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**Black freedom**

“If you believe, as I do, that we should be able to reform the criminal justice system so that it’s not biased and treats everybody fairly, I guess you can use a snappy slogan, like ‘Defund the Police’, but, you know, you lost a big audience the minute you say it.”

The quote above is taken from an interview the former United States President Barack Obama gave to Snapchat show Good Luck America.

If there must be leaders -- and leaders on fairness -- they should not be men who once presided over an imperialist state. There is no fairness in drone strikes, deportations and detention, the attempted felling of democratically-elected leaders or being the chief caretaker of colonial land theft and the institutional violence that renders Indigenous and Black populations at the greatest risk of succumbing to poverty and police violence.

It is problematic for the former president to perform the role of communication sage when his own sloganeering of ‘hope’ and ‘change’ did not prove sufficient to meet the hopes for an end to torture and deaths in custody. Or change in any satisfactory way discriminatory systems of punishment and civil asset forfeiture. Or stymie the efforts of the succeeding, less racial-equity-minded administration to resume a killing spree on death row via the resumption of federal executions or the deliberate mismanagement of a pandemic that disproportionately kills non-white people.

Problematic, too, is associating activists’ articulation of a programme to immediately divest from and incapacitate a classist and historically anti-Black institution with a marketing strategy.

Far worse, however, is Obama’s work to reinforce the myth that campaigns for Black survival must, first and foremost, work to present themselves in the best light to invite wider society. Wider society is the problem.

The course of history is often changed by small groups of like-minded people. The Combahee River Collective, the Black Panthers, MOVE, small cells of enslaved people overthrowing the slave wagon en route to transport them like cargo to a plantation. If these groups abandoned the truth they felt in their bones, if they adjusted their message to accommodate broader swaths of society they would not have been as effective as they were.

The work of radical Black freedom is directed against dominant society. What that society has been conditioned to find acceptable, what it finds pleasing, what it finds warranted and the limits to what it thinks is possible is our problem. We get to no satisfactory place by conforming or drawing nearer to anti-Black society.

If all Black movements adjust their language as Obama suggests we should, there would be no record of our truth, nor our fundamental and passionate disagreement with the state of things. Unadulterated radical Black imagining and voicings of a future free from anti-Blackness would be erased from history. The only record we would have of our dissent is sheepish pleadings to a racist society, sanded down to fit inoffensively into fragile liberal ears.

There exists no audience that would be roused from the edges of their seats by a clever, well-crafted motto. None who were not already elbowing their way to the front lines of struggle as soon as they heard about George Floyd, or Atatiana Jefferson or the Zong massacre. It is not so much that our demands risk losing a big audience, as the big audience window-shops our struggle. We have entirely too much faith in the revolutionary will of those who respond to the ten-thousandth racist murder with “it is so sad”.

Obama, himself, admitted that he was the kind of person who read Frantz Fanon and Gwendolyn Brooks not for what they meant to our lives but to pick up women. In this, he models the fleeting, parasitical interest in the intellectual labour of Black radical thinkers that is not always convertible to useful activism.

One wonders if Toni Morrison might have wriggled out of their photographed embrace if she knew Obama may have sprayed the CliffsNotes of her novels on himself like cheap cologne.

The great white whale of support for Black lives will always prove elusive. Polls have shown that the increase in support for the uprising against racist killing is a chimera, vanishing almost as soon as it becomes measurable. Those genuinely affected by George Floyd’s death in a life-changing way are now radical and will not be turned away by what may feel to some as a too-angry chant or too impractical demand.

Those, on the other hand, who were pushed by the swell of a crowd forced to sit and watch an eight minute and 46-second killing so nakedly discriminatory it debilitated, for a moment, their go-to excuses of “bad apples” and see-through calls for retraining, are now relievedly ebbing away with that crowd back to their settled places of faith in “America, the fundamentally good”. To devote one’s talents to the work of getting them back is a fool’s errand.

Instead of appealing to the people who can always stomach a bit more anti-Black state violence, it may be better to rally those who have had enough. Those who are not moved due to the efficacy of slogans but by their disgust with institutionalised and constantly legitimated white supremacist violence.

Liberal support is not indispensable to the cause of Black freedom. In fact, liberalism is one of the most effective tools in keeping Black liberation at bay. It glorifies waiting peacefully for justice. Not even dogs are asked to sit during their abuse.

And it is liberals Obama has in mind when he speaks about a potential audience. As a man who has had his effigy lynched and is called an American-hating terrorist more than any person alive, he knows better than most that conservatives do not come around no matter how much deference is shown, how many times magnanimity is performed, or how many times a Black hand reaches across to “the other side”.

Maybe slogans designed to save our lives should not be designed, primarily, for others. Maybe direct and forthright statements have longer longevity, provide better comfort and inspiration to those they are intended to serve than the ones watered down to please an audience ambivalent on the question of justice.

The black glove-fisted chants of “Black Power” may, in the end, prove to have done more good for the cause of freedom than “keep hope alive”. Maybe #landback addresses a specific injury, agitates for material reparations, and is a necessary cutting through the colonising culture that trained its young to sing “this land is your land, this land is my land”.

Excerpted: ‘Stop listening to Obama’

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