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Black Lives Matter 2014-2020: Celebrity flashpoints and iconic images

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For a brief period in August 2014 US journalist Wesley Lowery unexpectedly attained a fleeting celebrity status, which he recounts in his book *"They Can't Kill Us All"*, a compelling and illuminating first-person account of the sharp and dramatic rise to prominence in the US of the Black Lives Matter movement (2017, p. 12). It came after he was arrested while covering the civil unrest that ensued from the fatal police shooting of Michael Brown and its aftermath in Ferguson, Missouri on 9 August that year. By the time Lowery and his colleague Ryan Reilly were released from custody, just half an hour after having been placed in a cell at Ferguson police headquarters, news of what had happened to them had gone viral across the online mediascape and 'it was clear,' he writes, 'that we had become momentary media celebrities' (Ibid., p. 12). Since then, Black Lives Matter, both in the US and in the UK, has given rise to the politicised celebrity status of heretofore relatively unknown individuals like Lowery. It has also been punctuated by a number of celebrity flashpoints, and a range of interventions by extant celebrities whose public profiles have become inflected by their associations with, material support for, or vocal advocacy of the movement.

Politically engaged interventions into Black Lives Matter by established major celebrities thus ensued from the 2014 Ferguson events and their aftermath quite quickly, accompanied in some cases by noteworthy acts of celebrity philanthropy that were undertaken in ostensible support of the rising movement. Beyoncé for instance, who was rumoured to have secretly met with Black Lives Matter civil rights activist DeRay McKesson post-Ferguson and who (along with Jay Z) went on to donate a six-figure sum of money to various groups affiliated with the movement (Lowery 2016, p. 158), was arguably the highest profile example of such a celebrity. In addition to this act of politicised celebrity philanthropy, in the months and years after Ferguson, Beyoncé's records, music videos and performances also started to reference Black Lives Matter, in ways both explicit and implicit. This culminated in the major celebrity flashpoint that occurred around her, arising from her 2016 Superbowl performance in which she, accompanied by a troupe of black women dancers, performed her racially politically charged song 'Formation,' in costumes that paid clear tribute to the movement and its political sentiments via evocations of the visual aesthetics associated with the

Black Panther Party (all black, with black beret hats) and the enactment of its signature gesture of the raised clenched fist. In pointed reference to the sheer reach of Beyoncé's celebrity status, especially in flashpoint moments like these, African American Studies scholar Daphne Brooks notes that Beyoncé, especially since the gradual turn towards intersectional politics and activism that has come to characterise her public profile from 2013 onwards (Tennent and Jackson 2017, 228), has become 'the only post-soul black pop icon... to place social, cultural and political concerns at the centre of her repertoire' (2016). Albeit she does so in this case in the context of a performance piece that lends itself to nostalgic and in some ways revisionist readings. And crucially, she does so in the context of the spectacle of entertainment industry capitalism that is the Superbowl. In this way and others then, the radical intent suggested by association with the Black Panthers is far from ideologically straightforward and should not be taken at face value.

In the UK, one of the most significant things to occur in the nation's *cultural* life towards acknowledging (that) Black Lives Matter in the aftermath of Ferguson, and in striking accord with the currency and market appeal of celebrity culture, was the British Film Institute's three-month blockbuster season of film screenings, talks and events centred on black screen stars from across the landscape and history of film and television. 'BFI Black Star' ran from October to December of 2016 and was intended, as film industry researcher Melanie Hoyes writes, as 'a celebration of blackness and black onscreen talent' (2021, p. 203). However, she continues, it 'immediately threw up wider questions around representation and diversity,' (Ibid.) exposing the limited extent to which black lives seemed to matter to the gatekeepers of the UK film industry, while illuminating the diaspora of black British screen stars to Hollywood, in flight from the racialised glass ceiling that characterised their experiences of working in Britain (Hoyes 2021, pp. 203-204). As Hoyes' research revealed, 'None of the names potentially identified for the Black Star season – Idris Elba, Thandie Newton [she has since rejected the Anglicisation of her name and reclaimed its original spelling: Thandiwe], Naomie Harris, John Boyega, David Oyelowo, Chiwetel Ejiofor – appear in the [BFI Filmography] list [of the 100 most prolific actors, ranked by the number of roles they had played in UK films from

2006-2016], in spite of being instantly recognisable as they have achieved their international star status working in Hollywood and not via UK films' (Ibid., p. 207). They therefore had not appeared in enough films to make this list because of their migration to the US and a dearth of opportunity for black actors in Britain.

The northern hemisphere summer of 2020 saw the next historical landmark for the Black Lives Matter movement, which rose up again on a global scale with renewed levels of urgency in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin of the Minneapolis Police Department on 25 May, prompting the eruption of protests in cities all over the world. Some were noteworthy for the media flashpoints that occurred thanks to profile-raising instances of activist intervention by celebrities, which readily lent themselves to the attention and virality that characterised the mediation of Black Lives Matter at that time. In the US, celebrities ranging from Hollywood actors Michael B. Jordan and Tiffany Haddish to hip-hop stars Kanye West and Common and reality stars Porsha Williams and Nev Schulman (to name only some) drew media attention to marches and demonstrations protesting anti-black racism that took place across the country that summer. Such instances align with what celebrity African Studies scholar Emma Dabiri notes as the 'celebrification of activism' that has emerged in recent years in particular response to anti-black racism, which she argues was 'turbocharged' by the events of 2020 (2021, p. 137). These examples, along with those that earlier emerged from the post-Ferguson moment, also took place in the larger context of a media/political culture in which celebrity activism had become an increasingly visible global phenomenon (Tsaliki et al 2011), and in which interactions between celebrity culture and the political field have become more complex and more prominent (Arthurs and Little 2016).

Arguably the standout instance of this politicised celebrity activism took place not in the US, but in the UK. It came with the delivery by aforementioned black British film star John Boyega of an emotional, politically-charged speech decrying anti-black racism in impassioned terms to assembled protesters at London's Hyde Park on 3 June 2020. In this context, images and footage of a hooded

Boyega with megaphone in hand persevering through visible distress to complete his address have taken their place alongside equally iconic imagery and footage of the forcible toppling of the statue of slave trader Edward Colston from its plinth in the English city of Bristol a few days later on 7 June. Colston and his statue, filmed prior to its toppling, also featured prominently as a topic of historical discussion and debate in another politicised celebrity intervention into Black Lives Matter – the British/Canadian co-production: *Enslaved with Samuel L. Jackson* (BBC 2020). Originally entitled simply *Enslaved*, the clumsy amendment to the title of this documentary series on the history of the slave trade, for its UK television broadcast, is suitably indicative of the perceived value of celebrity in marketing Black Lives Matter themed-content in this context.

Involvements and interventions in the Black Lives Matter 2020 moment have also markedly raised the profiles of a number of black British film and television personalities, such as screenwriter and performer Michaela Coel, whose path-breaking television series *I May Destroy You* (HBO/BBC 2020) was being widely viewed at the time of Floyd's murder, and celebrity historian David Olusoga, whose writings and broadcasts about black British history in recent years have been steadfast in their efforts to intervene in the hegemony of some of Britain's more dominant narratives about empire and colonial history. While they were already public figures with an established media presence in their own right, both Coel and Olusoga ascended to new levels of celebrity and media visibility in the UK in the aftermath of June 2020. This was partly because the urgency and currency of their work was in some (albeit limited) ways being better appreciated and understood by the cultural gatekeepers and the processes attendant to such gatekeeping, but also, like Jackson's involvement in *Enslaved*, due to the market efficacy of pairing Black Lives Matter content with established celebrity credentials.

Both Coel and Olusoga experienced their own flashpoints in the weeks and months that ensued from the summer protests, and iconic imagery of each of them has taken on differently totemic status in the visual landscape of how the UK documented Black Lives Matter 2020. In

Olusoga's case, it occurred around the incendiary James MacTaggart Lecture that he gave as part of the Edinburgh Television Festival on 24 August, in which he castigated the gatekeepers of Britain's television industry for their complacency and complicity in perpetuating its white hegemony. In this way, Olusoga's politicised celebrity intervention into the whiteness of British television exists in productive dialogue with some of the crucial work being undertaken to demonstrate and understand the white (male) hegemony of the UK film industries by industry researchers like Hoyes (2021) as aforementioned, as well as academics like Shelley Cobb and Natalie Wreyford (2021).

Another politicised celebrity intervention of significant note came from Manchester United and England football star and anti-poverty activist Marcus Rashford. As Davison et al (2020) write 'Football has become a site of struggle' in the Black Lives Matter movement, from 'players taking the knee to the Premier League footballers replacing their names with the #BlackLivesMatter slogans on their shirts' (p. 5). Singling out Rashford for attention in this regard on the grounds that his free school meals campaign made him 'a national hero' and a 'spokesman for the people' they argue that the 'leadership' shown by this 22-year-old black man in this moment of acute national crisis 'raises questions about race, class and who speaks for the nation, challenging assumptions about the apolitical nature of sport' (Ibid., p. 6; on intersections of sport, politics, nationhood and whiteness see also Ewen 2012, 2013). They are right to highlight the intersectional cultural politics of race *and* class in characterising Rashford's celebrity intervention into the political sphere as one that represents the unheard voices of working-class people of colour, but it bears repeating that it is his celebrity status that provides the tipping point to enable his voice to be heard and his campaign to have impact. Commensurate with this celebrity status, and the politicised nature of his raised public profile, images of Rashford were prominent in the visual landscape of UK cultural responses to Black Lives Matter 2020, including in some relatively elite spheres beyond football.

The cover of the always highly anticipated 'September issue' of the 2020 UK edition of *Vogue*, arguably the highest profile fashion magazine, featured a striking monochrome image of

Rashford, standing alongside British fashion model Adwoa Aboah making her third appearance on the cover since 2017. Evoking imagery of both the Black Panthers and of Beyoncé's aforementioned Superbowl performance, the two of them are seen in a full body shot standing side-by-side in a green space (the editorial reveals it to be Rashford's garden at his Manchester home) – Aboah facing forward with her arms crossed in front, and Rashford side-on but with his head turned to the right to face forward. Making no explicit mention of Black Lives Matter, and with no direct written-text reference to specifically *racial* politics of any kind, the sub-coverline identifies them as 'the faces of hope,' while the main coverline makes use of their steadfast gazes toward the camera to either call for or point to (and perhaps this ambiguity is apt) 'ACTIVISM NOW.' This thus gestured towards the publication's seemingly political intent to align itself with the Black Lives Matter movement, and to do so via what it evidently viewed as the cultural currency and market viability of this combination of celebrity figureheads in that moment, although the semiotic work of making these connotative connections is left to the reader to do.

That month's 'Editor's letter' by editor-in-chief Edward Enniful eliminated the ostensible ambiguities of this cover art, devoting all its content to responding to the protests that had ensued from Floyd's murder (Enniful 2020). However, explaining that 'This month, all international *Vogues*... are uniting to dedicate their September covers... to one shared theme: hope,' (Ibid., p. 55) some of the political charge of the celebrity intervention ostensibly being made in the name of anti-racism is dissipated in the letter's main message, and the real-world racism that gave rise to it is glossed over in favour of the more amorphous uplift promised by the aspirational meanings attached to this gallery of celebrities. On Rashford though, Enniful is more precise in holding up his celebrity activism and anti-poverty advocacy as an admirable intervention into what at the time was socially catastrophic government policy: 'At 22, Marcus Rashford is a shining example of how to harness influence for good. When, earlier this year, the Manchester United and England footballer leveraged his enormous popularity to lobby the government to fund free school meals for vulnerable

children during lockdown and beyond, he not only brought about a policy U-turn but united a country' (Ibid., p. 58).

A year later, in the immediate aftermath of the final to the (Covid-delayed) Euro 2020 men's football tournament, it was sickening and disheartening but wholly unsurprising to anyone with even a passing interest in the relationship between English men's football and some of the more dangerously normalised cultural manifestations of racist ethno-nationalism in the UK, to see how quickly Enniful was proven wrong about the potential for Rashford's impactfully politicised celebrity activism to unify the people of Britain. Ultimately (but regrettably fittingly, see Ewen 2013), the overt racism that ensued from Rashford's mis-hit penalty at Wembley stadium's Covid super-spreader event on 11 July 2021 (followed by those of his teammates Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Saka) shone a light on what are actually stark divisions concerning the hard social fact of racial hatred in Britain – divisions that Enniful glosses over with his market-friendly appeals to unity and hope in both his editorial and his harnessing of Rashford's celebrity currency during the Black Lives Matter moment.

Subsequently, the racist defacement of the Manchester mural devoted to Rashford (and its later restoration with messages of support) that ensued when Italy ultimately beat England to win the match became a media flashpoint in part because it was offered up as an exceptional occurrence. Racist abuse is actually a rather more quotidian affair for people of colour in Britain, both in the social dynamics of everyday life, and at the highest institutional levels, including (and especially in this case) of government, as the Windrush scandal of 2018 which revealed the scale of the government's persecution of black Britons exposed so vividly (Gentleman 2019).

Elsewhere in magazine publishing at that time, *Vanity Fair* congratulated itself for 'its own milestone' in electing to feature cover art by a black photographer for the first time in its history (Jones 2020, 17). It also offered a *mea culpa* of sorts for the relative absence of people of colour (but especially black women) from past covers, in an editorial which, like many magazine editorials did

that summer, devoted itself to responding directly to the murder of George Floyd (Ibid., pp. 16-17). The cover features a perfectly lit image of film and television star Viola Davis photographed from behind wearing a midnight blue gown, her face in profile, hair in a high tight afro coil and, significantly, the flesh of her back exposed and displayed. Photographer Dario Calmese was candid in explaining the racial politics of this aspect of the cover, stating that it is “a recreation of the Louis Agassiz slave portraits taken in the 1880s – the back, the welts. This image reclaims that narrative, transmuting the white gaze on Black suffering into the Black gaze of grace, elegance, and beauty.” (Ibid., p. 17). Celebrity gymnast Simone Biles was similarly posed, with comparable connotative intertextual signification at work, on that month’s edition of *Vogue*. In the estimation of some cultural critics and commentators, and especially in the context of summer 2020, which was already laden with the present-day horrors of racial violence, this attempt to recuperate, remediate and reclaim these images of the violence done to black bodies during slavery was ill-judged, representing a missed opportunity to depict black women’s *lives*, not just bodies, and to do so beyond the incarcerating bounds of slavery as a reference point (Cineas 2020).

One thing these entertainment industry responses to Black Lives Matter 2020 call to mind is the truth spoken by Hollywood star Don Cheadle in the documentary mini-series *Black Hollywood: “They’ve Gotta Have Us”* (BBC 2018) in response to the new proliferation of black themed content in Hollywood’s output, and heretofore unforeseen levels of industry recognition for black filmmakers and performers. It was a truth spoken to the effect that the only colour the entertainment industries really care about is the ‘green’ of the almighty dollar. In other words, the entertainment media in 2020 capitalised on the cultural currency of Black Lives Matter because it served their interests to do so. And to whatever extent these responses were offered in good or righteously political faith, they remain, ultimately, in service to capitalism. On magazine covers, at the Oscars, in Marvel movies, and elsewhere in the mediascape, black lives may only appear to matter to producers and gatekeepers of mainstream industry content for as long as the market for these cultural products continues, in big enough numbers, to agree that they do.

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