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Entretien avec Melina Abdullah
Black Lives Matter, Obama, and the future of black mobilization

Réalisé par Yohann Le Moigne

Melina Abdullah is a scholar-activist. She holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Southern California and she chairs the Department of Pan-African Studies at the California State University of Los Angeles.

A womanist¹, she wrote numerous articles about black feminism, race relations or political coalition building.

She is, moreover, an original member and one of the main organizers of the Los Angeles chapter of Black Lives Matter, the famous network created in 2013 to organize black people and non-black allies in the fight against state-sanctioned violence targetting overwhelmingly black individuals.

We reached out to her in order to know more about her perspective on the Obama administration's record in terms of racial equality and racial justice, the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement both nationally and more specifically in Los Angeles, and the future of black mobilizations in the Trump era.

Yohann Le Moigne: the situation of the poorest African-Americans deteriorated under Barack Obama's presidency, especially after the subprime crisis, whereas the black upper classes have never been this rich and influential. How do you feel about this paradox and is it something that feeds your strategic reflection as a Black Lives Matter leader ?

Melina Abdullah: I think I would be careful about putting that on Barack Obama. The class divide within the black community is something that has been growing forever, and I think that, when you hit times of economic crisis (which is when Barack Obama was president), you see these things exacerbated, so I would be careful about putting that on him. Of course, he was a mainstream liberal, you can even call him a moderate in some regard so he did not do as much as I think he could have done or should have done, even if you are thinking about politics in pragmatic terms. In his second term, he could have done much more for working-class black people than he did so I would have liked to see that be part of the legacy of the first black president : doing more intentionally, specifically and explicitly for black working-class people.

YLM: in a recent article², two French scholars argued that the Black Lives Matters movement (called hereafter BLM) was not born *in spite* but

¹ The term "womanist" was coined by poet and activist Alice Walker, who defined it in her book *In search of our mothers' gardens: womanist prose* (1983) as "a black feminist or feminist of color". The concept of "womanism" later developed to become a social theory critical of the second-wave feminist movement, which was accused of not taking into account the specific and diversified forms of oppression experienced by black women and more generally women of color.

² CÉLESTINE, Audrey and Nicolas MARTIN-BRETEAU. « « Un mouvement, pas un moment » : Black Lives Matter et la reconfiguration des luttes minoritaires à l'ère Obama », *Politique Américaine*, n°28 (2016) : 15-39.

because of the election of a black president since, on the one hand, his inability to radically tackle racial issues disappointed a lot of people (especially among African-Americans), and, on the other hand, his election and actions generated reactionary attitudes on the far-right. What do you think about this argument?

MA: I recently wrote about that as well. I would say it is not just because of dashed hopes. I think that, of course the election of a black president does illuminate the fact that the system runs almost on autopilot and it does not really matter who occupies that seat... Well it matters, right, we have got Trump in the White House now – so it matters – but I think the effect of an individual in that seat are minimal so even if Barack Obama were further to the left than he was, even if he were a radically black president, the system would prevent him from doing anything radical, so I think that there is that point to make. There is also the point to make that Barack Obama was not radical: he was not a Malcolm X in Barack Obama’s clothing. He was a mainstream moderate democrat and we need to recognize that. Many of us were excited about the symbolism of having a black man in office, many of us were encouraged by that and hopeful around that. This is a point to be made but the bigger point about BLM emerging under Barack Obama is not just because of dashed hopes, because I think most black folks understand that the system has never been designed for us. However, we did see greater willingness to engage on racial issues. We did see, under a Barack Obama presidency, an environment where blatant white supremacy was not tolerated. It was seen as socially unacceptable. We did see a kind of need, a social norm of using at least a rhetoric of diversity and inclusion. And I think that when you start to see those kind of liberal measures taken, it is the weakening of the boot on the neck, and any time when you study revolutionary movements - and as BLM we understand the importance of transformative work so we are not a liberal reformist group, we believe in fundamental transformation – their emergence generally comes at a time when there is an opening and so the liberalism (even though it was mainstream liberalism) coupled with the symbolism of having a black president allowed for us to emerge. So Barack Obama cannot be credited by any means with the emergence of BLM, however his presidency did set the stage and create conditions where we could emerge.

YLM: in a 2015 television interview, you replied to a journalist who was mentioning some criticisms about the alleged lack of leaders within BLM (« *a leaderless movement* ») by saying: « We are leaderfull ». How is your governance system articulated and how does this group-based leadership differ from the modes of governance used in the previous decades?

MA: we say we are leaderful, which is shorthand for “group-centered leadership”. We adopted Ella Baker’s³ principles of group-centered leadership. It

³ Ella Baker was an African-American civil rights activist who played a key in several organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) or the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), from the late 1930s to her death in 1986. She is considered one of the most influential women in the Civil Rights movement, especially for all the work that she did in the South to organize local black populations. For

was very well articulated in the Civil Rights movement and Ella Baker is kind of a mentor to many of the folks and SNCC is precursive to the Black Power Movement. Ella Baker articulated the idea of creating sustainable movements by having a model of group-centered leadership where we all bear the responsibility for leadership and that is the model we have adopted.

YLM: four years after the BLM movement was formed, how would you assess its ability to act, especially under this horizontal leadership? More generally, what answers did you get from the authorities (federal, state, or local) after your various mobilizations?

MA: we are not looking for answers from governmental institutions. We don't care what they think. We are trying to transform the system, we believe in the abolition of police and we are not looking for the response to our mobilization. That said, of course they don't like it. There have been lots of arrests and lots of targeting but that is not what we are focused on : we are focused on how our community responds to our engagement and if you look at even mainstream polling numbers, the black community is hugely supportive of BLM (I think we have something like an 83% approval rating among black folks) so there has been a need for a mass black movement and I think if we are to assess our mobilization, that is what we are building. We are also building on previous movements, learning from previous movements, and really incorporating many of the people from previous movements into ours so even though BLM is often cast as a millenials' movement, it is not. It is a multigenerational movement: we have members who are three generations deep in BLM. I am thinking of one family where the grandmother was a member of the Black Panther Party, the daughter is in her forties, and her children are also all members and they are in their twenties and teens.

YLM: the intersectional dimension of the movement is clearly fundamental, but some might argue that it will challenge its sustainability. How do you aggregate so many particular interests into a common political project? Is it necessary? Or does effectiveness come from the complementarity of the modes of actions used by various protagonists?

MA: the notion of single issue-based organizations is important for service work. You have service organizations which do a great job of addressing, for instance, domestic violence, but if we are talking about community organizing and really understanding and engaging in transforming the systems that create conditions, you can't do it by just focusing on a single issue. BLM of course was born out of resistance, the need to resist police violence and brutality as was the Black Panther Party. But when we look at state-sanctioned violence against black people, there is the state at the root of it, so the question becomes: what interests are being advanced and how do we then begin to vision models that create black freedom and work towards those models? So there is a necessity for many different prongs, many different campaigns within the movement. We can't

further details about her work, see ROLLAND-DIAMOND, Caroline, *Black America : une histoire des luttes pour l'égalité et la justice (XIXe-XXIe siècle)*, Paris : La Découverte, 2016.

address police violence if we don't address the police state, we can't address the police state if we don't address the prison system, we can't address the prison system if we don't address capitalism, we can't address capitalism without talking about the way in which white supremacy feeds capitalism... And so we have to do all these things as a movement.

YLM: even though the black population is one of the most disadvantaged racial group in the US, it is also very heterogeneous socio-economically, culturally or religiously. How can BLM be heard by the whole community? Is it something you yearn for, and is there such a thing as a «black community»? (Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, for instance, asserts the contrary in *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*⁴)

MA: I love Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's work, but I do believe there is a black community. When we look at measures of linked-fate, the highest sense of linked-fate is carried by black folks. We are bound together. And so, yes, we are a diverse community, there is diversity within blackness, there are black people of different classes, there are black people of different genders, there are black people who live in different spaces, black people who are from the US and black people who immigrated to the US, so it is really important that we understand that there is diversity. We are not a monolith. However, the interest of black freedom is something that binds us all together, so I believe that there is both explicit and implicit understanding of what community means for black folks within the black community and so I will use that term "black community".

YLM: and do you, for example, try to convince black conservatives to embrace your views ?

MA: there is like 5 black conservatives in the world (laughs)... There are not many black conservatives, so this myth of black conservatism is a false myth. We can just write those people off.

YLM: you have worked extensively on black feminist leadership throughout history. This concept of "black feminist leadership" is often highlighted when discussing BLM. Do you see a clear continuity between today's women leaders, which you are a part of within BLM, and historical figures such as Ida B. Wells or Ella Baker?

MA: absolutely. We often call on the spirits of Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Ella Baker and so many others to guide our work. We have, from almost our inception, declared ourselves a womanist black nationalist organization with a queer and trans lens, we are now evolving into panafricanist identity. But at the core of who we are is a womanist movement.

⁴ TAYLOR, Keeanga-Yamahtta. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016.

YLM: when you mention the panafricanist dimension of the movement, are you referring to the movement at the national level or specifically in the Los Angeles Chapter?

MA: I am talking about the global network: we are moving into panafricanism, so we began to do work globally rather than just US-based. We have chapters outside of the US. We recognize that black freedom in the US is tied to global black freedom.

YLM: BLM was created in response to the killings of unarmed black individuals by police officers or aspiring vigilantes as in the case of George Zimmerman. It was therefore a reaction to acts symbolizing in the most direct way the persistence of racist crimes that have existed for centuries (police brutalities are one of the main types of discrimination endured by African-Americans since the abolition of slavery). However, racism has evolved since the 1970s. Though still ingrained in social institutions, it is now much more subtle and has taken the form of what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has called « colorblind racism »⁵. How do you articulate these two dimensions of racism in your personal reflection, both as a scholar and an activist? And do you think that BLM's actions are adapted to this evolution?

MA: Eduardo Bonilla-Silva talks about “racism without racists” and we hear a lot about “dog whistle politics” and this idea of underlying racism. I think that when we think about the form of racism, this kind of invisibilized racism that exists mainly in institutions, and is quieted sometimes in individual forms, we are really talking about the Obama era. But as we move beyond the Obama era, I would argue that there is no more dog whistle, they are using a full-arm trumpet! There is no hiding, they are not hiding their racism and we can use the so-called president of this country as the clearest example. So I think that it was an impermanent state but even if we think about that state of dog-whistle racism or racism without racists, black people never failed to understand what it was. We always understood what it was, we always knew what it meant when, you know, you are in a store and they ask you for your ID with a credit card, or we always understood what it meant when our children are being called “disruptive” when they do things like drum their fingers on a desk, we always knew that racism was at the root of all of these things, we knew that when black people can't get jobs it is not because there is something wrong with us but there is a racist institution that is refusing to hire us. We never lost sight of that, and of course with the blatant form in which racism exists now I think everybody else is starting to recognize that this understanding that black people have was something else than us just being paranoid.

YLM: BLM chapters have a high level of autonomy as well as specific claims. What is the specificity of Los Angeles, a city where the black community has a rich history of organizing and where Latinos (among many other groups)

⁵ BONILLA SILVA, Eduardo. *Racism without racists: color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America* (4th edition), Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2014.

are extremely influential? Does it increase your interest in building coalitions, especially with Latino organizations?

MA: BLM Los Angeles is the very first chapter of BLM. BLM was born here, in Los Angeles, so it is important to understand that: BLM began with us. And in a lot of ways, we have been very fortunate to have a big role in how BLM emerged, evolved and grew. You are right, there is a rich history of organizing in Los Angeles and that is, I think, part of why this is the foundation, this is where we come from because we do build on a rich history and I said earlier that some of the organizers from previous movements are involved in the BLM movement.

As for building movements with other communities of color, we have done that from the beginning. We work very closely with other organizations that are committed to transforming the system. I think it took some time for the organizations to fully mesh but we are moving into that moment of strengthened solidarity where we are seeing especially Black/Latino solidarity around particular campaigns. We have always worked with Latino-led movements around police killings and state-sanctioned violence but we are mobilizing more regularly together in recent months actually.

YLM: besides Latinos, what position does BLM adopt toward other groups' claims, such as the Native Americans' fight for the respect of their ancestral land or the Armenian American demand for the US recognition of the 1915 genocide (which are both addressed in this issue)?

MA: we take a position of solidarity especially with indigenous folks so there has been a lot of work together and I should have lifted this up before but the indigenous community has been involved in BLM since our inception so they are doing a lot of work with us. In fact, when we did our first and only freedom ride⁶, our last stop on the freedom ride was with an indigenous community in Albuquerque (New Mexico) and we actually did some very important work together there. So we have been doing work with indigenous communities, I think that you see it most clearly in the mobilizations against the Dakota Access Pipeline where BLM sent a delegation. We actually still have a member there, who has been there for over a year and who is doing work with indigenous communities in North-Dakota, and we also have indigenous ally members in BLM so this relationship has been a pretty strong one. The American Indian Movement has also been very involved in our work as BLM.

As for the recognition of the Armenian genocide, it is a conversation that has not happened yet.

⁶ In 2014, three weeks after the killing of Michael Brown by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, in Ferguson (Missouri), the three co-founders of what was then a nascent movement (Black Lives Matter), organized a "freedom ride". Some 500 people departed from 18 cities across America to reach Ferguson in order to protest the killing, and more generally to build a nationwide network to fight state-sanctioned violence against black people.

YLM: at the national level, BLM mobilized to defend immigrants' rights and for a comprehensive immigration reform⁷. Is there a consensus on this issue within the movement?

MA: yes, there is a consensus. And it is important to know that, when we talk about immigrant rights, we also talk about black rights. Sometimes we pretend like black people are not immigrants, I think that Trump's position on Haitian immigration should, if nothing else, remind us that black people are also immigrants. So immigrant communities and black communities are not mutually exclusive categories.

YLM: has the election of Donald Trump encouraged BLM to change its discourse or its mode of actions, both at the national level or in Los Angeles?

MA: Yes, absolutely. We cannot use the same tactics that we use for a liberal regime in the case of a blatantly white supremacist and fascist regime. We have to recognize that there is a white supremacist fascist and a misogynist in office. We have to directly address that. It took a minute because not many of us lived through a period of blatant white supremacy before, and so it was not easy to figure out how to engage under someone [like Trump] who is whipping up violent white supremacy in communities that threaten our physical safety – not that there were no threats before... I think that we need to think about those things and we have done some work in thinking about how to move around that.

One of the big issues, and I think that pretty much every progressive and radical organization has to face it, is that one of the tactics of fascism is to overwhelm with just a sheer number of attacks. So there is this kind of disorientation that occurs because there are attacks that are constantly coming, multiple ones per day. And so how do we not be distracted from our vision for freedom by simply getting caught up in response mode? I think everybody is trying to figure out how to do that, and we are also trying to figure out how to cut through to make sure that in mainstream media, in the way that we share information, that we not just be responding to Trump but be really looking at what is happening on the ground and in communities.

And then lastly I will just say that one of the things Donald Trump has done is, I think, bring radical organizers together, people who believe in transformative solutions. There is a famous hashtag “#resist”. I think we need to move beyond resistance and we are beginning to do that. So you see the coming together of organizations. In Los Angeles for instance, the Democratic Socialists of America work very closely with BLM. Centro Community Service Organization, which organizes the Latino and Chicano communities in Boyle Heights⁸, is now also working much more closely with BLM. We have always had a relationship but we are more and more consistently together, and I think that it is also a result of what is happening with the movement from “dog whistles” to “trumpets”.

⁷ Opal Tometi, one of the co-founders of the movement, is also the executive director of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration and the daughter of Nigerian immigrants.

⁸ Boyle Heights is a neighborhood located east of Downtown Los Angeles. It has been an important cultural, social and political center for the Chicano and Latino community for almost 70 years.

YLM: with the current political balance of power at the national level (which is largely in favor of the Republican party) and a Democratic party that does not seem ready to make a left turn (despite the popular success of Bernie Sanders' campaign during the primaries), one of the preferred alternatives to conduct progressive reforms is to bypass the federal level and to focus on more local struggles combining the defense of minority rights and the defense of impoverished whites. What is your position on this?

MA: I don't think that this is an « either ... or ». Of course we are dealing with local issues but there are also global issues and national issues. What I think is clear, and I think maybe this is what some folks are saying, is that you can't rely on the federal government as any form of intervention. So we are not going to ask a Jeff Sessions-led Department of Justice to investigate police departments because that would be dumb (laughs)... But it doesn't mean that we lose focus or lose sight of federal and global issues and just focus on local issues. It just means that the federal government can't or won't provide any intervention at all.