ThePoliticalScene20160314 The Matter of Black Lives A new kind of movement found its moment. What will its future be? By Jelani Cobb

Alicia Garza, a labor organizer in Oakland, espouses a type of ecumenical activism.
Photograph by Amy Elkins for The New Yorker

On February 18th, as part of the official recognition of Black History Month, President Obama met with a group of African-American leaders at the White House to discuss civil-rights issues. The guests—who included Representative John Lewis, of Georgia; Sherrilyn Ifill, the director-counsel of the N.A.A.C.P. Legal Defense and Educational Fund; and Wade Henderson, who heads the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights—were intent on pressing the President to act decisively on criminal-justice issues during his last year in office. Their urgency, though, was tempered by a degree of sentimentality, verging on nostalgia. As Ifill later told me, “We were very much aware that this was the last Black History Month of this Presidency.”

But the meeting was also billed as the “first of its kind,” in that it would bring together different generations of activists. To that end, the White House had invited DeRay Mckesson, Brittany Packnett, and Aislinn Pulley, all of whom are prominent figures in Black Lives Matter, which had come into existence—amid the flash points of the George Zimmerman trial; Michael Brown’s death, in Ferguson, Missouri; and the massacre at the Emanuel A.M.E. Church, in Charleston, South Carolina—during Obama’s second term.

Black Lives Matter has been described as “not your grandfather’s civil-rights movement,” to distinguish its tactics and its philosophy from those of nineteen-sixties-style activism. Like the Occupy movement, it eschews hierarchy and centralized leadership, and its members have not infrequently been at odds with older civil-rights leaders and with the Obama Administration—as well as with one another. So it wasn’t entirely surprising when Pulley, a community organizer in Chicago, declined the White House invitation, on the ground that the meeting was nothing more than a “photo opportunity” for the President. She posted a statement online in which she said that she “could not, with any integrity, participate in such a sham that would only serve to legitimize the false narrative that the government is working to end police brutality and the institutional racism that fuels it.” Her skepticism was attributable, in part, to the fact that she lives and works in a city whose mayor, Rahm Emanuel, Obama’s former chief of staff, is embroiled in a controversy stemming from a yearlong coverup of the fatal shooting by police of an African-American teen-ager.

Mckesson, a full-time activist, and Packnett, the executive director of Teach for America in St. Louis, did accept the invitation, and they later described the meeting as constructive. Mckesson tweeted: “Why did I go to the mtg w/ @potus today? B/c there are things we can do now to make folks’ lives better today, tomorrow, & the day after.” Two weeks earlier, Mckesson had announced that he would be a candidate in the Baltimore mayoral race, and Obama’s praise, after the meeting, for his “outstanding work mobilizing in Baltimore” was, if not an endorsement, certainly politically valuable.

That split in the response to the White House, however, reflected a larger conflict: while Black Lives Matter’s insistent outsider status has allowed it to shape the dialogue surrounding race and criminal justice in this country, it has also sparked a debate about the limits of protest, particularly of online activism. Meanwhile, internal disputes have raised questions about what the movement hopes to achieve, and about its prospects for success.

The phrase “black lives matter” was born in July of 2013, in a Facebook post by Alicia Garza, called “a love letter to black people.” The post was intended as an affirmation for a community distraught over George Zimmerman’s acquittal in the shooting death of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin, in Sanford, Florida. Garza, now thirty-five, is the special-projects director in the Oakland office of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, which represents twenty thousand caregivers and housekeepers, and lobbies for labor

legislation on their behalf. She is also an advocate for queer and transgender rights and for anti-police-brutality campaigns.

Garza has a prodigious social-media presence, and on the day that the Zimmerman verdict was handed down she posted, “the sad part is, there’s a section of America who is cheering and celebrating right now. and that makes me sick to my stomach. we gotta get it together y’all.” Later, she added, “btw stop saying we are not surprised. that’s a damn shame in itself. I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter. And I will continue that. stop giving up on black life.” She ended with “black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter.”

Garza’s friend Patrisse Cullors amended the last three words to create a hashtag: #BlackLivesMatter. Garza sometimes writes haiku—she admires the economy of the form—and in those four syllables she recognized a distillation not only of the anger that attended Zimmerman’s acquittal but also of the animating principle at the core of black social movements dating back more than a century.

Garza grew up as Alicia Schwartz, in Marin County, where she was raised by her African-American mother and her Jewish stepfather, who run an antiques store. Her brother Joey, who works for the family business, is almost young enough to have been Trayvon Martin’s peer. That is one reason, she says, that the Zimmerman verdict affected her so deeply. The family was not particularly political, but Garza showed an interest in activism in middle school, when she worked to have information about contraception made available to students in Bay Area schools.

She went on to study anthropology and sociology at the University of California, San Diego. When she was twenty-three, she told her family that she was queer. They reacted to the news with equanimity. “I think it helped that my parents are an interracial couple,” she told me. “Even if they didn’t fully understand what it meant, they were supportive.” For a few years, Garza held various jobs in the social-justice sector. She found the work fulfilling, but, she said, “San Francisco broke my heart over and over. White progressives would actually argue with us about their right to determine what was best for communities they never had to live in.”

In 2003, she met Malachi Garza, a gregarious, twenty-four-year-old trans male activist, who ran training sessions for organizers. They married five years later. In 2009, early on the morning of New Year’s Day, a transit-police officer named Johannes Mehserle fatally shot Oscar Grant, a twenty-two-year-old African-American man, in the Fruitvale BART station, in Oakland, three blocks from where the Garzas live. Alicia was involved in a fight for fair housing in San Francisco at the time, but Malachi, who was by then the director of the Community Justice Network for Youth, immersed himself in a campaign to have Mehserle brought up on murder charges. (He was eventually convicted of involuntary manslaughter, and served one year of a two-year sentence.)

Grant died nineteen days before Barack Obama’s first Inauguration. (The film “Fruitvale Station,” a dramatic recounting of the last day of Grant’s life, contrasts his death with the national exuberance following the election.) His killing was widely seen as a kind of political counterpoint—a reminder that the grip of history would not be easily broken.

Garza had met Patrisse Cullors in 2005, on a dance floor in Providence, Rhode Island, where they were both attending an organizers’ conference. Cullors, a native of Los Angeles, had been organizing in the L.G.B.T.Q. community since she was a teen-ager—she came out as queer when she was sixteen and was forced to leave home—and she had earned a degree in religion and philosophy at U.C.L.A. She is now a special-projects director at the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, in Oakland, which focusses on social justice in inner cities. Garza calls Cullors her “twin.” After Cullors created the Black Lives Matter hashtag, the two women began promoting it. Opal Tometi, a writer and an immigration-rights organizer in Brooklyn, whom Garza had met at a conference in 2012, offered to build a social-media platform, on Facebook and Twitter,

where activists could connect with one another. The women also began thinking about how to turn the phrase into a movement.

DeRay Mckesson has announced that he is running for mayor of Baltimore. Photograph by Christaan Felber Photograph by Christaan Felber

Black Lives Matter didn't reach a wider public until the following summer, when a police officer named Darren Wilson shot and killed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson. Darnell Moore, a writer and an activist based in Brooklyn, who knew Cullors, coördinated "freedom rides" to Missouri from New York, Chicago, Portland, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Boston. Within a few weeks of Brown's death, hundreds of people who had never participated in organized protests took to the streets, and that campaign eventually exposed Ferguson as a case study of structural racism in America and a metaphor for all that had gone wrong since the end of the civil-rights movement.

DeRay Mckesson, who was twenty-nine* at the time and working as an administrator in the Minneapolis public-school system, watched as responses to Brown's death rolled through his Twitter feed, and decided to drive the six hundred miles to Ferguson to witness the scene himself. Before he left, he posted a request for housing on Facebook. Teach for America's Brittany Packnett helped him find a place; before moving to Minneapolis, he had taught sixth-grade math as a T.F.A. employee in Brooklyn. Soon after his arrival, he attended a street-medic training session, where he met Johnetta Elzie, a twenty-five-year-old St. Louis native. With Packnett, they began sharing information about events and tweeting updates from demonstrations, and they quickly became the most recognizable figures associated with the movement in Ferguson. For their efforts, he and Elzie received the Howard Zinn Freedom to Write Award, in 2015, and Packnett was appointed to the President's Commission on Twenty-first Century Policing.

Yet, although the three of them are among the most identifiable names associated with the Black Lives Matter movement, none of them officially belong to a chapter of the organization. Elzie, in fact, takes issue with people referring to Garza, Cullors, and Tometi as founders. As she sees it, Ferguson is the cradle of the movement, and no chapter of the organization exists there or anywhere in the greater St. Louis area. That contentious distinction between the organization and the movement is part of the debate about what Black Lives Matter is and where it will go next.

The central contradiction of the civil-rights movement was that it was a quest for democracy led by organizations that frequently failed to function democratically. W. E. B. Du Bois, in his 1903 essay "The Talented Tenth," wrote that "the Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men," and the traditional narrative of the battle for the rights of African-Americans has tended to read like a great-black-man theory of history. But, starting a generation ago, civil-rights historians concluded that their field had focussed too heavily on the movement's leaders. New scholarship began charting the contributions of women, local activists, and small organizations—the lesser-known elements that enabled the grand moments we associate with the civil-rights era. In particular, the career of Ella Baker, who was a director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and who oversaw the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, came to be seen as a counter-model to the careers of leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. Baker was emphatically averse to the spotlight. Barbara Ransby, a professor of history and gender studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, who wrote a biography of Baker, told me that, during the nineteen-forties, when Baker was a director of branches for the N.A.A.C.P., "she would go into small towns and say, 'Whom are you reaching out to?' And she'd tell them that if you're not reaching out to the town drunk you're not really working for the rights of black people. The folk who were getting rounded up and thrown in jail had to be included."

Cullors says, "The consequence of focussing on a leader is that you develop a necessity for that leader to be the one who's the spokesperson and the organizer, who tells the masses where to go, rather than the masses understanding that we can catalyze a movement in our own community." Or, as Garza put it, "The

model of the black preacher leading people to the promised land isn't working right now." Jesse Jackson—a former aide to King and a two-time Presidential candidate, who won seven primaries and four caucuses in 1988—was booed when he tried to address young protesters in Ferguson, who saw him as an interloper. That response was seen as indicative of a generational divide. But the divide was as much philosophical as it was generational, and one that was visible half a century earlier.

Garza, Cullors, and Tometi advocate a horizontal ethic of organizing, which favors democratic inclusion at the grassroots level. Black Lives Matter emerged as a modern extension of Ella Baker's thinking—a preference for ten thousand candles rather than a single spotlight. In a way, they created the context and the movement created itself. "Really, the genesis of the organization was the people who organized in their cities for the ride to Ferguson," Garza told me in her office. Those people, she said, "pushed us to create a chapter structure. They wanted to continue to do this work together, and be connected to activists and organizers from across the country." There are now more than thirty Black Lives Matter chapters in the United States, and one in Toronto. They vary in structure and emphasis, and operate with a great deal of latitude, particularly when it comes to choosing what "actions" to stage. But prospective chapters must submit to a rigorous assessment, by a coördinator, of the kinds of activism that members have previously engaged in, and they must commit to the organization's guiding principles. These are laid out in a thirteen-point statement written by the women and Darnell Moore, which calls for, in part, an ideal of unapologetic blackness. "In affirming that black lives matter, we need not qualify our position," the statement reads.

Yet, although the movement initially addressed the killing of unarmed young black men, the women were equally committed to the rights of working people and to gender and sexual equality. So the statement also espouses inclusivity, because "to love and desire freedom and justice for ourselves is a necessary prerequisite for wanting the same for others." Garza's argument for inclusivity is informed by the fact that she—a black queer female married to a trans male—would likely have found herself marginalized not only in the society she hopes to change but also in many of the organizations that are dedicated to changing it. She also dismisses the kind of liberalism that finds honor in nonchalance. "We want to make sure that people are not saying, 'Well, whatever you are, I don't care,' " she said. "No, I want you to care. I want you to see all of me."

Black activists have organized in response to police brutality for decades, but part of the reason for the visibility of the current movement is the fact that such problems have persisted—and, from the public's perspective, at least, have seemed to escalate—during the first African-American Presidency. Obama's election was seen as the culmination of years of grassroots activism that built the political power of black Americans, but the naïve dream of a post-racial nation foundered even before he was sworn into office. As Garza put it, "Conditions have shifted, so our institutions have shifted to meet those conditions. Barack Obama comes out after Trayvon is murdered and does this weird, half-ass thing where he's, like, 'That could've been my son,' and at the same time he starts scolding young black men." In short, all this would seem to suggest, until there was a black Presidency it was impossible to conceive of the limitations of one. Obama, as a young community organizer in Chicago, determined that he could bring about change more effectively through electoral politics; Garza is of a generation of activists who have surveyed the circumstances of his Presidency and drawn the opposite conclusion.

I met up with Garza in downtown San Francisco last August, on an afternoon when the icy winds felt like a rebuke to summer. A lively crowd of several hundred people had gathered in United Nations Plaza for Trans Liberation Tuesday, an event that was being held in twenty cities across the country. A transgender opera singer sang "Amazing Grace." Then Janetta Johnson, a black trans activist, said, "We've been in the street for Oscar Grant, for Trayvon Martin, for Eric Garner. It's time for our community to show up for trans women."

The names of Grant, Martin, and Garner—who died in 2014, after being put in a choke hold by police on Staten Island—are now part of the canon of the wrongfully dead. The point of Trans Liberation Tuesday

was to draw attention to the fact that there are others, such as Ashton O'Hara and Amber Monroe, black trans people who were killed just weeks apart in Detroit last year, whose names may not be known to the public but who are no less emblematic of a broader social concern. According to a report by the Human Rights Campaign, between 2013 and 2015 there were fifty-three known murders of transgender people; thirty-nine of the victims were African-American.

Garza addressed the crowd for just four minutes; she is not given to soaring rhetoric, but speaks with clarity and confidence. She began with a roll call of the underrepresented: "We understand that, in our communities, black trans folk, gender-nonconforming folk, black queer folk, black women, black disabled folk—we have been leading movements for a long time, but we have been erased from the official narrative." Yet, over all, her comments were more concerned with the internal dynamics of race. For Garza, the assurance that black lives matter is as much a reminder directed at black people as it is a revelation aimed at whites. The message of Trans Liberation Tuesday was that, as society at large has devalued black lives, the African-American community is guilty of devaluing lives based on gender and sexuality.

The kind of ecumenical activism that Garza espouses has deep roots in the Bay Area. In 1966, in Oakland, Huey P. Newton co-founded the Black Panther Party, which was practically defined by hyperbolic masculinity. Four years later, he made a statement whose message was, at the time, rare for the left, not to mention the broader culture. In a Party newsletter, he wrote:

> We have not said much about the homosexual at all, but we must relate to the homosexual movement because it is a real thing. And I know through reading, and through my life experience and observations, that homosexuals are not given freedom and liberty by anyone in the society. They might be the most oppressed people in the society.

The movement remained steadfastly masculinist, but by the nineteen-eighties Newton's words had begun to appear prescient. When I asked Garza about the most common misperception of Black Lives Matter, she pointed to a frequent social-media dig that it is "a gay movement masquerading as a black one." But the organization's fundamental point has been to challenge the assumption that those two things are mutually exclusive. In 1989, the race-theory and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the principle of "intersectionality," by which multiple identities coexist and complicate the ways in which we typically think of class, race, gender, and sexuality as social problems. "Our work is heavily influenced by Crenshaw's theory," Garza told me. "People think that we're engaged with identity politics. The truth is that we're doing what the labor movement has always done—organizing people who are at the bottom."

As was the case during the civil-rights movement, there are no neat distinctions between the activities of formal organizations and those incited by an atmosphere of social unrest. That ambiguity can be an asset when it inspires entry-level activism among people who had never attended a protest, as happened in Ferguson. But it can be a serious liability when actions contrary to the principles of the movement are associated with it. In December, 2014, video surfaced of a march in New York City, called in response to the deaths of Eric Garner and others, where some protesters chanted that they wanted to see "dead cops." The event was part of the Millions March, which was led by a coalition of organizations, but the chant was attributed to Black Lives Matter. Several months later, the footage provoked controversy. "For four weeks, Bill O'Reilly was flashing my picture on the screen and saying we're a hate group," Garza said.

A week after the march, a troubled drifter named Ismaaiyl Brinsley fatally shot two New York City police officers, Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu, as they sat in their patrol car, before killing himself. Some observers argued that, although Brinsley had not identified with any group, his actions were the result of an anti-police climate created by Black Lives Matter. Last summer, not long after Dylann Roof killed nine African-Americans at the Emanuel A.M.E. Church, South Carolina's governor, Nikki Haley, implied that the movement had so intimidated police officers that they were unable to do their jobs, thereby putting more black lives at risk. All of this was accompanied by an increasing skepticism, across the political spectrum,

about whether Black Lives Matter could move beyond reacting to outrages and begin proactively shaping public policy.

The current Presidential campaign has presented the movement with a crucial opportunity to address that question. Last summer, at the annual Netroots Nation conference of progressive activists, in Phoenix, Martin O'Malley made his candidacy a slightly longer shot when he responded to a comment about Black Lives Matter by asserting that all lives matter—an evasion of the specificity of black concerns, which elicited a chorus of boos. At the same event, activists interrupted Bernie Sanders. The Sanders campaign made overtures to the movement following the incident, but three weeks later, on the eve of the first anniversary of Michael Brown's death, two protesters identifying themselves as Black Lives Matter activists—Marissa Johnson and Mara Willaford—disrupted a Sanders rally in Seattle, preventing the Senator from addressing several thousand people who had gathered to hear him. The women were booed by the largely white crowd, but the dissent wasn't limited to whites. This was the kind of freestyle disruption that caused even some African-Americans to wonder how the movement was choosing its targets. At the time, it did seem odd to have gone after Sanders twice, given that he is the most progressive candidate in the race, and that none of the Republican candidates had been disrupted in their campaigns.

Garza argues that the strategy has been to leverage influence among the Democrats, since ninety per cent of African-Americans vote Democratic. She says that it will be uncomfortable for voters if "the person that you are supporting hasn't actually done what they need to be doing, in terms of addressing the real concern of people under this broad banner." She defended the Seattle action, saying that it was "part of a very localized dynamic, but an important one," and added that "without being disrupted Sanders wouldn't have released a platform on racial justice." Afterward, Sanders hired Symone Sanders, an African-American woman, to be his national press secretary. He also released a statement on civil rights that prominently featured the names of African-American victims of police violence, and he began frequently referring to Black Lives Matter on the campaign trail. He subsequently won the support of many younger black activists, including Eric Garner's daughter.

An attempt to disrupt a Hillary Clinton rally early in the campaign, in New Hampshire, failed when the protesters arrived too late to get into the hall. But Clinton met with them privately afterward, and engaged in a debate about mass incarceration. She has met with members of the movement on other occasions, too. Clinton has the support of older generations of black leaders and activists—including Eric Garner's mother—and she decisively carried the black vote in Super Tuesday primaries across the South. But she has been repeatedly criticized by other activists for her support of President Bill Clinton's 1994 crime bill, and, particularly, for comments that she made, in the nineties, about "superpredators" and the need "to bring them to heel." Two weeks ago, Ashley Williams, a twenty-three-year-old who describes herself as an "independent organizer for the movement for black lives," interrupted a private fund-raising event in Charleston, where Clinton was speaking, to demand an apology. The next day, Clinton told the Washington Post, "Looking back, I shouldn't have used those words, and I wouldn't use them today."

If Black Lives Matter has been an object lesson in the power of social media, it has also revealed the medium's pitfalls. Just as the movement was enjoying newfound influence among the Democratic Presidential contenders, it was also gaining attention for a series of febrile Twitter exchanges. In one, DeRay Mckesson and Johnetta Elzie got into a dispute with Shaun King, a writer for the Daily News, over fund-raising for a social-justice group. The conservative Web site Breitbart ran a picture of Mckesson and King with the headline "Black Lives Matter leaders Just Excommunicated Shaun King."

Last month, it was announced that Garza would speak at Webster University, in St. Louis, which prompted an acrimonious social-media response from people in the area who are caught up in the debate over the movement's origins. Elzie tweeted, "Thousands of ppl without platforms who have no clue who the 'three' are, and their work/sacrifice gets erased," and said that the idea that Garza is a founder of the movement is a "lie." Garza released a statement saying that she had cancelled the event "due to threats and online

attacks on our organization and us as individuals from local activists with whom we have made an effort to have meaningful dialogue." She continued, "We all lose when bullying and personal attacks become a substitute for genuine conversation and principled disagreement."

There's nothing novel about personality conflicts arising among activists, but to older organizers, who had watched as federal surveillance and infiltration programs sowed discord that all but wrecked the Black Power movement, the public airing of grievances seemed particularly amateurish. "Movements are destroyed by conflicts over money, power, and credit," Garza said, a week after the cancellation. "We have to take seriously the impact of not being able to have principled disagreement, or we're not going to be around very long."

Almost from the outset, Black Lives Matter has been compared to the Occupy movement. Occupy was similarly associated with a single issue—income inequality—which it transformed into a movement through social media. Its focus on the one per cent played a key role in the 2012 election, and it likely contributed to the unexpected support for Bernie Sanders's campaign. To the movement's critics, however, its achievements fell short of its promise. Its dissipation seemed to prove that, while the Internet can foster the creation of a new movement, it can just as easily threaten its survival.

Black Lives Matter would appear to face similar concerns, though in recent months the movement has tacked in new directions. In November, the Ella Baker Center received a five-hundred-thousand-dollar grant from Google, for Patrisse Cullors to further develop a program to help California residents monitor and respond to acts of police violence. Last year, Mckesson, with Elzie, Brittany Packnett, and Samuel Sinyangwe, a twenty-five-year-old data analyst with a degree from Stanford, launched Campaign Zero, a list of policing-policy recommendations that calls for, among other things, curtailing arrests for low-level crimes, reducing quotas for summonses and arrests, and demilitarizing police departments. To date, neither Clinton nor Sanders has endorsed the platform, but both have met with the activists to discuss it.

The announcement of Mckesson's mayoral candidacy, which he made on Twitter—he has more than three hundred thousand followers—is the most dramatic break from the movement's previous actions. (Beyoncé has more than fourteen million followers, but she follows only ten people. Mckesson is one of them.) Mckesson is a native of Baltimore and he grew up on the same side of town as Freddie Gray, whose death last year in police custody sparked protests and riots in the city—at which Mckesson was a frequent presence. His family struggled with poverty and drug addiction, but he excelled academically and went on to attend Bowdoin College, in Maine. He will be running against twenty-eight other candidates. One of them, the city councilman Nick Mosby, is married to Marilyn Mosby, the Maryland state's attorney, who is handling the prosecution of the six police officers indicted in connection with Gray's death.

In Baltimore, Mckesson told me that he is using his savings to fund his activist work. "It's totally possible to have Beyoncé follow you on Twitter and still be broke," he said. (BuzzFeed reported that a former Citibank executive would host an event at his New York City home to raise funds for Mckesson's campaign.) He wouldn't discuss his candidacy's implications for the movement, but he is very serious about running. Two weeks ago, he released a twenty-six-page report detailing his platform for reforming the city's schools, police department, and economic infrastructure. He has already been attacked for his connection to Teach for America; after he released his plan for improving Baltimore's schools, it was dismissed as a corporatist undertaking along the lines of Michael Bloomberg's and Rahm Emanuel's reforms. He rejects the idea that his lack of experience in elected office should be an obstacle. When I asked how he thought he would be able to get members of the city council and the state legislature to support his ideas, he said, "I think we build relationships. That question seems to come from a place of traditional reading of politics. That says, 'If you don't know people already, then you cannot be successful.' Politics as usual actually hasn't turned into a change in outcomes here."

Garza is tactful when she talks about Mckesson's campaign. "I'm in favor of people getting in where they fit in. Wherever you feel you can make the greatest contribution, you should," she said. But she doesn't see it as her role to define the future of the movement. She told me an anecdote that illustrates the non-centrality of her role. Last month, on Martin Luther King Day, she and Malachi were driving into San Francisco, where she was scheduled to appear at a community forum, when they heard on the radio that the Bay Bridge had been shut down. Members of a coalition of organizations, including the Bay Area chapter of Black Lives Matter, had driven onto the bridge, laced chains through their car windows, and locked them to the girders, shutting down entry to the city from Oakland. Garza had known that there were plans to mark the holiday with a protest—marches and other events were called across the nation—but she was not informed of this specific activity planned in her own city. "It's not like there's a red button I push to make people turn up," she said. It would have been inconceivable for, say, the S.C.L.C. to have carried out such an ambitious action without the leadership's being aware of every detail.

In January, Garza travelled to Washington, to attend President Obama's final State of the Union address; she had been invited by Barbara Lee, her congressional representative. (Lee, who was the sole member of Congress to vote against the authorization of military force after 9/11, has a high standing among activists who are normally skeptical of elected officials.) After the speech, as Garza stood outside in the cold, trying to hail a cab, she said that she was disappointed. The President had not driven home the need for police reform. He had spoken of economic inequality and a political system rigged to benefit the few, but had scarcely touched upon the implications of that system for African-Americans specifically. From the vantage point of black progressives, his words were a kind of all-lives-matter statement of public policy.

A year from now, Barack Obama will leave office, and with him will go a particular set of expectations of racial rapprochement. So will the sense that what happened in Sanford, Ferguson, Baltimore, Charleston, and Staten Island represents a paradox. Black Lives Matter may never have more influence than it has now. The future is not knowable, but it isn't likely to be unfamiliar. ♦

*An earlier version of this article misstated Mckesson's age at the time.

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