The age of Obama will be remembered as one of the most ironic periods in African American history. On the one hand, the Obama epoch has been a breakthrough era in terms of the heightened political visibility of black figures on the national stage. From Cory Booker’s journey from Mayor of Newark to Senator of New Jersey; to Eric Holder’s history-breaking tenure as the nation’s first African American Attorney General; to Al Sharpton and Melissa Harris Perry’s left-leaning talk shows on television giant MSNBC—the visible presence of “black faces in high places” (to borrow philosopher Cornel West’s phrase) has reached an apex. On the other hand, however, the Obama years have been characterized by a new reign of racial terror in America. From the state-sanctioned assassination of Trayvon Martin to the daylight execution of teenager Michael Brown, the age of Obama will be remembered as a revival of the lynching tradition in America. If we understand lynching as more than simply a reference to black bodies swinging from trees, but rather as a longstanding system of racial terror that allows white violence against black people to go unchecked by the law—then the story of American race relations in 2014 is not much different then what it was in 1934. In spite of the friendly brown face that sits at the head of the American empire, things on the ground for everyday black people are arguably worse than ever.

In light of this crisis—what historian Jelani Cobb has called the “paradox of progress”—the question that Black America finds itself wrestling with is the same one that Dr. King wrestled with fifty years ago: where do we go from here? Recently, the riotous atmosphere of Ferguson, Missouri (in light of the killings of teenagers Michael Brown and Vonderrick Myers) has given birth to a rising sentiment that the time has come for Black America to finally lead itself out of the wilderness. There are two political shifts that must occur in order for us to give birth to a new vision for Black America. The first has to do with affirming that black lives matter, the second is about moving towards what I call a blues-centered vision for American democracy.

#BlackLivesMatter: Loving Blackness as Political Resistance

In a culture where antiblack racism and systematic white supremacy runs rampant, black people simply loving one another is a revolutionary act. I do not speak of “love” here in an abstract or individualistic sense, nor am I advocating for racial segregation. Instead, I am referring to what the critic bell hooks once referred to as “loving blackness as political resistance.” By “blackness” I am referring to all those scattered and variegated aspects of our history that have come to define our communal identity (be it the colors of our skin, the textures of our hair, the historical patterns of our speech, or the brown bodies that we inhabit). Loving blackness as political resistance means refusing to believe the lies we’ve been told by others or the lies we’ve been telling ourselves. I think of loving blackness as political resistance when I hear the words of novelist Arundhati Roy who once wrote that our primary goal must be not only
One way to love blackness as a form of political resistance is to publicly affirm (and demand that our nation recognizes) that black lives matter. This is precisely the impulse that has been at the heart of the #BlackLivesMatter social media campaign that has played a key role in the Ferguson movement. Rather than being based on a principle of segregation, #BlackLivesMatter is based on a principle of affirmation. To love blackness as political resistance means being willing to insist that black life must be given the same value in the eyes of the law as other forms of life. This is a move that is often met with public resistance. In the wake of the murder of Michael Brown, many commentators have implied that black civil disobedience is irresponsible. The argument implies that since black people do not typically protest “black on black” crime, singling out white-on-black crime is a form of reverse racism. There are several deep logical flaws in this reasoning. First, it is important to note that all crime in America tends to take place in a segregated fashion: black people are no more likely to commit crimes against members of their own race than other racial groups are. In fact, when put in context, “white on white” crime is just as prevalent (if not more prevalent) as “black on black crime.”

But here is the difference. When black people commit crimes against other black people they are swiftly “dealt with” by the law (i.e. they tend to be swiftly arrested, prosecuted, and sent to prison with tough sentences). Historically, the exact opposite has been true in instances where black people have been assaulted by nonblack people--particularly by white people. Recent examples abound: it took months for George Zimmerman to be even arrested for killing Trayvon Martin (this came only after widespread public pressure through social media) and at the time of this writing the Ferguson Police Department has yet to arrest officer Darren Wilson for the killing of Michael Brown. Affirming that black lives matter means demanding fairness under the law. Loving blackness as political resistance means loving the pursuit of justice for black freedom, liberty, and equality. More importantly, it means building conversations in our community about how to affirm the value of all black life—not simply the lives of black men. For every Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin in our community, there is also an Islan Nettles (the transgender woman murdered in Harlem, New York in 2013) or a Kathryn Parker (the 92 year old black woman killed by police in a botched Atlanta drug raid in 2006). Affirming that black lives matter means being willing to fight for the lives of our entire community not just the lives of a select few.

**Moving from Neoliberalism to Blues Democracy**

In addition to affirming that black lives matter, we must also move from neoliberal multiculturalism to a blues-centered vision for American democracy. Neoliberal multiculturalism refers to a form of political tokenism that has taken hold in various sectors of American public life over the course of the past 30 years. The hallmark characteristic of neoliberal multiculturalism is an emphasis on symbolic inclusion at the expense of actual widespread social transformation. To put it metaphorically: neoliberal multiculturalism celebrates black people who are breaking glass ceilings, but shows little concern for the black masses who are still stuck in the basement of the American empire. This top-down approach to measuring “progress” has had a devastating effect on the organization of black politics in the post-civil rights era. Too often we have been seduced into believing that breakthroughs at the top of the social
ladder will lead to breakthroughs at the bottom of it. Whether it be the presence of Clarence Thomas on the Supreme Court; the appointment of Michael Steele as Chair of the Republican National Party; or an Ivy-League educated black family in the White House—the presence of minority “figure heads” has rarely led to any radical change or transformation to the status quo. In fact, under the Obama Presidency African American material conditions have worsened in every conceivable measure of social “progress.” Black poverty, unemployment, and incarceration rates are all higher in 2014 than what they were in 2008 when Obama took office. Moreover, the age of Obama has unleashed a new open-season for state-sanctioned white violence against black people. We had hoped that Obama might be Moses—instead, he is beginning to look like Pharaoh.

In order to move beyond this era of neoliberal multiculturalism, we must embrace what I call a blues-centered vision for American democracy. The blues—that unique musical tradition born in the juke joints and the dusty back roads of the American south—is a tradition that aims to give voice to the suffering and hardships of everyday people. A blues-democracy then, is a democracy that operates from the bottom-up as opposed to from the top-down. To speak of a blues democracy is to speak of a democracy organized around improving the lives of the “least among us” (to borrow a biblical phrase). In America, the “least among us” are black, poor, uneducated, queer and often incarcerated. Our political efforts must be centered around improving their lives as opposed to simply celebrating those who have already “made it” in America. A blues-centered vision of democracy means shifting our focus from the one black man in the White House to the one million black people in the jailhouse.

Conclusion: Turning Up for Democracy

IT IS OUR DUTY TO FIGHT FOR OUR FREEDOM,
IT IS OUR DUTY TO WIN.
WE MUST LOVE AND SUPPORT ONE ANOTHER.
WE HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT OUR CHAINS.
—ASSATA SHAKUR

As the age of Obama draws to a close, Black America is at a crossroads. Not only has the infrastructure of our communities worsened, our traditional political institutions have proven to be ineffective at best and outright corrupt at worst. Many of us have grown weary. Many others have given up altogether. And yet, we are not—and have never been—a victim people. As the legacies of freedom fighters such as Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, Ella Baker, Shirley Chisolm, Fannie Lou Hammer and James Baldwin attest, being black in America has been characterized by a bold and richly democratic “keep on, keeping on” spirit.

Time and again, black people have had the tragicomic audacity to believe that change in America is not only possible, it is on its way. But the caveat has always been this: “change” will not come by waiting on America to “wake up.” Instead, we must wake it up. In many ways, this means embracing the hip hop spirit of “turn up.” As Lil Jon’s wildly popular 2013 anthem “Turn Down for What” implies, to “turn up” is to get wild, get unruly, and get disobedient. Turning up means abandoning respectability. Turning up means embracing a jazz-spirit of improvisation.
Turning up means getting indignant—and abandoning any concern for what others might say or think. This has been the spirit of the movement in Ferguson and it must be the spirit of a new vision for our community. It is time for our churches and our civic institutions to turn up. It is time for our inner city prophets and our bourgeoisie black middle class to turn up. It is time for our artists, activists, and intellectuals to turn up. Justice is our birthright and social transformation is our mission. As Assata Shakur once reminded us, we have “nothing to lose but our chains.”

Simply put, the time has come for us to “turn up” for black freedom and democracy. One way we do this is by loving blackness as political resistance and another way is by taking a blues-centered approach to American democracy. Our lives literally depend on it.

The stakes are high: freedom in America has always been a fight—and yet it remains our responsibility to turn up on the battlefield.

Frank Leon Roberts teaches at New York University’s Gallatin School of Individualized Study. Educated at NYU and Yale, he has been a contributor to The Huffington Post, Vibe Magazine, The Village Voice, The San Francisco Chronicle, and The Daily Voice. A New York City native, he is at work on his first book Weeping May Endure: Notes Towards a Blues Democracy.