

BLACK LIVES MATTER

I was at the Netroot Nations candidates session listening to Martin O'Malley with other writers from Emptywheel in a cavernous hall with terrible acoustics and wildly over-amped speakers. We had already heard the moderator tell his story; his high pitched voice was hard on my ears, and the racketing speakers compounded the misery. Suddenly a group of young women entered singing, moved to the front of the hall, and started chanting slogans: Say her Name, and more. I have ear issues, and loud ratchet noises make me anxious and irritable. I grumbled about the noise, turned off my hearing aids, then gave up and went to the men's room for a bit of relief. When I emerged from my sound sanctuary, Bernie Sanders was shouting over the action, the noise was too much and I left.

I can recall three contemporary thoughts: 1. Enough, already, you've made your point. 2. Why are you shouting at your friends, people who agree with you. 3 No politicking by Bernie Sanders for me.

After lunch, I retreated to the central hall, and listened to This Week in Blackness. The host interviewed O'Malley and several of the BLM activists. O'Malley was properly apologetic for his use of the phrase "all lives matter", said he had met privately with the activists, and answered several tough questions, including what he thought he had done wrong as Mayor of Baltimore or as Governor of Maryland. The activists were straightforward and unapologetic, clear and forceful. They all said the action was not directed at the candidates in a personal way. It was a demand that candidates and the people attending NN15 connect directly to real-life issues important to a huge group of activists. They didn't want just airy planks for some platform, or an explanation of how some group's standard proposals met their demands. They wanted everyone in the room to understand

their specific personal concerns. One of the women said something like: all those candidates have great plans, but I'm afraid I will not be alive to benefit from those plans. I am afraid, she said. I am fearful, she said.

"And I am afraid", writes Ta-Nehisi Coates in *Between the World and Me*. He says he always felt fear, and that his parents, his aunts, his uncles, all were afraid. He shows us how that fear drove the parenting of his extended family. He describes his boyhood in a neighborhood of Baltimore. Those of us sleeping, locked into what Coates defines as the Dream of being White, call that part of town "tough" to separate us from that fear. We see his days at Howard, brief intervals of feeling safe, and fear drenching him when he leaves campus. Then he tells us about the horrifying death of his brilliant friend Prince Jones at the hands of a Black police officer.

He describes that fear through the facts of lives, in language better suited to my hearing than the chants of the women of Black Lives Matter, but it goes to the same place in my heart that their explanation does. She, each of them, is right. This isn't about those politicians, and it isn't about me or my physical hearing issues. It's about a group of my fellow citizens who live a life so different from mine that I cannot reconcile it with my own. I understand racism, what Dreamers call structural racism to distance ourselves from it. The Black Lives Matter women led me to Coates' marvelous book, where I can begin to grasp the fear and its crushing implications. Understanding cannot come from my own writing or thinking, but only from listening to others, exactly as the women of Black Lives Matter demanded.

Sometimes I think that I've spent my life unlearning the stories I was taught, and replacing them with something less untrue. But. I refuse to be the old people who forced my generation to impose the Dream of Whiteness on

the bodies of the people of Viet Nam. I will not be the old lawyers and judges who called my women colleagues Honey and Sweetie until they passed out of our lives.

And I will try not to be a pseudo-intellectual toad like David Brooks, using a grade-school description of the American Dream of Exceptionalism in his repulsive and deliberate misreading of Coates' Dream of Whiteness. Neither of those Dreams is worth one more slug of misery for any of my fellow humans.