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My Brother as "Problem": Neoliberal Governmentality and Interventions for Black Young Men and Boys

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Abstract

In this article, the author argues that the Obama Administration's My Brother's Keeper (MBK) initiative serves as an exemplar of neoliberal governmentality, in which Black young men and boys are constructed as essentially damaged, as problems in need of a technocratic public–private solution. More than simply an ideological imposition from above or outside—from policy makers, state bureaucrats, or market actors—MBK signals the neoliberal turn in Black politics, in which technical, entrepreneurial interventions replace political organization as the imagined solution to the social and economic inequities experienced in Black life. The author highlights three discursive "moments" that capture the work neoliberal governmentality does in and through MBK, and offers discussion of what it might mean to pursue a more critical engagement with MBK and other neoliberal initiatives intended to address racial inequities in education and society.

Keywords

educational policy, educational reform, education reform, equity, politics of education, racial/ethnic data, social justice, federal policy

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In introducing My Brother's Keeper (MBK) in February 2014, the first thing President Obama said after announcing the name of the program was, "Now, just to be clear—My Brother's Keeper is not some big, new government program" (Obama, 2014a). The President went on to emphasize government efforts to boost economic growth and job creation—initiatives "that are good for all Americans." In contrast, MBK is a partnership between government, the private business sector, and philanthropic organizations. None of the funding for MBK is provided by the government; instead, private-sector partners agreed to raise US$200 million over 5 years to cover the cost of implementing a range of programs to help "boys and young men of color who are having a particularly tough time" (Obama, 2014a).

After a brief acknowledgment of the role of government in helping improve opportunities for everyone, the President then highlighted things that government *cannot* do:

> We can help give every child access to quality preschool and help them start learning from an early age, but we can't replace the power of a parent who's reading to that child. We can reform our criminal justice system to ensure that it's not infected with bias, but nothing keeps a young man out of trouble like a father who takes an active role in his son's life.

Parents, he noted to applause, "will have to parent—and turn off the television, and help with homework." He went on to name teachers, corporations, and faith leaders among those who have a "job to do," and cautioned that we not "get caught up in long-running ideological arguments about race and class, and crime and poverty, the role of government, partisan politics."

Rather than deliberating the significance of "our history or our future," he chided, we need to "move past some of those old arguments and focus on getting something done and focusing on what works" (Obama, 2014a).

Far from being nonideological, this first speech introducing MBK laid out the very *ideological* argument for a government retreat from racial redress, and provided the justification for a shift to private corporate-sector and (normative traditional) family-based and racial-cultural solutions to the problems of boys and young men of color—solutions decidedly outside of the sphere of political deliberation and contestation. In this article, I argue that the Obama Administration's MBK initiative serves as an exemplar of neoliberal governmentality, in which Black young men and boys are constructed as essentially damaged, as problems in need of a technocratic public–private solution. More than simply an ideological imposition from

above or outside—from policy makers, state bureaucrats, or market actors—MBK signals what Lester Spence (2012) has called "the neoliberal turn in Black politics," in which technical, entrepreneurial interventions replace political organization as the imagined solution to the social and economic inequities experienced in Black life. Necessarily, MBK proceeds through representations of Black males and Black poor communities as *in crisis*—always in crisis—a state of affairs requiring paternalistic intervention to eradicate deficiencies of character and provide psychological uplift for those willing to overcome the damage inflicted on them largely as a result of their failure to adapt to shifts in the global economy, and who have, it is asserted, chosen an anachronistic cultural identification with blackness over racial and national identities more consistent with social cohesion and economic mobility (Melamed, 2011; Sexton, 2008).

Neoliberal governmentality can be understood as "the collective logic used to generate knowledge about populations, institutions, and spaces, as well as problems and solutions" (Spence, 2012, p. 140). Here, problems are constructed as outside of the realm of the political; there is little role for the state except to facilitate the process whereby a professional-managerial class uses its technical knowledge and skills to bring about changes in individuals and communities. The work of these technicians is imagined as motivated purely by the pursuit of favored measurable outcomes (rather than ideology or bias), and to proceed (best) without the interference of politics (Apple, 2006). It may also be celebrated as replacement for politics, as the successful resolution of past resistance and protest, now evolved into actionable "what works" solutions (Spence, 2012).

What I want to explore here are the logics that idealize MBK as a solution to the problem(s) of Black young men and boys, and that serve to make the program legible to a variety of publics, from policy makers to educators to Black elites to Black young men and boys themselves. Throughout, I highlight how the neoliberal project, far from eschewing race, recruits familiar racial imaginations for its ideological and policy agendas. It may not be surprising that the rationale for MBK relies on deficit-based representations of Black young men and boys: They lack interest in education, they lack the ability to delay gratification, they are preoccupied with not "acting white," and they are misguided in their pursuit of careers in hip hop and professional sports. However, I want to argue that MBK also appropriates "positive" tropes of Black collective identity and racial uplift, from the very name of the initiative, with its invocation of racial-familial responsibility, to the focus on the importance of elders as mentors and role models, to its promise of reinvigorating organizations that help Black people help themselves. Importantly, even as MBK is intended to be inclusive of all boys and young men of color,

I contend that the imagination of the problem is decidedly and specifically *Black*. My focus on blackness here is not intended to render these other groups of color invisible; rather my analysis proceeds with the understanding that it is the deployment of blackness that most heavily informs the racial-neoliberal logics of MBK.

To be clear, the trouble with MBK is not its individual parts, which focus on worthy goals related to mentoring and job-training programs, early childhood readiness, and reform of school discipline policies and practices. I fully understand why community advocates, researchers, and school district leaders might voice support for MBK and even seek to be involved in its initiatives and grant competitions. With declining federal and state investment in education and social services, increasing income inequality and concentration of poverty, and the dismantling of a host of civil rights protections (and a general public antipathy to racial redress in particular), those who care about racial equity and opportunity grasp at any possibility to make a difference in the lives of people placed at the margins of our society (Baldridge, 2014; Pedroni, 2007). My critique here is that these arguably beneficial programs are being advanced within a neoliberal project intended to undermine more fundamental change by locating problems within (the bodies of) Black boys and young men rather than in the social and economic order (Anyon, 2005, 2014; Crenshaw, 2014). MBK initiatives are proffered not as *public* investments in the public good, but as *private*-sector technical solutions to the perceived cultural problems of a specific group. Thus, support for MBK legitimizes neoliberalism, as ideology, as policy and as governmentality, and may indeed subvert efforts to imagine and then push for the deep-structural changes that are desperately needed to make a significant change in the life chances and futurities of Black young men and boys (Noguera, 2003, 2009).

I begin with a discussion of neoliberalism and neoliberal governmentality, focusing on how a cultural politics of race moves in and through ideological formations, policy processes, and everyday life. Next, I describe three discursive moments in MBK—a presidential town hall with young men of color, the public debate over the initial exclusion of girls in MBK, and the announcement of the MBK Community Challenge. I analyze these moments as cultural (re)productions of neoliberal governmentality, with an emphasis on the subtext of (Black) pathology in the public promotion of interventions for Black young men and boys. Finally, I conclude with some discussion of what it might mean to pursue a more critical engagement with MBK and other neoliberal initiatives intended to address racial inequities in education and society.

Neoliberal Governmentality as Racial Logic

Michel Foucault maintained that the art of government is in engaging and managing continuities between the governing of self, family, and state, which is to say, respectively, morality, economy, and politics (Foucault, Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991). He theorized that governmentality is

> at once, internal and external to the state, since it is the tactics of government which make possible the continual definition and redefinition of what is within the competence of the state and what is not, the public versus the private, and so on. (Foucault, Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991, p. 103)

Thus, governmentality involves not only the governing of people but also ideas, imaginations, values, and social and cultural processes. As Foucault explained,

> The things with which in this sense government is to be concerned with are in fact men [*sic*], but men in their relations, their links, their imbrication with those other things which are wealth, resources, means of subsistence . . . Men in their relation to . . . customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking, etc.; lastly, men in their relation to . . . accidents and misfortunes such as famine, epidemics, death, etc. (Foucault, Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991, p. 103)

Governmentality, then, always involves the state as an actor in social life, but not simply in the administration of services, but more importantly, in articulating how social problems should be understood, and what values and strategies should be brought to bear in resolving these problems as they have been imagined and explained to us by state actors.

Policy studies of governmentality point to, among other things, the logics through which the state constitutes policy problems, and then situates itself in relation to governance of these problems. Here, the state presents itself as a problem manager, rather than the primary agent responsible for administrating policy intended to alleviate problems. Governmentality refers to not only the technologies of policy implementation but also, and equally important, the logics that frame policy proposals, policy discourse, and even policy evaluation and assessment. As Kalervo Gulson (2011) argued, policy is not just what evolves in the end; it is the truth generated about the problem itself.

David Harvey (2005) has argued that neoliberalism serves as "a *political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites" (p. 19, emphasis in original). This may seem disconnected from the aims of MBK, and perhaps even contrary to its professed goals of opening up opportunities for the social and economic mobility

of boys and young men of color. However, it is important to understand that a crucial part of the neoliberal project is shifting economic resources from the state and into the market sector, so that profits can be maximized for the corporate and owning classes. Social services, physical infrastructure, transportation, and, of course, education—the general public welfare—all become a drain on the accumulation and hoarding of wealth at the top. The rationale for neoliberal economic policies foregrounds concern for the public good: Privatization encourages competition, which in turn improves the search for efficiency in the delivery of services, and therefore a higher level of services and more choices for more people, and at a lower cost. Also, it is argued that with lower levels of taxation, the wealthy will be able to invest in new technologies, product development, and expansion, which will in turn create more jobs for the middle class and the poor, making them productive contributors to economic growth and less reliant on the publicly funded safety net. In practice, however, neoliberal policies have contributed to greater economic inequality, limited creation of living-wage jobs, and less access to affordable higher education, all compounded by drastic cuts in programs for those who are unable to compete in this more hostile environment (Harvey, 2005; Piketty, 2014; Spence, 2012).

In rejecting the idea of *government* as the mechanism for ensuring a collective social good, neoliberalism celebrates the idea that citizens should take care of themselves. As Aihwa Ong (2007) noted, neoliberalism promises freedom through "self-mastery," a kind of governance of the individual self that "requires people to be free and self-managing in different spheres of everyday life—health, education, bureaucracy, the professions, etc." (p. 4). Ong (2007) added, "There is also a stress on responsibility at the community level, and new requirements of self-responsibility by individual subjects" (p. 4). As I shall explain here, MBK heralds not only a self-regulation by individual Black young men and boys (and their parents) but also a kind of collective Black governance, a Black responsibility for managing Black communal affairs without economic support from the state.

Neoliberalism manages (the problem of) race largely by promising increased freedom and economic opportunities through a market driven by choice and efficiency rather than racial ideology or allegiance (Goldberg, 2009). Racial inequities still exist and in certain cases are even growing. But as Jodi Melamed (2011) argued,

> Neoliberal-multicultural racialization has made this disparity appear fair by ascribing racialized privilege to neoliberalism's beneficiaries and racialized stigma to its dispossessed. In particular, it has valued its beneficiaries as multicultural, reasonable, law-abiding, and good global citizens and devalued

> the dispossessed as monocultural, backward, weak, and irrational—unfit for global citizenship because they lack the proper neoliberal subjectivity. (p. 44)

Under neoliberal multiculturalism, or what David Theo Goldberg (2009) has described as racial neoliberalism, the achievements of some people of color—around the world and in the United States—serve as evidence that the state and the market are inherently antiracist. Here, then, Black subjects who are left behind are not the victims of racism or White supremacy, but rather, have failed to take advantage of opportunities for self-governance (and investment) ostensibly available to all, regardless of race. To the extent that there are identifiable disparities between racial groups, we are to conclude that there is a cultural mismatch between the unsuccessful racial group and the emerging and inevitable advance of a global future (Melamed, 2011; Sexton, 2008; Spence, 2012).

With regard to Black politics more specifically, Lester Spence (2012) argued that neoliberalism facilitates not only inequality between Black and White but also intraracial economic inequality. Then, he pointed out, the material conditions of poor Black people are increasingly framed in terms of cultural rather than structural problems. Significantly, this logic is advanced by prominent Black leaders, including politicians, clergy, and entertainment and media figures. And even when structural constraints are acknowledged, Spence maintains, proposed solutions center on the need for more entrepreneurialism, which often takes the form of Black-led initiatives to develop among Black poor people an entrepreneurial "spirit"—that is, an internal "grit" or "drive" toward educational and economic success. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to analyze Black actors in the administration of MBK, it is clear that the initiative creates opportunities for a Black professional class concerned with addressing racial inequities or otherwise interested in improving opportunities for Black poor people. Here, my aim is not to criticize this work or the motivations of these professionals. Rather, I want to suggest that the state encourages these intraracial managerial relationships, which, however unintentionally, become complicit in a larger anti-Black politics that advances rightist discourses about Black pathology and dismisses the need for structural solutions to material problems in Black life.

In a period of neoliberal governmentality, the state acts to manage the production of certain kinds of ideal and always racialized human subjects—those who self-govern are suited for their part in the political economy and who understand democratic citizenship as embodied in the exercise of individual choice (and decidedly *not* in collective political movement).

Problem-Solving Black Young Men and Boys: Discursive Moments in Neoliberal Governmentality

In this section, I describe three "moments" that illustrate how neoliberal governmentality emerges in the discourse on MBK. Again, I want to be clear that this article is not a critique of the individual programmatic efforts pursued by educators and advocates. These examples highlight the discourse of MBK and are not in any sense an analysis of the worth or effectiveness of specific interventions. However, it is my argument that this discourse serves to promote some interventions and delegitimizes others. My interest here is how these moments construct and locate the "problem" outside the state—outside of political struggle—and then identify solutions, and point to specific private actors (including boys and young men of color) who must be responsible for intervening against the "problem" *as it has been constructed* within this neoliberal cultural-ideological frame.

An MBK Town Hall: Fear of "Acting White" as Moral Failure of Native and Black Young Men and Boys

On July 21, 2014, President Obama held a "town hall" at a Washington, D.C., school to promote his new MBK initiative. The aim of the event, he said to the students from around the nation, was to "give me a chance to hear from you about what your concerns are, what your dreams and hopes are, what your fears are, and how you think we may be able to help" (Obama, 2014b). He then noted how he was similar to many of the "young men" in the room and noted his absent father, single mother, and lack of wealth (although he noted that his grandparents were able to offer financial support). He then offered that, like the students at the town hall, he "acted out," "made some bad choices," "didn't take school as serious" as he should have, and "made excuses sometimes for misbehavior." Here, then, as on other occasions, the President begins his discussion of MBK by framing boys and young men of color as socially and morally troubled. There is no mention of structural economic or racial inequality, aside from a subtle reference to the fact that, in his own life, he "often had a second chance, or I often got a third chance" and an acknowledgment that his mistakes were unlikely to get him shot, or land him in jail. Also, here, the President only refers to the adolescents as "young men," and never as "boys," a term that, admittedly, we tend to reserve for preteen males. Even so, imagining these students as men rather than boys increases their culpability for the kinds of shortcomings he enumerates.

After his speech, the President asks for questions from the audience, explaining that "we want the mayors who are here and the business leaders

who are here . . . to hear directly from you." The first two questions followed the social-moral development framing offered by the President:

> Hello. Good afternoon. I'm Jamal. My question is did you set goals for yourself when you were younger?

> My name is Gray Smith and I'm from DC. And my question is how do you cope with judgment and how people see you?

And then came this third question, from a student who identified himself as being from Montana:

> My question for you, Mr. President, is how is the United States government helping American Indian people revitalize their language and culture? Because so many of our young men and boys don't know who they are because they've lost their culture and language, and the United States government has tried so hard for the past 200 years to destroy that.

Unlike the first two questions, this one was decidedly policy-oriented, and pointed directly to the impact on Indigenous youth of intentional, state-sponsored colonial and racial terror (Coulthard, 2014; Grande, 2004; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

The President began his response by noting that he had recently been on "an Indian reservation in South Dakota," and recounted his "heartbreaking" experience hearing Native young men and women's life stories. He also acknowledged their loss of "connections to ancestors and . . . memories" and noted how important it was for Native youth to be "proud of their past."

But then came the pivot, in which he reminded the Native questioner that "we live in the 21st century" and instructed that "you can't just live in the past." He went on to explain that "young Native Americans are also going to have to learn math, science, computer sciences, engineering," that even as young Native people are looking "back to your roots," they will also have to adapt to "what is increasingly a world culture." Here, then, the President troublingly positions Native culture and history as constructed in the past, and not as something living and growing in the now. Native culture and connection is useful for social and emotional grounding, in his view, but only to the extent that it can be put into the service of personal and national economic advancement. And in terms of individual social mobility and the nation's needs in the global marketplace, that requires Native youth to dedicate themselves to study of the hard sciences and technology.

And then comes another pivot, in which the President—still having not addressed the policy question which the young person posed to him—returns to the framing of personal effort and moral choice and, almost seamlessly, brings the discussion back to the problems of Black young people:

> And I think that one of the things—this is true not just for Native Americans, but it's also true for African Americans. Sometimes African Americans . . . there's been the notion of "acting white"—which sometimes is overstated, but there's an element of truth to it, where, okay, if boys are reading too much, then, well, why are you doing that? Or why are you speaking so properly? And the notion that there's some authentic way of being black, that if you're going to be black you have to act a certain way and wear a certain kind of clothes, that has to go.

Several things are accomplished here. First, Native youth get erased, subsumed into Black youth, and more specifically, Black youth as problem. There is no discussion of the importance of Black youth having a connection to their history and culture, or acknowledgment of the state's role in dismantling and delegitimizing Black cultural institutions and folkways. Instead, the President invokes the rather common, but problematic notion of "acting white" to shift our attention back to the counterproductive choices and poor judgment of Black youth. There is a certain irony in chiding Indigenous people for eschewing "acting white," and then another level of colonial erasure in simply laying a discourse most often associated with Black academic failure onto Native youth, as if this must now be their problem too, as they experience similarly low academic outcomes.

For President Obama, rather than focus on cultural authenticity, Native and Black youth "just have to be who you are," and ask themselves, "are you kind, are you responsible, do you work hard, can you delay gratification?" The implication here is that the relatively lower outcomes for some youth of color suggest that they have not internalized these values. The policy solution in MBK is to therefore teach them these things, to find technologies to instruct Native and Black youth in values and skills presumed lacking so that they improve their academic performance. Here, the President contends, "there are some cultures, frankly, who've done this better than others." He highlights Jews and Asian Americans as groups who have been able to maintain cultural connections while also being academically successful, implying that of course, the effective balance between ethnic/cultural and national identities is possible, and has been achieved by certain populations. The recommendation, then, is that Indigenous and Black "cultures" have failed in this task and will need to exercise leadership

to better manage themselves to remain competitive and relevant in a neoliberal-multicultural global context.

"Gendering" the Problem: The Exclusion of "Sisters" in MBK

In the months following the announcement of MBK, a growing number of scholars and community advocates raised critical questions about the exclusion of young women and girls of color. In a July 2014 *New York Times* op-ed article, prominent legal scholar and race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw argued that the exclusive focus on boys ignores the structural economic and racial conditions endured by both men *and* women, and boys *and* girls, who live *together* in marginalized families and communities. Although Black boys and men have disproportionately lower educational and social outcomes than Black girls and women on several measures, this comparison elides vast disparities between Black girls and other groups of girls in such areas as school suspension, domestic violence, incarceration, and violent death. Women of color are also likely to earn far less than White men, and even less than men in their respective racial/ethnic groups; moreover, the median wealth of Black and Latino women, at US$100 and US$120, respectively, is a pittance in comparison with the median wealth of Black men (US$7,900), Latino men (US$9,730), and let alone White women (US$41,500). Thus, while boys and young men of color are experiencing dismal life chances, it is not the case that girls and young women of color are not also at great risk (Crenshaw, 2014, July 29).

Crenshaw suggests that the exclusive focus on men and boys is characteristic of most race-based interventions at this historical moment. She notes, "'Fixing' men of color—particularly black men—hits a political sweet spot among populations that both love and fear them" (Crenshaw, 2014, July 29). The prevailing logic is that Black problems, particularly, are problems of men and boys and perhaps problems *with* men and boys. That is, the problem is located within these gendered and racialized bodies, and not within the broader social order that reproduces inequality for everyone in the communities in which Black men and boys live. Although some of the challenges facing Black men and boys can be attributed to gender, and may require gendered solutions, the assumption here is that gender is the logical frame for all or most of the problems they face. In this view, because Black girls are doing marginally better than Black boys (on some measures), they (a) experience fewer, and less consequential, problems overall and (b) experience gender as a relative advantage, at least intraracially.

Senior Obama administration advisor Valerie Jarrett, in her defense of MBK's exclusive focus on boys, insisted that it wasn't "either-or" (Feldmann,

2014, June 20). She pointed to the Lilly Ledbetter law, which would ensure pay equity for women, and noted that the White House Council on Women and Girls was committed to increasing the number of girls who pursue careers in science, technology, and mathematics. Thus, Black girls and other girls of color would benefit from these broader initiatives to assist women. In making this argument, Jarrett effectively denied that Black girls and women face any unique problems, or at least suggested that the intersection of race and gender for Black girls and women is not as significant or impactful as that intersection is for Black boys and men. Ultimately, Jarrett argued, "If you're in a family unit . . . and the boys are having a particularly hard time, the impact on the entire family is troublesome" (Feldmann, 2014, June 20). She makes no such allowance for the impact of troubles facing Black girls or women in the same households.

What Jarrett and the White House neglect to acknowledge here is that even if we were to eliminate disparities in outcomes for Black boys and girls, and for Black young men and women, that would hardly be any kind of victory for Black families and communities as there is even greater inequality between Black people, *regardless of gender*, and other racial/ethnic groups, and particularly in comparison with Whites. This hierarchical gendering of Black problems, then, not only represents a rightist racial-ideological imagination, as Crenshaw insists, it also rationalizes technical gender-based (male) fixes rather than deep-structural political-economic transformations. To be sure, one could reasonably make the case for gender-based interventions in addition to (or within) a broader structural approach; however, what we see here is that the gendering of Black problems, which is almost always the privileging of Black men over women (Joseph, 2006; Smith, 1983), displaces the need for structural, redistributive interventions.

The MBK Community Challenge: Technical Problem-Solving Against Black Politics

The major component of MBK is the MBK Community Challenge, which invites city mayors, county executives, and tribal leaders to apply for grants to support interventions and trainings aligned with the goals of MBK, which are enumerated as follows:

A. Ensure all children enter school cognitively, physically, socially and emotionally ready

B. Ensure all children read at grade level by 3rd grade

C. Ensure all youth graduate from high school

D. Ensure all youth complete post-secondary education or training

E. Ensure all youth out of school are employed

F. Ensure all youth remain safe from violent crime. (White House, 2014)

Again, there is no additional government funding provided to implement these programs. Rather, incentives are offered by private philanthropic organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the California Endowment, and the New Venture Fund. AT&T and the National Basketball Association are among corporate financial supporters of the Challenge. It is beyond the scope of this article to offer an analysis of market-driven reforms and venture philanthropy in education (for more on this, see Au & Ferrare, 2014; Lipman, 2013; Pedroni, 2007; Scott, 2009). Also, as I have emphasized throughout this article, I do not mean to critique the individual interventions that are part of MBK; indeed, who could be against academic achievement, employment, and community safety? Rather, my aim here is to interrogate the logics, the ideological frames within which these interventions are celebrated, prioritized, and pursued. More, following Spence (2012), I want to suggest that under neoliberalism, seemingly evidence-driven and apolitical *technical know-how* replaces Black *political* organization, agitation, and redress as the favored and legitimized strategy to pursue racial justice and improve Black life chances. Here, for example, government leaders are tasked with managing the process, and bringing to the table "stakeholders" who include—ostensibly, on equal footing—corporate and nonprofit executives, university presidents, bank leaders, law enforcement officials, and parent, teacher, and youth organizations. The assumption is that all of these groups have shared interests in advancing Black boys and young men, *and* that these interests are accurately articulated in the goals of MBK as predetermined by the government. The solutions are already enumerated; all that is left is to identify the roles of various stakeholders in the implementation of these solutions. The priorities outlined in MBK (and constructed in consultation with corporate, nonprofit, and civil rights elites) are the ones which will demand community attention and resources; efforts that the state and its private-sector partners deem unimportant will be less likely to be regarded as legitimate or worthwhile, in part because efforts not outlined in MBK will not receive funding, but also because MBK is presented as the most efficient and reasoned articulation of the problem and its solutions.

Most troublingly here, although the MBK Community Challenge makes some mention of racialized economic inequality, its interventions are limited to mitigating (some) effects of that inequality rather than rallying communities

to demand any kind of structural change in the economic order. I readily acknowledge that it would be ridiculous to expect corporate leaders and bank executives, or even many nonprofit leaders, to join with Black families and youth as "stakeholders" in wealth redistribution, or in radical transformation of incarceration policies or workers' rights. And that is precisely the point: The MBK Community Challenge is the state's *challenge to specific communities* to manage problems deemed racial and/or ethnic in origin under the supervision of the private corporate sector; what it is decidedly *not* is a challenge taken up by the state to implement racially just social and economic policies, as part of a recommitment to state leadership in *public* welfare. Thus, the MBK Community Challenge can work *against* Black politics by constructing the solution to racial inequality in ways that do not involve appeals to the state for redress, but instead, the administration of efforts to motivate young Black men and boys, and help them achieve in school and stay out of trouble with the law. These, then, become the legitimized sites of Black engagement, the delineated and actionable solutions to collective Black suffering.

This emphasis on "what works" has another danger: Because any combination of these proposed solutions is regarded as worthy of investment, leaders can choose from among them as one might from a buffet—a program to encourage poor parents of color to read to their children, organized trips of elementary school boys to the local college or university, a summer jobs program for teens, or efforts to improve communication between young men of color and police officers. Local leaders can, as the Challenge instructs, "decide what combination of the above objectives they will tackle" (White House, 2014). Thus, even as the Community Challenge goals are, taken together, wide-ranging and potentially impactful, meeting the challenge only requires the selective adoption of individual "solutions." That is, communities do not have to take a comprehensive approach to addressing the problem, even as it is articulated in MBK.

Finally, the data-driven decision-making mandates of MBK may drive local leaders to prioritize interventions whose results can be quantified most easily and quickly, and at a low cost. The inclination would be for civic, corporate, and philanthropic leaders to demonstrate that a specific, discrete intervention has a specific measurable effect, and then to argue for more funds to scale up that specific intervention not only in a specific local area but across the nation. In this market approach to data-driven decision making, the danger is that we may lose any desire to *contextualize* the data that is driving decisions in a given place and time (Dumas & Anderson, 2014), and forgo democratic, public deliberation on *what* evidence is considered decisive in the first place. Once again, then, MBK functions to privilege technocratic solutions to racial inequality and serves to alienate Black subjects from a

structural (rather than cultural) imagination of Black problems, which then limits the ability to understand problems as the impetus for political mobilization and action.

Toward a More Critical Engagement With Racial-Neoliberal Interventions for Black Young Men and Boys

To critique MBK as an exemplar or site of neoliberal governmentality is not to dismiss the project's aim of improving the life chances of poor boys and young men of color. Nor is the purpose to castigate those youth workers and advocates who are encouraged by the initiative, and who seek to secure some of the private funds earmarked for the much-needed services they offer. Rather, this article calls attention to the need to interrogate the rightist ideological foundations of racial-uplift social policies like MBK, and raise critical questions about how the framing of the "problem" legitimizes interventions that neither disrupt the White supremacist racial hegemony, nor threaten the capitalist economic order. Here, it is not merely enough to say that state-sponsored initiatives like MBK culturally reproduce the logics of racial and economic inequality. More to the point, what I mean to suggest is that neoliberal social and educational policy construct racial inequality as largely a matter of individual choice and cultural defect. The hope offered in these policies is for young boys and men of color to transcend the racial group, to individually "beat the odds." The state then puts forth this individual transcendence as evidence that the group can, if they so wish, choose to be successful. This, in turn, rationalizes a retreat from direct state investment in social welfare; in its place, the state positions itself as the manager of relations between individuals and the marketplace, merely facilitating the freedom already on offer through capitalism, and decidedly *not* through political challenges to the state—political challenges that demand group recognition and a structural, redistributive response.

What does it mean, then, to call for a more critical engagement with these policies? That is to say, what cultural politics is to be pursued here, at the site of MBK and other initiatives that center on addressing the "problems" of Black young men and boys? First, it is to insist on the need to resist attempt to displace a politics of redistribution with a politics of recognition (Fraser, 1995). A politics of recognition focuses on demanding a greater sense of cultural regard, such that, in this case, boys and young men of color would be viewed as important, capable, and worthy of equal opportunity without discrimination on the basis of race, or more specifically, without having to suffer

disdain and violence due to imagined fears about the threat they pose to society (Dancy, 2014; Davis, 2008; Hucks, 2014; Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, & Watson, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2011). A politics of redistribution centers on demands for economic redress; here, then, the focus is on ensuring that boys and young men of color have access to material resources needed to improve their life chances. Redistributive politics necessarily realize that some groups have unjustly accumulated resources as a means to secure and maintain their own dominance; thus, political work in this domain requires not only getting aid to boys and young men of color but also an immanent critique of class, the very modes of production that reproduce racialized economic inequality from generation to generation. As inherently cultural-ideological projects, initiatives like MBK effectively displace redistribution with recognition. That is to say, even as agents of the state lament economic inequality, and may even go so far as to acknowledge a history of race-based maldistribution of resources, they just as quickly dismiss a significant role for the state in correcting that maldistribution; instead, they center their attention on actions boys and young men of color must take to lift themselves up. To be sure, some (private) resources are offered, but the problem is understood largely as one of inspiring boys and young men of color and of making them feel that they matter. To the extent that interventions focus on increasing social and cultural capital, such efforts are largely divorced from attention to the economic capital that is necessary to effectively operationalize social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986/2011). Here, again, a politics of recognition, as important as this is, displaces a needed politics of redistribution.

Second, and related to this, we have to understand the cultural work gender does in displacing a focus on structural problems. Framing the problems of Black men and boys primarily in terms of gender mislocates the problem within the bodies of Black men and boys. Here, the hegemonic discourse centers either on social and psychological problems with(in) Black masculinity, or, more broadly, how the intersection of race and gender creates unique problems in the lives of Black young men and boys as they encounter a world that fears and despises them, or simply does not understand them (Ferguson, 2001; Noguera, 2003, 2009). However, as Kimberlé Crenshaw points out, boys are raised in families, in communities. In addition to pointing out the specifically gendered challenges of Black girls and women, Crenshaw notes that the foundation of many Black problems is rooted in the maldistribution of economic resources. As she concludes, "What needs to be fixed are not boys per se, but the conditions in which marginalized communities of color must live" (Crenshaw, 2014, July 29). Although there is great attention to, and need for research and political focus on Black young men and boys as a specific population, we have to be careful that we not fetishize gender, and

then become complicit with neoliberal logics that privatize in raced/gendered bodies what are actually problems of racialized capitalism, even as these problems may manifest as gendered phenomena.

Third, a critical engagement of neoliberal interventions for Black men and boys requires a persistent interrogation of the managerial roles played by Black professional elites, including policy makers, educators, nonprofit leaders, and academics. As Lester Spence (2012) has cautioned, governmentality not only creates opportunities for "black expertise . . . in managing black populations," but also it "[places] severe limits on black political imaginations" (pp. 145-146) by replacing collective democratic action with techniques or fixes implemented by these Black elites. In truth, Black social actors who care deeply about Black children and communities find ways to subvert neoliberal policies everyday. For example, Bianca Baldridge (2014) has documented how Black after-school professionals, faced with expectations of prioritizing academic skill-building and college preparation at the expense of social and emotional development, strategized to continue to meet the needs of young people while still satisfying the mandates of the private funders of neoliberal school reform. These youth workers understand that "deficient rhetoric and 'needing-to-be-fixed' framing of Black and poor youth denies their agency" (Baldridge, 2014, p. 465). Even so, Baldridge concedes, the program she studied sometimes succumbed to neoliberal logics of accountability and reform, and selected students who were more likely to perform successfully on the narrow metrics that were important to funders. In Baldridge's study, the Black professional class at least had a critique of neoliberal reform. But this is not always the case, and the growing intraracial economic divide (Cohen, 1999; Spence, 2012) only promises to exacerbate differences between the worldviews and interests of Black elites and the Black poor people they serve or, in neoliberal terms, *manage*.

Most importantly, we need a cultural politics that refuses to see Black young men and boys, and other children of color, as the embodiment of crisis and as a crisis for capitalism. As a necessary dimension of this refusal (Tuck & Yang, 2014), we must invite communities to help us expand our imagination of what counts as the "problem," and join with them in advancing new ideological frames—new ways of understanding the intersections of race, gender, opportunity, and schooling—that lead us toward more transformative social and educational policies.

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