

# ***Bridging the Gap: Black Lives Matter, Africa, and the Aspiration for Globalised Black Solidarity***

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## **Abstract:**

The question of unity and solidarity between Africa and its Diaspora is recurrent theme when it comes to addressing different forms of white oppression. Although twentieth century movements like Garveyism and Pan-Africanism have worked towards such unity, they did not go beyond cultural collectivity. The failure to form political and economic unity became more evident in the 1960s, for as African nations secured independence and African Americans their civil rights, both communities drifted apart turning to their local socio-cultural struggles. Due to this, the notion of one Black world has become a mere metaphor. In this paper, I discuss Black Lives Matter as a movement that calls for collective freedom of the global Black family. In so doing, I provide a commentary on the (complicated) relationship between the movement and Africa, the various challenges that face BLM, and the possible solutions that can serve as a first step towards a united Black world.

**Keywords:** Africa; Black Lives Matter; Global Black Family; Transatlantic Unity.

## **1– Introduction**

In an article published in 2016, the American writer Faraji comments on the Grammy performance of the American Hip Hop artist Kendrick Lamar. Faraji (2016) explains how Lamar's performance that centred Africa and the ancestral relationship between Africa and the Diaspora reflects an activist generation that is conscious of the importance of such connection. Beyond referencing the deep in history relationship between Africa and the Diaspora in the artistic realm, the African Diaspora in general is considered a part of the African Union and its sixth region (African Union, n.d.). On this, Faraji writes: 'the appeal to Pan Africanism is not a romanticized foray into a bygone era of utopian Pan African nationalism, but instead, it can be the seeds of Pan African alliances' (2016, p. 5). Indeed, this alliance that was once celebrated in the twentieth century by movements like Pan-Africanism and Black Nationalism is back again to the surface by recently formed organisations.

The Black Lives Matter movement—BLM hereafter—is one of these foundations that set the solidarity between Africa and the Diaspora as one of its key interests. The movement was established to protest the anti-Black police brutality in 2013, mainly as a

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reaction to the shooting and murder of Martin Trayvon by a white police officer in 2012. Police brutality against unarmed Black subjects resulted in the question of race and racial discrimination/profiling that has dominated the social and political domains in the USA. While the movement's main focus is to raise awareness and protest police brutality, it also calls for a 'collective freedom' and 'liberation for all Black people' around the world (khan-cullors & bandele, 2018, p. 202; *About Black Lives Matter*). In their statement, the founders of the movement (2018, pp. 202–203) emphasise on the fact that the movement is for 'all Black bodies,' regardless of their gender and sexual identities, economic status, abilities/disabilities, religion and immigration status or location who deserve justice and peace. This kind of collectivity and the formation of 'global Black family' (p. 202) echoes the twentieth century solidarity that brought Africa and its Diaspora together. Before I turn to the main discussion, however, I should note that in my reference to terms such as "racial solidarity" and "Black world," I use Kehinde Andrews's (2018, p. 154) definition of Blackness as not 'simply about colour, but a commitment to a liberatory politics that our colour ties us into.' In his argument, Andrews (2018) refers to the white oppression that peoples from African descent still experience until today in different domains under notions like imperialism and globalisation. Therefore, as I draw on examples of the different forms of solidarity and unity between BLM and the African continent throughout my discussion, which could lead to achieving the aspired for "global Black family," I try to answer the following questions: how would BLM achieve the collective freedom that its co-founders call for? How do subjects of the Black world react to the movement and to the idea of a transatlantic solidarity? And finally, what kind of challenges that BLM need to deal with in order to achieve its goal? To answer these questions, the article traces back the origins of the movement and the international social and political reactions to its launching, in particular those by Africans. These reactions are collected from various sources such as documentaries, interviews with activist, and blog posts.

As stated earlier, BLM came to the socio-political scene of the USA in 2013. The movement's main focus is protesting police brutality against Black people and the institutional discrimination on the basis of race that comes with it. The movement reached its peak in 2014–2015 as its members covered large spaces across the USA through organising protests and sit-ins in order to make sure their demands are heard. In the 2014 Ferguson uprising, for instance, BLM activists played a significant role in organising protests after the murder of Michael Brown, an 18 years old Black American who was shot multiple times by a white police officer and was left for hours in the street (Clark et al., 2019). The success of the movement in shedding light on police brutality against the Black community was not only limited to the USA, rather, the movement managed to establish a number of chapters in Toronto and London. Indeed, these

chapters led different protests across European capitals, Toronto, and Sidney in support of the Black community in the USA, while at the same time raising attention to racial relationships in their countries (Di Fiora, 2018). Issues such as racial discrimination and police brutality against natives in Canada and Aboriginals in Australia were brought to the surface using the hashtags #NativeLivesMatter and #AboriginalLivesMatter in the same manner as BLM.

Despite the fact that the movement is not a dominant topic in the news recently, its work and activism are as important as they were at the time of its formation. In an editorial published by the movement on its website celebrating its ten years' anniversary under the title *The Evolution of a Movement*, BLM sets itself within a history of Black struggle against different forms of oppression from colonialism, slavery, lynching, to present-day lack of access to medical care and education (*The Evolution of a Movement*, 2024). Again, the movement brings the global solidarity aspect as an important component of its agenda by referring to the aspirations of the former Ghanaian president and Pan-Africanist Kwame Nkrumah. In this editorial, BLM states that: 'Nkrumah's vision of a united, self-determined Africa guides our efforts to rebuild not just in response to injustice but in pursuit of a transformative future' (*The Evolution of a Movement*, 2024). Sharing such statement in 2024, after ten years of its launch, shows how the movement is still striving to build a 'collective freedom' of the 'global Black family' (BLM; khan-cullors and bande 2018, 202). Therefore, while the movement seeks to provide access to resources and funding to support Black communities across the USA, it plays an active role in addressing different problems in Africa and Latin America. Following its claim that 'Blackness is global' (BLM in Africa, 2025), BLM runs projects in Ghana to secure clean water, celebrates Latinx heritage—studies by Hordge-Freedman and Loblack (2020) and Reed et al (2024) reflect further on the relationship and support of Latinx to the movement—and inspired protests in Benin to return stolen objects from its former coloniser, France (Djos-Raph, 2023).

However, while the movement works to bridge the gap between Africa and the African Diaspora in the USA, Africans reacted differently to the movement. The conflict between those who support BLM and those who refuse to do so brings back to the forefront the question of the transatlantic relationship between Africa and the Diaspora. Before moving to discussing this problem in details, it should be noted that with the lack of exact statistical resources on the number of Africans who support or oppose the BLM movement, this study refers to news reports, activists' commentary, and hashtag trends on social media to review such reactions.

## 2– The Question of Unity: BLM and Africa

The question of unity between the two sides of the Atlantic is not a new one. At the turn of the twentieth century and with the rise of Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism movements, Africa served as a ‘source and origin,’ in the words of Molefi Kete Asante, for those in the Diaspora (as quoted in Gilroy 1993, 188). Through these two movements, Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism, Africans and those in the Diaspora came together in their fight against white supremacy through revolting against colonialism and racial oppression. Nevertheless, with African countries securing their independence in the 1960s and African Americans gaining civil rights, the unity between the two groups has become no more than a metaphorical relationship, in which Africa is viewed as a “home” that those in the Diaspora will never return to (Gilroy, 2000; Tillery, 2001). Moreover, even though Pan-Africanism is still celebrated until today, according to Odamtten (2013, p. 176), the movement ‘has lost its transatlantic vitality and organizing force.’ The complicated relationship between the two communities can be detected in the documentary *Am I too African to be American? Too American to be African?* (2015) directed by Nadia Sasso. The female participants in the documentary tell their stories of being born in the USA to African parents and their experience of being both African and American. Throughout the stories, it becomes obvious how, as they are ‘caught in the middle,’ the participants’ identity shifts according to the place they inhabit. While in the USA, they are viewed as Africans even by African Americans but in Africa, they are perceived as foreigner, the Just Comers—the JC. Another example is the story of Josh Greene, an African American who moved to Rwanda for work. Even though Greene is trying to understand the community around him through learning Kinyarwanda, he is still referred to by Rwandans as an American Muzungu (i.e., white person). Moreover, unlike in the USA where he was continuously racially profiled, in Rwanda, Greene is privileged because of his “American” side that associates him with money and higher education. On being in such position, Greene comments: ‘I am struggling with what my own identity means and where I should call home’ (Greene, 2018). This is not to say that Black Americans are unable to fit into African communities. Indeed, the experience of Obadele Kambon that was published by the BBC (August 24, 2019) is an example of how Black Americans can make a place for themselves within African communities. After being wrongly arrested by police in the USA, Kambon shares that while in Ghana, he no longer feels as a ‘victim of racial profiling or racial abuse’ (Nunoo, 2019).

These examples of Africans in the USA and Black Americans in Africa and the conflict of identities it results in reveals the complexities that face the dream of creating a ‘global Black family’ aspired for by the BLM movement. Even though unlike 20<sup>th</sup> century movements, BLM succeeded in challenging mainstream definition of leadership through

being formed by women and masses instead of middle-class male leadership, it still faces the same obstacles when it comes to forming a transatlantic unity. To highlight the obstacles that the movement might face, Andrews (2018) compares BLM to the Civil Rights Movement. In his study, Andrews (2018) warns the movement from falling into the limitations of nation-state borders. In case a movement gives in to national boundaries and their narratives, which is in itself a Western structure in Frantz Fanon's words (2001), means that it also needs to comply with the power relationships within the state instead of challenging its oppressive system (Andrews 2018). Furthermore, by being confined by nation-state boundaries, both for Africans and those in the Diaspora, they are blinded to the collective oppression the Black world still experiences.

## 2.1– Africans on BLM

Being confined by national boundaries is one of the major obstacles that faces BLM's work towards the collective freedom of the global Black family. In an essay with the title 'Why I'm no longer talking to Nigerians about race' (2016), the Zimbabwean writer Panashe Chigumadzi comments on a conference panel under the title 'The Irony of Black Lives Matter in Africa.' The writer criticises the conference organisation that put panellists to discuss this topic from West African origins, a region that does not experience white oppression in the same way as being Black in a white majority country. Chigumadzi goes on to argue that if a pan-African unity and solidarity is desired, the Black problem should be viewed as a 'global problem,' in which Africans—mainly Nigerians—have to support African Americans in their fight against white oppression:

If Nigerians want to be the true Giants of Africa and, indeed, the world, they must walk it with the empathy and humility befitting of a true politics of black and pan-Africanist solidarity. If instead, you walk as giants blind to the pain and the struggles of your sisters, your presence only serves to destroy the work done by others instead of elevating us all to new heights. (Chigumadzi, 2019)

Indeed, the focus on local problems has distanced some Africans from addressing and supporting BLM protests under the claim that 'there were local issues closer to home, such as child labour, that should be addressed first' (Ndeye 2016). This view is not only limited to the African public, a number of activists as well believe that the relationship between Africa and the African-American community is a 'one-way deal,' meaning that unlike Africans who are aware of the struggles of Black Americans, the same cannot be said about (Black) Americans and their understanding of the different conflicts and struggles taking place, for instance, in Zimbabwe, South Sudan, or Central African Republic (Brown, 2016). Governments have also played a significant role in sabotaging BLM activities in the continent. In July 2016, Lydia Hickman, an African-American

political activist attempted to organise a protest in Dakar, Senegal where she resides as a reaction to the shooting of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling in Minnesota and Louisiana respectively. The protest, however, was called off by the Senegalese police. Even though the authorities stated that the protests needed to be stopped as it was a sensitive issue, Hickman commented on such decision saying: ‘Some say it was because they [the Senegalese authorities] feared the reaction from the American government’ (Ndeye 2016). The obstacles set by governmental relationships is not only limited to the African continent. For example, BLM activists led protests in California after the shooting of Alfred Olango, a Ugandan refugee, in 2016. The Ugandan government, however, decided to take a ‘diplomatic protocol over rage, instructing its embassy in Washington to investigate before it takes any further action’ (Serumaga 2016, 19). This raises the question of how far the “alliance” between the American and African governments can go in sabotaging anti-racism movements like BLM. Addressing this issue in his article *The Quagmire of US Militarisation in Africa* (2020), Campbell argues that the African nations found themselves in a difficult situation between supporting the existence of US military bases to fight “terror” on their lands and arguing against racial hierarchy, especially that of the Trump administration. Aware of this conflict, the US government focuses on ‘rewriting the narrative of national engagement with Africa’ that reflects more of a control, i.e., exploitation rather than balance (Campbell, 2020, p. 75). In other words, developing this (racial) hierarchal relationship makes it difficult for African government to support anti-racism and anti-imperialism movements.

The limitations caused by national boundaries are not only associated with the transatlantic relationships between Africa and the Diaspora as within the African continent itself, Africans are shying away from addressing their neighbours’ problems. The 2019 xenophobic attacks directed towards Nigerians in Johannesburg, South Africa reflected one image of the troubling relationship between the African countries. While these attacks took place in South Africa, Nigerians responded by attacking South African businesses in Nigeria, a tragic turn of events that has resulted in temporary shutting down the South African embassy as stated by the BBC (September 3, 2019). This is not the first time such attacks take place. In 2008, South Africans started to attack Africans from different nationalities who were in South Africa as workers or immigrants. The attacks were linked to Goodwill Zwelithini, a Zulu king, who ‘was reported to have said that foreigners “should pack their bags and go back home”’ (Haffejee, 2015; Honwana, 2015). While the 2008 xenophobic attacks against Africans in South Africa left more than 60 people dead, the 2019 attacks have resulted in more than 10 people dead. As argued by Amadi (2023), xenophobic sentiments in Africa do not only threaten transatlantic unity, but also hinders any form of an African unity project that might lead to social and

economic development. Besides these xenophobic attacks directed towards Africans migrants outside their countries, those who remain in their countries are not immune to violence. Civil wars, military coups, and police violence against civilians is common in different African regions. Police brutality against African citizens takes place usually in relation to election campaigns such with the case of the 2016 presidential elections in Burundi (Niyitunga, 2017), or in relation to peaceful protests. For instance, in April 2016, *Article 19*—a global human rights organisation—reported on the extensive use of violence by the police against protesters in Kenya who came out protesting issues varying from corruption to the lack of employment. To bring these problems to the front, some African activists followed on the steps of BLM by creating their own hashtag #AfricanLivesMatter that positions Africans and their struggles at the centre of the debate. However, by coming up with a hashtag that focuses on the African problem, the question that raises here is whether BLM and its hashtag #BlackLivesMatter is inclusive of African lives (Awachie, 2016).

This is not to say that there is no form of solidarity or support between the two groups. For example, in 2015, activists under BLM organisation travelled to South Africa to support students in their protests against the rise of tuition fees under Fees Must Fall movement (Brown, 2016). At the same time, despite the limited number of the participants, a number of protesters in South Africa gathered near the American embassy in Cape Town in order to deliver a message that ‘black lives matter everywhere in the world’ (Brown, 2016). In other parts of Africa as well like Kenya and Zimbabwe, protests addressed police brutality against Black Americans while also protesting the lack of safety and dictatorship in their own countries. When it comes to social media, activists in Ghana started the hashtag #GhanaisWatching to show solidarity with the Black community in the USA.

## 2.2– BLM on African Struggles

Still, amid these struggles and protests that covered a number of areas in Africa, besides a number of posts on X (Formerly Twitter) BLM made no official statement on these issues despite its call for the collective freedom of the global Black family. Perhaps BLM’s silence can be viewed more clearly in relation to the African emigrants and their journey crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Even though BLM—along with Movement for Black Lives (M4BL)—addressed the issue of African immigrants in the USA, restrained Africans in the Mediterranean Sea are not part of the debate (Strong, 2018). Although the two movements might not be publically vocal on such situation, but marginalising the struggles experienced by African immigrants and Africans in general by organisations situated in the West, mainly in the USA, mirrors the common absence of Africa from

mainstream media and social media interests. The 2015 Paris attacks serves as a clear example of this marginalisation. When the terror attack took place in Paris November 2015, it gained global attention that resulted in Facebook setting up a statement to allow its users to reveal their locations and whether they were safe. The global grief over the victims of the Paris attack brought back the lack of support and grief the world showed to the terror attack in Kenya that took place in April 2015. Unlike the Paris attacks, the terror attack on Garissa University College campus, which left more than 140 people dead, did not gain the same amount of global attention or mourning for that matter. Due to this, Kenyan activists, along with using #AfricanLivesMatter, started the hashtag #147NotJustANumber to humanise the victims of the Garissa attack through demanding a suitable grievance for African lives (Rupani, 2015). The difference in how the world, especially through social media, reacted to these two tragic events reveals, in the words of Reni Eddo-Lodge (2018, p. 217), 'who does and who doesn't make a "relatable" victim of terror.' Besides social media, BLM did not show any kind of support to Africans both as victims of terror attacks in the continent or dying while crossing the Mediterranean.

In a blog post on how Africa remains a secondary thought in the agendas of movements like BLM and M4BL and the struggles of African immigrants in the Netherlands, Kiza Magendane (2016) uses the term "second colonialism" in reference to the neglect directed towards Africans when it comes to racial oppression. The term "second colonialism" explains the way 'the American black discourse and reality has become a template for the black reality worldwide' (Magendane, 2016). According to Magendane's statement, BLM is not only constricted by national boundaries, but it is also controlled by the globalisation narrative that Africa does not fit its 'story line' (Ferguson, 2007, p. 27). However, if BLM is indeed aiming for the collective freedom of the global Black family, major obstacles and possible solutions has been already highlighted by Malcolm X. Reflecting on the importance of the transatlantic unity between Africa and the Diaspora to end oppression against Black people, Malcolm X's speech at the founding rally of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1964 sums-up such relationship: Because not only it is an organization of Afro American unity meaning that we are trying to unite our people in the West, but it's an organization of Afro American unity in the sense that we want to unite all of our people who are in North America, South America, and Central America with our people on the African continent. We must unite together in order to go forward together. Africa will not go forward any faster than we will and we will not go forward any faster than Africa will. We have one destiny and we've had one past.

Malcolm X's statement sets what Andrews (2018, p. 263) refers to as a 'blueprint' for a potential organisation or movement that can unite the 'global Black nation' (Andrews, 2018, p. 297; 2016). Therefore, if BLM aspires for the collective freedom of the global Black family, solidarity and unity between Africa and the Diaspora are key conditions towards such goal. To do so, however, the movement is not challenged only by nation-state boundaries, but also by Western imperialism.

The impact of Western imperialism is clearly seen across the "peripheral" states to the West. When it comes to the Black world, as Bush (2009, p. 20) puts it: 'despite the nominal independence of most African countries and the increasing electoral gains made by blacks in the United States, the Black world remains in the grips of hunger, poverty, and disease.' While the struggles that still linger across the Black world are associated with neocolonialism and imperialism, Western powers covered these oppressive systems under globalisation, mainly as a way to continue its exploitation of the economic wealth of Africa (Martin, 2002). Even though globalisation is about global economy and benefits, Africa does not play part in this equation. As stated earlier, Africa remains in the shadows of globalisation, in which it does not benefit from it in the same way as Western economies. Even though the blame is usually directed towards the leaders of the African nations who 'had remained too cozy with former colonial powers or with the United States' (Cooper, 2005, p. 44), organisations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) are adding to the severity of the situation. While these two organisations and their programs aim for opening African markets to the world and foreign investments, such plans have resulted in the fall of local productions for African farmers and producers. Robert Beckford, in his documentary *The Great African Scandal* (2007), reflects on the poverty that struck Ghanaian farmers after their government sought the help of IMF to improve its agriculture in the 1980s. Through these two organisations, the benefit is guaranteed for Western companies that sell its products to African states, while at the same time, it results in 'destructive social consequences and human costs' for Africans (Ferguson, 2007, p. 71). Therefore, if the Black world wants to end oppression against Africans and those in the Diaspora, challenging Western imperialism is the first step to be taken. In addition to Western imperialism, the inner conflicts within African nations might prove challenging to the aspirations of unity of the global Black nation. Thus, while a transatlantic unity between Africa and the Diaspora is needed to end white oppression, 'African unity should be achieved first before extending the olive branch to various diasporan communities' (Falola and Essien 2013, p. 7). Even though Falola and Essien (2013) refer to this problem in relation to Pan-Africanism, I believe that it is still valid for the current obstacles facing the unity aspired for by BLM.

### 3– Conclusion

The difference between BLM's aspirations and the reality of the mized African involvement with the movement reveals that fact that achieving a global Black solidarity and forming a Black family might be challenging task. However, with the spreading realisation and awareness that the young generation is showing across the Black world about the shared forms of (racial) oppression that they are experiencing, a desire to challenge—especially political and economic—oppression and build a united Black world has created a 'common sense of identity' between the two communities (Honwana, 2019, p. 14). The writer goes on to explain that, currently, youths have more access to social media compared to their parents' generation which facilitates their ability to develop their own "language" as a counter-hegemonic discourse. In a recent study, Gibson et al (2025) reflect on how youth-led activism resulted in a shift in the linguistic aspect that aims for decolonialising academic spheres. Using these aspects; their social marginalisation, awareness of the political and economic struggles, and the ability to communicate and protests using social media platforms provided youth with enough freedom to form movements and protest injustices. Perhaps an organisation like the Pan-African Coalition of Youth for Change in Africa, which is formed through the coming together of different movements from Senegal, Burkina Faso, Congo, and Gabon can be a one step towards African unity. Additionally, one of the core interests of this organisation is building connection with the African Diaspora. Along with BLM, the Pan-African Coalition of Youth for Change can debate, address, and achieve the collective freedom of the global Black family.

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