collective Love has the power to create lasting and multi-generational healing. There is an imperative to construct an American narrative that is reflective of all its human souls—one which understands and embraces the dynamic truth of its people, experienced together, as one beloved nation.

## **Conclusion**

The pervasive, multi-generational effects of slavery and the long-standing political stalemate against progress for Black Americans has brought to light questions about what it means to not only be an American, but what it means to be a Black American. Americans, both Black and white, stand at a unique crossroad in American political history, one that demands we examine adequate rehabilitation measures if we wish to reap the fruits of a truly collective society. The withholding of what I have termed Collective Love, that elusive promise of a fully-incorporated American people, has attempted to drive a permanent wedge between our citizens at the cost of upending our democracy. The elixir to our suffering is to love redemptively, *collectively*.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> African American abolitionist and women's rights activist. Truth was born into slavery but escaped with her infant daughter to freedom in 1826. In going to court to recover her son in 1828 she became the first Black woman to win such a case against a white man. In 2014, Truth was included in Smithsonian magazine's list, "The 100 Most Significant Americans of All Time."

<sup>2</sup> Wells was an African American journalist, newspaper editor, suffragist, sociologist, feminist, and early leader in the Civil Rights Movement. She was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909.

<sup>3</sup> Gerrymandering, which has redrawn voting districts along color lines, has been an effective strategy in suppressing Black votes. In 2013, the US Supreme Court, in a 5-4 ruling, said the Voting Rights Act's requirement, that (mainly) Southern states undergo special scrutiny before changing their voting laws, was based on a 40-year-old formula no longer relevant to changing racial circumstances

<sup>4</sup> At the height of the Civil Rights Movement protests, Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested in Birmingham, Alabama after violating an anti-protest injunction and was kept in solitary confinement. During this time, King penned his famous letter in response to a statement published in the Birmingham News by eight Birmingham clergymen condemning the protests.

<sup>5</sup> Liberal ideologies have long embraced social policies that provide government aid and assistance to minorities and the working poor. While assistance programs provide structural relief such as housing, welfare, and a stripped-down version of healthcare, they often do not directly engage the communities they aim to support. This "white savior" ideology further disenfranchises Black Americans (West, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Census demographics are an important consideration in examining the political and social swing of power in twenty-first century America. The US Census Bureau says that by the year 2044, white European Americans will slip below majority (US Census Bureau, 2015). For the first time in its history, the United States will be a majority nonwhite nation. This factual and non-negotiable eclipse in demographics underscores the stakes of white and Black Americans situated in social opposition to each other.

<sup>7</sup> The Constitutional Court of South Africa is a supreme constitutional court established by the Constitution of South Africa. It was originally the final appellate court for constitutional matters. Since the enactment of the Superior Courts Act in 2013, the Constitutional Court has jurisdiction to hear any matter if it is in the interests of justice for it to do so.