

VISUALIZING STRUGGLE: THE USE OF IMAGERY IN THE CONTINUING
STORY OF THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT

SHAHBAZ KHAYAMBASHI

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Abstract

Black Lives Matter began as a hashtag in 2013 to protest the death of Trayvon Martin and the lack of accountability by his murderer, George Zimmerman. However, it was with the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, both murdered by police officers who were, in turn, not held accountable for their actions, that the movement truly took off, becoming the international movement it has become today. While the movement's rise was dependant on several variables, one of the most important aspects was its use of imagery. Whether images of the deceased who led to the birth of the movement, the images of protest that fueled it or the reactionary images that combated it, this protest movement was viewed by its audience through the pictorial turn. This dissertation follows the Black Lives Matter movement from its birth to the modern day, looking at its use of imagery to grow into what it is today, using visual and semiotic analyses to discuss the many different image-based aspects of the movement. Through this analysis, what becomes evident is that images are a powerful weapon in 21st century struggles. It does not matter if they are being used by protestors or by their opponents; images, whether photographs, videos or even low-effort internet memes, have a real ability to convince people of facts and change opinions. While this can be a positive—the topic of police brutality against Black people became a central topic of discussion because of the release of several videos of such incidents in a short span of time—many reactionary forces have learned of this power and have begun to use it to their own advantage. This is ultimately the more concerning matter here. While this dissertation is specifically about the use of imagery in the Black Lives Matter movement, the points made herein are just as applicable to not just many other contemporary protest movements, but also to the reactionary political strategies that control the western right-wing.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Do Black Lives Matter in the United States?

“They call this the land of the living, but they’re trying to make a dead man out of me.” -MDC

As I write this, people in Minneapolis are protesting the murder of a Black man at the hands of the Minneapolis police department. While this is tragic in and of itself, one incredibly sad aspect of it is that it simply does not adequately date the time of writing. Even if I were to point out that he was murdered by way of a no-knock raid, that he was murdered in his own home, or that he was murdered because he reached for a legal firearm at the sight of strangers in his home, it still may not immediately answer the question of time, owing to both the frequency and prevalence of such incidents. Twenty-two-year-old Amir Locke was sleeping in an acquaintance’s apartment when police executed a no-knock search warrant. Upon breaking into the apartment, several police officers came across a sleeping man who, upon realizing that strangers had surrounded him, reached for his legal firearm, at which point he was shot twice in the chest.¹ He was not the person being sought, he had no criminal record and there was no reason that he had to suffer any harm, let alone die so senselessly and so young. This event brings to mind several cases which share similarities, both recent and historical. It is this rhizomatic collection of similar events that has led to calls for reform, both within states and federally. This collection is also the reason for the birth of a battle cry, a call for empathy and just a general truism: Black Lives Matter.

¹ Liz Sawyer, Libor Jany and Paul Walsh, “Minneapolis Police Insisted on ‘No Knock’ Warrant That Led to Amir Locke’s Shooting Death; City Announces Moratorium,” PBS, February 4, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/amir-locke-fatal-shooting-death-minneapolis-police-no-knock-warrant/> (accessed February 14, 2022).

Black Lives Matter originated in 2013, when one of the co-founders of the movement, Alicia Garza, tweeted “I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter... Our lives matter,” in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman after the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin.² This tweet was later massively retweeted with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter.³ What started as a Twitter campaign went on to become a full movement against the police brutality toward Black people after the murder of Michael Brown at the hands of Darren Wilson.⁴ This movement consisted of protests, occupations and other methods of calling for change and awareness. It took on the role of both organization and battle cry. Informed by intersectional feminist philosophy,⁵ Black Lives Matter rejects the politics of respectability and advocates for all Black lives, whether rich or poor, whether wholly law-abiding or with a criminal record:⁶ the belief behind Black Lives Matter is that no Black lives are deserving of death as the dominant ideology would suggest. In the United States, the status quo suggests that “a dead Black boy is always more guilty for his death than his white killer.”⁷ If a Black individual commits even a violent crime, a just society would ensure that they can face fair judgment in place of a summary execution. This is ultimately the central tenet of the Black Lives Matter movement.

While this is the central tenet, Black Lives Matter do concern themselves with a variety of political positions. Their policies include ending the war on Black people, both in policing and

² Laurie Collier Hillstrom, *Black Lives Matter: From a Moment to a Movement* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2018): 22.

³ Gene Demby, “Combing Through 41 Million Tweets to Show How #BlackLivesMatter Exploded,” *NPR*, March 2, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/03/02/468704888/combing-through-41-million-tweets-to-show-how-blacklivesmatter-exploded> (accessed January 22, 2022).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Rima Vesely-Flad, *Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies: Moral Pollution, Black Lives and the Struggle for Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017): 154.

⁶ Barbara Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018): 13.

⁷ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2015): 59.

in other areas where Black people are disadvantaged, reparations, investment in education for all, the guarantee of the health and safety of Black people in general society, economic justice, community control and political power.⁸ They also call for an end to broken window policing, the practice of disproportionately policing racialized and poorer communities seen as dangerous areas and removing undesirable individuals under the guise of doing so to save the communities.⁹ Furthermore, they demand community oversight, a limit to the use of force by police departments, independent investigation and prosecution of police officers accused of crimes against the community members, community representation, more common use of body cameras and more in-depth training for the police, and an end to for-profit policing, militarization of police departments and fairer police union contracts that will protect the community.¹⁰ I cannot help but think that very few of these demands are particularly controversial, but it is the source that makes them controversial. Owing to their intersectional practices, Black Lives Matter also provides support to women, queer and trans people of Black and racialized communities.¹¹

This organization eventually became something of a community. Even people who were not necessarily members of the organization could see themselves as aiding the cause, whether through protest, social media usage or more blatant forms of praxis like recording the police or invading unwelcoming spaces. This community ultimately found the perfect way to communicate, organize and grow online. As Rima Vesely-Flad points out, social media uniquely benefits communities associated with moral pollution¹² and the pre-established enclaves that had been developed before the movement was born became a perfect ground for people to share their

⁸ Vesely-Flad, *Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies*, 160.

⁹ Alex S. Vitale, *The End of Policing* (London: Verso, 2017): 10.

¹⁰ Vesely-Flad, *Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies*, 161.

¹¹ Black Lives Matter, 2020, *2020 Impact Report*.

¹² Vesely-Flad, *Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies*, 168.

thoughts. However, thoughts are cheap. What was found to be much more powerful was images. Images began to reconstruct the Black body online.¹³ This reconstruction occurred on both fronts, as violent protests and riots became much more frequently displayed, but the peaceful protests similarly began to create new images of Blackness.¹⁴ These images are the focus of “Visualizing Struggle: The Use of Imagery in the Continuing Story of the Black Lives Matter Movement,” both how and why they work.

Photographed Events

It is generally agreed that the Vietnam War was the first heavily televised war.¹⁵ This is often seen as a result of two important factors: an advance in technology that could record events more easily¹⁶ and the fact that journalists felt backed by the media.¹⁷ This war, with its unusually subversive elements in reporting, shares many similarities with the recording of Black Lives Matter activity, which have similarly resulted from even more advanced technology and a backing of modern day journalists, not by the traditional mass media, but by various online sources¹⁸ and communities of likeminded individuals.¹⁹ In other words, the advance of Web 2.0 has ensured that no one must continue to be dependent on corporate-owned media for their information. For better or for worse, one can find that information from their neighbour and, in this particular case, that results in the creation of a movement.

¹³ Ibid., 169.

¹⁴ Ibid., 171.

¹⁵ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1977): 18.

¹⁶ David Kerekes and David Slater, *Killing for Culture: Death on Film and the Enigma of Snuff* (London: Headpress, 2016): 354.

¹⁷ Sontag, *On Photography*, 18.

¹⁸ Fatih Çömlekçi and Serhat Güney, "An Alternative Media Experience: LiveLeak," in *Design, User Experience, and Usability: User Experience Design for Diverse Interaction Platforms and Environments* (2014): 63.

¹⁹ Shahbaz Khayambashi, “Blood and Guts in Living Colour: A Study of the Internet Death Video Community,” in *OMEGA—Journal of Death and Dying* 83 (2021): 391.

At its core, this is a study of metapictures, occasionally even taking meta to several degrees.²⁰ Metapictures, as defined by W.J.T. Mitchell, are pictures that refer to pictures, that are about pictures.²¹ My study is based around images that dictate the narrative of the Black Lives Matter movement, images that either led to it, depict it or result from it. The pictures that will be discussed in this dissertation are almost exclusively metapictures, either insofar as they refer to previously recorded images and videos or in that they become a part of a rhizomatic index of police brutality. The general metapictures often take the form of images visible in protests. These images will often incorporate references to images of the pain and suffering of the subject of the protest or to the living being, before pain led to their end. However, many such images lead to dialectic metapictures.

Unfortunately, even the belief that pain and suffering should not be doled out indiscriminately is not a universal one. Reactionary right-wing sources will often oppose that which Black Lives Matter defends, whether that be the belief that Black lives do indeed matter, that the police should not be murdering Black people or that Black people have a right to protest their ill treatment. It is in these cases that the metapicture becomes an object of confusion, as an image that refers to other images can also begin to refer to different readings of the same image.²² For example, an image of a protest that incorporates images of pain and suffering can be twisted in different directions through the addition of paratext or its placement in the digital world. This may well be a direct result of the changes that can occur to images through the addition of text,²³ but it is ultimately more nefarious as it requires the victim to involuntarily

²⁰ W.J.T Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): 58.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²² *Ibid.*, 45.

²³ David Campbell, "Horrible Blindness: Images of Death in Contemporary Media," in *Journal for Cultural Research* 8 (2004): 62.

speak out against their own rights. As mentioned, there are also occasionally meta-metapictures involved, which is a direct result of the aforementioned rhizomatic network of violence, that often sees various images of police brutality compared and contrasted, referenced in images of protest, which may then be referenced elsewhere, positively or negatively. In short, the referentiality that runs through these images is not as simple as one may assume. This referentiality, almost paradoxically, also permits an easier categorization, however, allowing for three levels of imagery that inform the greater use of imagery in the movement.

The first level of imagery visible here is the sort of imagery that directly led to the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement. While this category does include some tangential imagery, such as lynching photos or images of civil rights leaders from the 19th and 20th centuries, the most influential images are particularly recent. This category includes images and videos of extrajudicial death at the hands of police officers and images of those victims before their deaths made them famous. The first batch of images at this level often took the form of videos of Black men being shot and killed by often white police officers. These videos unusually almost always portrayed Black men being killed. While plenty of Black women were similarly killed in this period, their deaths were somehow avoided by the eye of the camera, often because their deaths came beyond the eye of the camera, either in their own homes or in the hostile space of the police. However, the men were seemingly more likely to be slaughtered in the streets in the direct view of the camera. These videos took on various forms, sometimes capturing the lead-up to the murder—whether that lead-up is an interaction with the police officer who eventually commits the murder or simple dead space of an individual existing before being gunned down—and sometimes starting in the middle of a struggle. These videos are rare when compared to the number of similar situations—less rare with the advancement of ubiquitous camera technology,

whether on bystanders, police officers or security cameras—so these videos can be argued to hold even more power, as they must stand in as an assumption for other similar unrecorded events.

While such images absolutely have the power to shock,²⁴ that is often as far as their power will go. Through the passage of time, images of atrocity serve as detrimental in a variety of ways, whether that is the continuation of suffering,²⁵ normalizing the acts that led to the suffering²⁶ or replacing pain with the signs of pain.²⁷ These detrimental effects ultimately lead to such images becoming self-reflexive, which leads to a form of generification. Susan Sontag discussed this phenomenon in relation to images of starvation in Africa, accusing their creators and viewers alike of voyeurism.²⁸ When a series of videos come out depicting a similar thing, no matter how horrific, the series of videos begin to become seen as a genre, with the genre eventually, inevitably leading to their designation as spectacle.²⁹ This genre begins to take on a hyperreal element, as each video appears to be a mere reproduction of a previous video, with similar elements and points of depiction.³⁰ This generification has led to the normalization of things like Islamist executions in the Middle East and Northern Africa, cartel violence in Latin America³¹ and, unfortunately, deaths of Black men in the United States. This is why images of death are only truly powerful when they are unique.³² While death in the 21st century almost

²⁴ Sontag, *On Photography*, 19.

²⁵ Elizabeth Dauphinée, “The Politics of the Body in Pain: Reading the Ethics of Imagery,” in *Security Dialogue* 38 (2007): 145.

²⁶ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003): 100.

²⁷ Elizabeth Dauphinée, “The Politics of the Body in Pain: Reading the Ethics of Imagery,” in *Security Dialogue* 38 (2007): 142.

²⁸ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 42.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

³⁰ Shahbaz Khayambashi, “The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes: The Internet Death Video, the Community which Sustains It and Their Place in Modern, Semi-Public, Internet-Based Society,” Major Research Paper (York University, 2015): 6.

³¹ Kerekes and Slater, *Killing for Culture*, 400.

³² Sontag, *On Photography*, 19.

necessitates visual proof,³³ too much visual proof no longer shocks the viewer, leading to a sort of visual fatigue followed by apathy. This is also why images of life are often far more powerful than images of death.

This first level thus also includes images of the dead, pre-atrocity. These images take the form of Roland Barthes' concept of *noeme*,³⁴ proof that something or someone had once existed. These photos therefore provide not just evidence of the deceased's existence, but also of the humanity of the deceased and, in turn, their inhumane treatment by their murderer. In fact, the images of the living have shown themselves to have so much power that they can work with images of the living, as Twitter campaigns like the "if they gunned me down" hashtag has shown—this campaign which involved posting two photos of oneself, one in a more stereotypically positive light and the other in a more stereotypically negative light, and asking which one the media would use to represent the user.³⁵ Again, while the uniqueness of an image of death and destruction would show its power on a large scale, images of life have shown themselves to be an antidote to generification. This is likely because death images portray an event, while life images portray an individual. Unfortunately, even life images have their downsides. As Sontag has repeatedly stated, photographic intent does not dictate a photo's meaning, as photos cannot speak for themselves.³⁶ Meaning often comes from placement or captions,³⁷ making the act of meaning-making a politically fraught one. Thus, despite the fact that the photos in this category are often meant as positive representations of the since-deceased, often taken by family, friends or even the deceased individuals themselves, the meaning will be

³³ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 83.

³⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010): 77.

³⁵ Laura Stampler, "Twitter Users Ask What Photo Media Would Use #IfTheyGunnedMeDown," *Time*, August 11, 2014, <https://time.com/3100975/iftheygunnedmedown-ferguson-missouri-michael-brown/> (January 22, 2022).

³⁶ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 39.

³⁷ Campbell, "Horrible Blindness," 62.

determined by the distributor and the consumer of the image, two individuals who will frequently share similar politics and therefore similar views of the individual photographed. This is how the deceased individual, one who can no longer fight on behalf of their own character, becomes the object of a culture war. This culture war then leads us to the second level of imagery, the level of protest that results from the creation and distribution of the images on the first level.

The second level of imagery consists of images of the protests themselves, whether they are images of the actual act of protesting or the surrounding acts of unrest and violence. While there are obviously questions to be asked about what constituted acts committed by the Black Lives Matter movement and what acts do not, all of these acts are considered related and one-and-the-same within the collective consciousness, with certain acts often standing in for the entirety of the movement. As such, these images may include anything from peaceful protests and occupations to police violence against protestors to rioting and acts of violence. While all observers will unquestionably insist that they are describing a Black Lives Matter protest, the left-of-centre observers will often remember the protests by large crowds and the right-of-centre observers will remember them by images of buildings on fire. While attempts have repeatedly been made to convince the other side that they are wrong about their recollections, it is no longer important to make those distinctions. In fact, those distinctions do not matter in a post-truth age.³⁸ What truly matters is what the images say. These images are strewn with various signifiers of historical and political significance. This is why it is much more important to discover why these photos appear than to demarcate which are genuine and which are propaganda. After all, as

³⁸ Lucia Abbamonte, *'Black Lives Matter': Cross-Media Resonance and the Iconic Turn of Language* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018): 17.

Sontag stated, photos that go against a viewer's ideological beliefs will ultimately be dismissed as fabrications anyway.³⁹

Finally, the third level of imagery consists of responses to the Black Lives Matter movement. This level is almost exclusively composed of reactionary, right-wing material that has become much easier to disseminate using the same internet technology that led to the creation and growth of the Black Lives Matter movement. These materials tend to take the form of exploitable and repeatable thoughts and images incorporating bad faith ideas to discredit the movement. These ideas often use three strategies, either hiding their true beliefs behind a veneer of "just a joke" to escape culpability, using a series of truth signifiers and repetition to disguise fabrications as truth and incorporating pathos-driven arguments to make their bigoted position appear more logical and well thought out. Such strategies could be dismissed owing to their pedestrian approaches, but they cannot be dismissed so easily because they seem to work quite well in convincing people of their positions. While the sorts of people who are convinced by them tend to be people who would be convinced by them regardless, the real danger is in their effortless creation of "alternative facts." When Kellyanne Conway spoke those words in 2017,⁴⁰ I doubt even she could foresee how low public discourse could go.

With the collection of these levels of imagery, a thorough mixture of visual and semiotic analyses becomes necessary to truly understand where this movement stands in the collective consciousness. While sympathies for the Black Lives Matter movement appears to be split

³⁹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 11.

⁴⁰ Eric Bradner, "Conway: Trump White House Offered 'Alternative Facts' on Crowd Size," *CNN*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/01/22/politics/kellyanne-conway-alternative-facts/index.html> (accessed February 20, 2022).

somewhat evenly on the American political divide,⁴¹ the actual beliefs held by Americans within both political parties are less clean-cut and can be seen more clearly through analyzing their varying news and media platforms, how they speak of the dead and what social media platforms they participate in. While a democrat could support the movement and say all the right things, their subconscious opinions on the dead or their political beliefs around the role of policing within society could show their placement to be much different and these beliefs can come out subconsciously in something as innocuous as a comment on a Facebook news article. Within the last decade, I have personally seen a few people who I once considered friends accidentally—or occasionally purposefully—let their true feelings spill out in unusual places over news stories or small interactions where they felt that their privileged positions were under attack. People like this believe that their pretense should be celebrated and not questioned. While it is absolutely important to question and condemn openly and proudly reactionary forces, it may in fact be more important to expose crypto-reactionaries whenever possible and I hope that this dissertation will make that simpler in the long run, as well as allow us to better understand our own reactionary tendencies.

Outsider Looking In

I would like to make note of my own identity as the author of this dissertation. I am an Iranian-Canadian, born in the former, raised in the latter, which makes me an outsider in relation to the subject of this dissertation. Not having experienced the Black American condition, I do not

⁴¹ American politics lacks even a left-right distinction, with their political viewpoints being something closer to bourgeois, centre-left liberalism and far-right conservatism, with the “left” side being concerned with identity politics but not class-based politics that would be important to a group based on Marxist ideals. Some leftist academics have accused Black Lives Matter of not incorporating class-based ideas into their ideology, but that is unusually and circularly owing to their placement within an American political spectrum. In other words, while their ideas are based around intersectional politics that incorporate race, gender, sexual orientation *and* class, their class politics are ultimately harmed by their lack of exposure to non-American politics.

believe that I am equipped to attempt to reach a conclusion on the Black American condition, what it means to be Black in the United States or how the American police affect Black Americans. I think it is important to point out here that that is not my intention. Instead, my outsider-looking-in stance is not as an observer of Blackness in America, but rather as an observer of image-mediated understandings of discourses based around Blackness in America, which is to say this is not an objective truth, but rather a subjective truth told through a study of the media.

As an academic, I have made every effort to not write from a colonialist perspective. While I recognize that this does not necessarily protect me from all concerns raised by colonialist thought, I have done my best to ensure that colonialist beliefs do not slip into this dissertation. What I have aimed for is a visual and semiotic study through a study of racialized imagery. While I cannot and will not attempt to understand what it is to be Black in America, I do believe that I am well-equipped to understand images that attempt, and frequently fail, to understand what it is to be Black in America. Furthermore, this dissertation is ultimately also about what it is to be photographed or recorded in a panoptical society and what it is to experience one's own objectification through the use of imagery by others, as parts of this dissertation are predicated on being hated by anonymous sources. In short, this dissertation is not one that necessitates Blackness as identity, as it is not a study that must be done from the inside. In fact, it is a study that benefits from occurring from the outside, as it allows for a reading of media manipulation and prejudice from a source that has not been imbued in it since birth—at least not in the same way.

A Note on Terminology

The main subject of this paper is Black Lives Matter, as an organization, a movement, a slogan and a set of visualized words. Throughout the dissertation, I have made many references to these three words and, in doing so, I have consistently referred to them in full, as Black Lives Matter. This is a conscious decision. While the movement has been referred to with both its full name and the shortened version of BLM, the term BLM, with its contextless nature, has become a term more favoured by reactionary forces, the same reactionary forces who have introduced CRT (critical race theory) into the discourse that has allowed them to ban books about Black issues through the vague criticisms that result from that term. Other scary acronyms include the likes of AOC (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez) and Antifa (anti-fascism, which many on the right have spun around to mean things like anti-first amendment). Whereas Black Lives Matter succinctly makes its point—a point which is admittedly still questioned by reactionaries—BLM does not mean much beyond a three-letter excuse for every societal issue that the United States has in relation to race. In fact, BLM is the preferred term for reactionary responses to Black Lives Matter activism. Alongside Antifa, BLM becomes another name for everything that the speaker hates or fears. This is where the necessity to coin the term BLMization comes from.

BLMization, with its awkward composition and all, refers to the tendency for reactionary right-wing forces to refer to every racialized Black issue in the United States, specifically the issues that affect white people, as a result of BLM. If these issues were blamed on Black Lives Matter, the cognitive dissonance would show itself, the same way that right-wingers cannot simply refer to Antifa as anti-fascism. Where non-racialized—or at least not necessarily racialized—sociopolitical issues are related to a bastardized right-wing version of anti-fascism, the racial BLM scare tactic is a way to fight back against racial progress for Black Americans

without outwardly fighting against it. This is why I have refused to refer to Black Lives Matter as BLM—outside of its use in BLMization or verbatim use in the words of others—because I do not wish to take away the power and truth behind the full phrase, Black Lives Matter.

Chapter Contents

“Visualizing Struggle” starts with three introductory chapters. After this first chapter, the second chapter provides some introductory context for the rest of the dissertation. This includes a historical study of the pre-Black Lives Matter roots of Black liberation and anti-police brutality ideals. This is followed by a theoretical analysis of some of the important background theory of this dissertation and a short literature review of important works within the interdisciplinary discourse of this dissertation. This literature review focuses on some important works that are necessary for a closer understanding of ideas at the base of my work. The third chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the methodological approach which is used in my dissertation.

Chapter four begins the first section, the inspiration of the movement, with a thorough analysis of the death videos that inspired Black Lives Matter. The object of study in this chapter is a collection of twelve videos depicting the deaths of Black, unarmed or non-threatening⁴² men at the hands of police officers. These videos are analyzed for similarities among the treatment of the individuals to get a better understanding of the beliefs about the Black body by American police officers.

Chapter five continues the inspiration section with a chapter analyzing the representation of the deceased on the news. The objects of study are mostly online news sources, as television sources are ultimately much more difficult to find. However, due to the importance of television

⁴² This refers to legally armed individuals, individuals armed with weapons that pose no real threat—i.e. an individual holding a knife but not moving towards anyone—or individuals holding toy or replica weapons.

news, I have made an effort to utilize contemporary news articles from a variety of television news websites, with the understanding that what is reported in the written digital format will resemble what is reported on the televisual format. These articles are also divided across three types of platforms: the mainstream media, the alternative media and the reactionary media. This analysis will reveal the similarities and differences in reporting across political divides.

Chapter six begins the second section, devoted to images of protest, with an in-depth analysis of the images that are produced of the acts of protest within the Black Lives Matter movement. This analysis looks into the difference between images as created by Black in-group protestors and the out-group media images. This analysis uncovers a variety of interesting practices within depictions of protest, including various acts of iconoclasm and iconopoeisis and the importance of certain unusual acts of banality over other, more recognized, liberal acts of acceptable protest.

Chapter seven continues the protest section with a short study of the use of the American flag in images of protest and anti-protest. This chapter questions the very meaning behind the symbolic imagery of the American flag and what it means for different people throughout history, its use as an unquestionable weapon of hatred at the root of the analysis. This is done through a semiotic analysis of three specific images from three different moments of struggle within protest movements that somehow incorporate the American flag, questioning the actions taking place within the same frame.

Chapter eight takes on a theoretically fraught approach by taking reactionary right-wing rhetoric at face value and using Jean Baudrillard's post 9/11 work *Spirit of Terrorism* to discuss Black Lives Matter as a terrorist organization with a necessary goal. This chapter deals with the images of rioting and fire that are often magnified by right-wing media sources to question why

these images are given so much air time in lieu of non-violent protests concurrently occurring near them. While Black Lives Matter obviously does not fit the definition of a terrorist organization, their goals do provoke “terror” in white supremacist, right-wing Americans and this chapter attempts to discover why this fear exists.

Chapter nine begins the third and final section of this dissertation, following the terror aspect of the previous chapter to delve further into the anti-Black Lives Matter groups, not because their opinions are necessary to acknowledge, but rather because their existence should be an object of interest and curiosity. This chapter looks specifically into the “where’s BLM” rhetoric that followed the success of Black Lives Matter as a movement. This bad-faith rhetoric questions the movement’s motives by pointing to cruelty towards Black people at the hands of other Black people or towards white people at the hands of Black people and loudly wondering why Black Lives Matter does not deal with each issue. This bad-faith argument has been used against every progressive movement since such movements have existed—for example, feminism has often been disproven by finding one woman who was not helped by the movement in a direct enough way—and this chapter looks at the larger rhetorical issue through the lens of this movement. This chapter will look at the images and videos that are used to spread this message, as well as competing hashtags and similar campaigns.

Chapter ten looks at another reactionary form of right-wing rhetoric, the rise of the meme in twenty-first century political debate. Meme refers to exploitable and repeatable image macros which have recently become very useful for right wing politics owing to their ease of spread, ease of readability and their truth creation that results from their very form. This chapter discusses a variety of meme formats and allows for better understanding of how they work in furthering reactionary politics, as well as how progressive causes like Black Lives Matter have

learned to harness the political powers of memes for the furthering of their own causes. This chapter is followed by a short concluding chapter, which brings “Visualizing Struggle” to an end.

Chapter 2: History/Theory/Literature

An Overview of the Basics

In a study as multidisciplinary as this one, it is ultimately a bit difficult to differentiate between various aspects of study. As such, I found it necessary to research the topic through both historical and theoretical lenses, which led to the two becoming almost indistinguishable from each other. This is also why I felt it necessary to combine my theoretical and historical contexts with my literature review. In this chapter, I will attempt to demarcate these aspects as much as possible, while also situating my own research within a wider expanse of academic thought, pinpointing the gaps that my dissertation will fill.

As I think that the most important research for this dissertation has made itself known throughout the body chapters, I do not think it necessary to do a thorough literature review of all of it. Instead, I will devote this chapter to three specific segments of the literature that has aided the creation of this dissertation. The first section will consist of a short historical study of what has led to Black Lives Matter as a movement, both in the long term and the short term, a series of events that have had a role, no matter how small, in the creation of the movement that are ultimately tangential enough to not necessitate inclusion in the later chapters. The second section will consist of a series of important theoretical concepts that can be considered assumed knowledge necessary for the dissertation, theories that get to the base of the subjects at hand. Finally, the third section will consist of an in-depth literature review of a selection of texts that precede my dissertation in significant aspects of the topic. This selection of works deals with ideas that are ingrained throughout this dissertation, but which may otherwise seem tangential or less important. This will in turn provide a crucial basis on which to understand the rest of this dissertation. In other words, this chapter should not be seen as a comprehensive review of the

predecessors to my field of research, but rather as the groundwork that has allowed me to build my dissertation.

Historical Context of a Movement

The Black Lives Matter movement almost seemed to develop unexpectedly, coming out of a singular incident of violence. Black Lives Matter exists in a United States under the spectre of a right-wing sensibility that holds the belief that racism was over in the United States until Barack Obama became president. In other words, it exists in a societal space where many of the types of people who never experienced racism become either aware of it and choose to deny it or see their own racist actions questioned and do not appreciate it. These individuals would likely agree with the original sentiment, the sentiment that Black Lives Matter came into existence because of a singular act, but we know that it is inaccurate. While Black Lives Matter, as a statement and movement, may have been born with the death of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent attention paid to the deaths of other Black American—and eventually international—individuals, the issue at its centre has been a historical conflict. And it is important to point out the intentional word usage here: the movement was not born of a slew of deaths, but rather at the *attention paid* to that slew of deaths. A major criticism from the opposition to Black Lives Matter contends that the movement gives too much empathy and support to criminals and people who were not innocent at the times of their murders, somehow fully overlooking the American history of not giving empathy or support to many innocent individuals who were murdered by police officers before the death of Martin, murders which were protested within the community, but not seen by the general public.

The historical beginnings of what led to Black Lives Matter are contested among academics. Christopher J. Lebron situates the beginning with the works of Frederick Douglass

and Ida B. Wells,⁴³ stating that Black Lives Matter resulted from white people holding on to days when violence against Black people was acceptable.⁴⁴ There are two directions that this statement can be taken. First, that Black Lives Matter is a response to a modern-day version of a lynching crisis and the second, that Black Lives Matter is part of a tradition of Black people with even the most minimal amount of power using it to speak out. Of course, Black people have historically had many of their bodily senses curtailed and policed throughout history, whether it is the crime of reckless eyeballing,⁴⁵ the crime of existing in a whites-only location or the crime of speaking when not spoken to. Where Douglass and Wells spoke of a truth of crimes against humanity at the hands of slave owners, Black Lives Matter speaks of the same at the hands of the police, both ultimately condemning the society that allows such crimes to happen.

Gene Seymour situates the beginning somewhat closer to the modern day with his invocation of Kwame Ture's Black power rhetoric.⁴⁶ Both slogans were feared and hated by a white society that either misunderstood them or understood them but pretend not to, as that would allow for a culture war. Rima Vesely-Flad, meanwhile, situates its beginnings in a more conceptual time and place, seeing Black Lives Matter sprout from a longstanding sense of moral pollution that comes with the Black body.⁴⁷ She suggests that this pollution has led to the criminalization of the Black body, which has led to the relationship between poor Black bodies and the prison industrial complex. A system based on selling young Black bodies to prisons for

⁴³ Christopher J. Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁵ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011): 8.

⁴⁶ Gene Seymour, "Power Outages: The Old-New Politics of Black Protest," in *The Baffler* 33 (Winter 2016): 111.

⁴⁷ Rima Vesely-Flad, *Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies: Moral Pollution, Black Lives and the Struggle for Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017): 34.

labour ultimately necessitates further policing and police who have been trained to not care about those polluted bodies will in turn cause more harm to them leading to the movement.

Juliet Hooker has a similar conceptual understanding of the movement's beginning, suggesting that it is a response to the placement of Black Americans as American losers, whose position as losers is predicated on the neutered idea of respectable Black American politics, encapsulated by the likes of Martin Luther King as opposed to Malcolm X or any other activists who did not avoid the possibility of violence as an option.⁴⁸ Essentially, King's radical non-violent tactics are much easier to liberalize for white bourgeois populations and Hooker believes that this liberal reading of radical tactics allows bourgeois individuals to continue to ignore the problem and reactionary individuals to question every tactic that does not hold up to their understanding of non-violent resistance. This has led to a necessary revamp of Black American activism in the conception of Black Lives Matter.

While all of these positions have a certain amount of truth to them, I would suggest that Lucia Abbamonte's understanding of the roots of Black Lives Matter are the most to the point and arguably the most correct, with it simply coming from decades of underreporting of important information by the various departments of the American police.⁴⁹ Abbamonte decries the lack of clear information coming from various police departments around the United States, despite the fact that the 2014 Death in Custody Reporting Act mandates the necessity of said reporting.⁵⁰ In fact, 750 agencies have self-reported 400 justifiable homicides per year,⁵¹ despite the fact that The Counted Project, an independent project dedicated to the creation of a

⁴⁸ Juliet Hooker, "Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics: From Democratic Sacrifice to Democratic Repair," in *Political Theory* 44 (2016), 450.

⁴⁹ Lucia Abbamonte, *'Black Lives Matter': Cross-Media Resonance and the Iconic Turn of Language* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018): 7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

comprehensive database of police violence in the United States in 2015, found rates that were twice that amount.⁵² It should be kept in mind that the Counted Project only concerned itself with the year 2015, whereas the governmental information, coming from self-reports, seems to suggest that there is a steady amount of annual deaths, deaths which are somehow shown as a normal, necessary number. Furthermore, many states refuse to comply with the Death in Custody Reporting Act,⁵³ ensuring that there are plenty of deaths at the hands of the police that are going unreported. That is ultimately where I would suggest the origin of Black Lives Matter lies. Black Americans have suffered since their arrival in the country, but it is with the acceptance of the racist nature of American policing—policing in general, but the roots of American policing in slave catchers makes American policing a unique case—that the movement begins. Many of these issues can be solved with the dismantling and rebuilding of American policing, but few are willing to have that conversation and therein lies the problem.

The roots must also acknowledge the history of Black individuals killed at the hands of police officers. I would like to look at a small selection of such cases, mainly more well-known ones, but with the disclaimer that this is not meant to indicate that this is in any way definitive: American history is fraught with Black people being murdered by police officers, becoming so commonplace that the killings will only become well-known if they are violent or egregious enough. The first murder I would like to focus on, not because it is particularly exemplary, but rather because it shows just how easy it is to get away with such crimes, is the 1969 murder of Black Panther Fred Hampton. Hampton and associate Mark Clark were killed by Chicago police during a raid ostensibly for drugs.⁵⁴ What is important about the murder of Hampton is that he

⁵² Ibid., 9.

⁵³ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁴ Jeffrey Haas, *The Assassination of Fred Hampton: How the FBI and the Chicago Police Murdered a Black Panther* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010): 79.

was sleeping at the time. Not only that, but the officers had time to remove his pregnant girlfriend Deborah Johnson from the room before returning and fatally shooting him while he continued to sleep.⁵⁵ While this could be argued as a case of criminalization, in an us versus them situation, it still shows just how brazen police officers can be when their position in society remains unquestioned. The murder of Hampton echoed in 1985, when Philadelphia police dropped two bombs on a residential home, killing eleven members of the MOVE, an anarcho-primitivist communal Black power organization.⁵⁶ Similar to the Hampton murder, this incident showed how willing the American police are to kill Black individuals who scare them and how easily they can get away with acts of mass destruction, as this event also led to the destruction of dozens of houses in the surrounding area.⁵⁷ This need to punish Black people who go against the status quo, even if it puts others at harm, is a fairly constant theme, including the shooting of random individuals in the search for Christopher Dorner,⁵⁸ the use of a bomb disposal robot with a bomb to blow up Dallas shooting suspect Micah Johnson⁵⁹ or the more complicated recent shooting death of teenager Valentina Orellana-Peralta amidst the shooting murder of Daniel Elana-Lopez,⁶⁰ a Latino man shot by a Black officer, just to show that this need to destroy can even cross colour lines.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 80.

⁵⁶ Alan Yuhas, "Philadelphia's Osage Avenue Police Bombing, 30 Years On: 'This Story is a Parable,'" *The Guardian*, May 13, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/may/13/osage-avenue-bombing-philadelphia-30-years> (accessed January 14, 2022).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Sara Morrison, "Police Officer who Shot at Two Innocent Women 103 Times Won't Be Fired," *The Atlantic*, February 5, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/02/police-officers-who-shot-two-innocent-women-103-times-wont-be-fired/357771/> (accessed January 14, 2022).

⁵⁹ Kevin Sullivan, Tom Jackman and Brian Fung, "Dallas Police Used a Robot to Kill. What Does that Mean for the Future of Police Robots?" *The Washington Post*, July 21, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/dallas-police-used-a-robot-to-kill-what-does-that-mean-for-the-future-of-police-robots/2016/07/20/32ee114e-4a84-11e6-bdb9-701687974517_story.html (accessed January 14, 2022).

⁶⁰ "Valentina Orellana-Peralta: Teen Shot by Police in LA Dies in Mother's Arms," *BBC News*, December 29, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-59816567> (accessed January 4, 2022).

These comparisons to the modern situation with police violence become much more concrete in 1991, when George Holliday videotaped and released the video of four LAPD officers beating Rodney King in the streets. When the video reached the general public, the story that went along with it was that King was under the influence of drugs and the police were trying to break his arms and legs so they could arrest him.⁶¹ What is worse than this story is that it was generally accepted as the best course of action. This acceptance could be attributed to contemporary fears put forth by the American government at the time—whether the superpredator hoax, the war on drugs or numerous other scare tactics—or both could be seen as results of the same problem. Whatever the inciting factor may be, a large segment of the United States simply did not care about this act nor did they care about the miscarriage of justice when the police involved in the incident were found not guilty of their crimes, just as they always have. And just as the police had always escaped culpability, these trials were often followed by riots and this case was no different. The acquittal of the four officers led to arguably the most infamous riot in the United States, when Los Angeles erupted into six days of death and destruction. While Martin Luther King stated that riots are the voice of the unheard, those in power have always ensured that those voices remain unheard and the same is seen in these riots. As soon as a riot begins, the violence is decontextualized by reporters and officials. With the LA riots, the inciting incident has more or less been removed from the story, with the majority of the remembered events revolving around Black violence. Interestingly enough, the most oft-remembered aspect of the violence is the attack on Reginald Denny, a white truck driver driving through the violence. While this act is unconscionable and must be condemned, it is such a common occurrence to contextualize violence against Black people around a white victim, that it

⁶¹ Richard A. Serrano, “3 in King Beating Say They Feared for Lives: Police: The Detailed Account of the Incident is Contained in a 314-Page LAPD Internal Affairs Report,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 1991, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-05-21-mn-2282-story.html> (accessed January 14, 2022).

must be called out whenever it occurs. This same contextualization has occurred repeatedly in Black Lives Matter protests.

Finally, I would just like to take a moment to discuss the murder of Amadou Diallo. Diallo's death could have led to the formation of Black Lives Matter if it had happened just a decade later. He was a Guinean immigrant who was going home when he was stopped by four police officers. As he reached for his wallet, he was shot nineteen times.⁶² He was unarmed and the reason for the stop was stated as a resemblance to a rape suspect from a year earlier.⁶³ Diallo was murdered without cause, had his death covered up with lies and the officers who murdered him got away with it. This case was exemplary of the type of death that led to the origin of Black Lives Matter and it was unable to be hidden. However, due to the perception of police officers at the time, it was simply ignored. Whereas today, the media would need to criminalize the dead individual, even that was not necessary then, as the excuse that the officers thought he was reaching for a weapon was simply taken at face value. Almost exactly a decade later, Oscar Grant would be shot under somewhat similar circumstances and people would pay enough attention for a movement to be created in a few years.

Theoretical Contexts for a Movement

While the historical aspects of this dissertation are wholly rooted in Black American history, the theoretical aspects are rooted in the intersection between death and imagery, the theoretical understandings of protest and, ultimately, the question of why these images of death, images which have shown themselves to be invaluable in creating protests which create

⁶² Jane Fritsch, "The Diallo Verdict: The Overview; 4 Officers in Diallo Shooting are Acquitted of All Charges," *New York Times*, February 26, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/02/26/nyregion/diallo-verdict-overview-4-officers-diallo-shooting-are-acquitted-all-charges.html> (January 15, 2022).

⁶³ *Ibid.*

change—arguments have been made that these images do not directly create change, but I believe it is inarguable that they lead to the movements which create change—have been hidden until now. Of course, a large part of that is due to the deficit in technology—while George Holliday ran outside with a new camcorder, today’s media creators all have a high-definition camera on their person at all times—but I would suggest that a bigger reason for this lack of content has to do with the squeamishness that has always existed around such images, the paradoxical concept of good taste.⁶⁴

The ability to capture images of death on moving image media is a long-contested practice, as many question its ethical nature. Many of these ethical questions will be discussed later. However, it is first necessary to create a theoretical framework for the subject itself, leading us back to Roland Barthes’ iconic study of photography in *Camera Lucida*, a book which captures his fascination with death at its core. Barthes points out the ability of photography, and by extension moving image media, to capture a moment in a way to suggest *noeme*, that that has been.⁶⁵ When speaking of images of executed criminals, Barthes takes it a step further, suggesting that the photo dictates that he is dead, in a present sense, and that he is going to die, in a contemporary sense.⁶⁶ In other words, all photographed subjects are ultimately doomed to death. This statement is at the theoretical core of my research. The vast majority of the subjects of my dissertation have died and had their deaths captured as a series of repeatable images, meaning that they die more than just once. As Andre Bazin puts it, in his study of filmed footage of the death of a bullfighter, “on the screen, the toreador dies every afternoon.”⁶⁷ Not only that, but many of these deceased individuals have had their deaths recorded from various angles and

⁶⁴ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2004): 68.

⁶⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010): 77.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶⁷ André Bazin, “Death Every Afternoon,” in *Rite of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002): 31.

viewpoints, creating the comprehensive death footage that had previously only been afforded to the likes of John F. Kennedy.⁶⁸ I might even go so far as to say that even those subjects within this dissertation who continue to live are mere moments away from their photographs becoming reminders that they once existed.

It is also important to make a note about locality in relation to death images. As Susan Sontag pointed out, images of death that were most frequently visible in the 20th century tended to be images of the foreign dead, as that treatment was deemed unseemly for the locals, for “us.”⁶⁹ This “us” is also invoked by Lilie Chouliaraki in her study of the ironic spectator, wherein she suggests that, in the post-humanitarian age—with its shift away from individualized altruism towards institutionalized philanthropy⁷⁰—solidarity with vulnerable others is no longer about them, but about us and our ability—or inability—to empathize with them.⁷¹ This, along with the modern media’s representation of war that aims for an aura of impartial objectivity⁷² creates a new, useless form of philanthropy. This us versus them distinction was however ignored in one case, a case where both the local and the foreign were nationally internalized, the struggle of Black Americans against white supremacy. David Campbell identified the images of lynching as nothing less than evidence of this white supremacy.⁷³ That evidence served a variety of roles, everything from a threat to a commodity. However, what could not be expected was the eventual change of these images’ meanings, away from proof of white supremacy towards that of

⁶⁸ Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Observation on the Long Take," in *The Cinematic*, ed. David Company (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007): 84.

⁶⁹ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 70.

⁷⁰ Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013): 5.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁷² Lilie Chouliaraki, "Aestheticization of Suffering on Television," in *Visual Communication* 5, no. 3 (2006): 262.

⁷³ David Campbell, "Horrible Blindness: Images of Death in Contemporary Media," in *Journal for Cultural Research* 8 (2004): 59.

white brutality.⁷⁴ It is this change that gives those images their modern meaning. However, that switch took decades to occur—while the brutality was obvious, the ability to call it out was not yet attainable for many Black Americans. This theoretical construct is necessary for both the concept itself and the realization that, while the images discussed in this dissertation are similar to those of lynching in content, the switch in meaning occurs concurrently, no longer divided on temporal lines, but rather ideological and political lines.

Finally, it is necessary to look at a short, succinct quote from Jennifer Malkowski to put the current style of death video in focus: “the brief, spectacle-oriented video is king.”⁷⁵ Despite the long history of death in photos and moving images, the modern style of death video is an entirely different breed. People want to see death, available camera technology allows individuals to record death with a moment’s notice and there is no shortage of websites to host these images of death and destruction.⁷⁶ This goes a long way in explaining both the proliferation of corpses in mainstream media in recent years⁷⁷ and the rise in carnivalesque websites dedicated to a post-modern form of *memento mori*.⁷⁸ It is this spectacular video-mediated practice that leads to the introduction of this style of violence that is almost contradictory in its own self-presentation. Sue Tait details this contradiction in her defense of such imagery against a pornographic classification, when she states that the images are less objective than they appear and that their meaning is created through an audience response. While she objects to the idea of

⁷⁴ Amy Louise Wood, “Lynching Photography and the Visual Reproduction of White Supremacy,” in *American Nineteenth Century History* 6 (2005): 392.

⁷⁵ Jennifer Malkowski, *Dying in Full Detail: Mortality and Digital Documentary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017): 4.

⁷⁶ Shahbaz Khayambashi, “Blood and Guts in Living Colour: A Study of the Internet Death Video Community,” in *OMEGA—Journal of Death and Dying* 83 (2021): 391.

⁷⁷ Jacque Lynn Foltyn, “Dead Famous and Dead Sexy: Popular Culture, Forensics, and the Rise of the Corpse,” in *Mortality: Promoting the Interdisciplinary Study of Death and Dying* 13, (2008): 154.

⁷⁸ Khayambashi, “Blood and Guts in Living Colour,” 403.

looking as a civic duty,⁷⁹ she does point out that these images have been used as news by powerful people,⁸⁰ meaning that their immediate dismissal is short-sighted at best. The use of such imagery for a protest movement like Black Lives Matter only serves to prove Tait's thesis correct.

On that note, a secondary concept that requires a theoretical construction for the sake of this dissertation is the very idea of protest. The basics of protest as a concept are not necessarily a matter of much academic debate. As Karl-Dieter Opp outlines it, despite the varying definitions of protests and what can be deemed separable "protest activities," a protest is ultimately a joint action or behaviour, one which is not regular, among a multiplicity of people who object to one or more decisions of a target, with their goal being one that cannot be achieved by themselves without the help of the antagonists or a third party.⁸¹ While Opp continuously questions the accuracy of this definition, it seems accurate in relation to the type of protest discussed in this dissertation. Furthermore, Opp points to various other important theoretical constructs for an understanding of the reasons behind protest, aiming at positivity,⁸² the best results⁸³ and awareness of imbalances in social standing.⁸⁴ This reasoning must then be filtered through a Black lens to get a better understanding of the Black Lives Matter style of protest, a style that is ultimately inseparable from the concept of sousveillance. Sousveillance refers to the act of surveilling those in power to ensure their humane treatment of others, essentially policing the police. Speaking truth to power ultimately goes hand in hand with sousveillance, but Black Lives Matter puts a greater emphasis on sousveillance, as the ability to record and stream both negative

⁷⁹ Sue Tait, "Pornographies of Violence? Internet Spectatorship on Body Horror," in *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25 (2008): 93.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁸¹ Karl-Dieter Opp, *Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements* (London: Routledge, 2009): 34.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

acts by the police and positive acts by protestors has been one of the most important aspects of their activism.

It is similarly important to be aware that a large part of the reason for this constant sousveillance has to do with the fact that the other witnesses of protests, the media, have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo and will, in turn, frame protests in a way that allows the status quo to remain unquestioned.⁸⁵ Didier Bigo points to the concept of a Banopticon, a Foucauldian construct wherein a panoptical society places a certain group, as a whole, under scrutiny, leading to a blurring of the very concept of citizenship.⁸⁶ Black individuals have always been a victim of Banoptical oversurveillance and the only way to fight back is a mixture of sousveillance and self-surveillance. Leading back to mediated framing, the powers-that-be have a vested interest in ensuring that citizens do not become aware of the issues at hand. This is done through a mixture of foregrounding violence,⁸⁷ ignoring peaceful protest,⁸⁸ making defamatory connections between current protest and previous acts of violence⁸⁹ and, tangentially, only focusing on protests that will allow them to push an anti-other agenda—for example, focusing extensively on protests in enemy nations, while ignoring protests at home.⁹⁰ While this is often done through decontextualizing images and pushing violence, this is also done through a Mitchellian process of characterizing the opposing side as clones. W.J.T. Mitchell, in his study of the war on terror, identifies the clone as a result of an anxiety that comes as a result of the first

⁸⁵ Alexa Robertson, *Screening Protest: Visual Narratives of Dissent Across Time, Space and Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2019): 59.

⁸⁶ Didier Bigo, “Globalized (In)Security: The Field and the Ban-opticon,” in *Alternatives 27* (2002): 82.

⁸⁷ Robertson, *Screening Protest*, 60.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

international war against a what, as opposed to a who.⁹¹ In this situation, the clone, faceless, unidentifiable, imagined and only capable of causing destruction,⁹² is both a source of deep terror and easier to kill, owing to its lack of humanity. This clone has found its way into national discourse, allowing reactionaries to turn them into scapegoats for every issue and to commit acts of violence upon them without any need for self-reflection. This has led to every issue being blamed on Antifa or BLM, decontextualized buzzwords to strip their opponent of any ethos, pathos or mission statement. This has also led to these reactionaries seeing no issue with acts of violence against their clone opponents who can be further connected to their tangible enemies, the likes of George Soros and a number of other democratic party figures taking the role of puppet master. This can take the form of passing legislation to make it legal to run over protestors with one's car⁹³ or making one's intentions to harm protestors known ahead of time and facing no consequences when going ahead with those threats. It goes without saying that violence committed by the clones is always real, but the ones committed by their opponents might as well not be. The mixture of lacking humanity for the clone and the long history of dehumanizing Black Americans has finally come together in a series of violent right-wing actions.

Finally, I find it necessary to focus on a smaller theoretical field, that which Sontag has repeatedly referred to as an argument of "good taste." An argument of good taste can apply to so many areas of this dissertation, with a specific focus on the reactionary politics of the opposition,

⁹¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011): 1.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 74.

⁹³ "A Judge Has Blocked the Anti-Riot Law Passed in Florida After George Floyd Protests," *NPR*, September 9, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/09/1035687247/florida-anti-riot-law-ron-desantis-george-floyd-black-lives-matter-protests> (accessed January 15, 2022).

but, as Sontag points out, good taste is “always a repressive standard”⁹⁴ when invoked by those in charge and the supporters of the status quo. As such, good taste is often invoked to keep images of wrongdoing away from the public eye under the guise of decency. The sort of good taste that would lead to the distribution of lynching images with the genitals of the victim covered.⁹⁵ In this case, it is used under the guise of protecting the victims when it would be used specifically to protect the offenders. This is the reason why so much of this violence was kept away from potential audiences until recently. Good taste has also taken on a new post-Trump position. Transgressive political pandering from the right has become something to be celebrated in recent years, with vulgar attacks being thrown at their opponents without a second thought. What continues however is the call for decency from their opponents. This is what leads the right to call for the death and rape of their opponents, while simultaneously feigning outrage when the same is leveled at them.

Audiences clamour for violence; they want to know blood and death.⁹⁶ And yet, a mixture of superstition and abjection has kept the dead away from audiences, even more so when that death is real.⁹⁷ In fact, even in this age where any image of carnage is a simple click away for the curious, we continue to be told to ignore our own base instincts in this field.⁹⁸ The question becomes why? The answer is multifaceted. The most obvious reason has to do with the abject. As Tait points out, in the modern world where death is more oft-discussed, gore is seen as realism.⁹⁹ Not only is gory detail seen as proof of verisimilitude, but a lack of gore will in turn

⁹⁴ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 68.

⁹⁵ Malkowski, *Dying in Full Detail*, 37.

⁹⁶ Vivian Sobchack, "The Violent Dance: A Personal Memoir of Death in the Movies," in *Screening Violence*, ed. Stephen Prince, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000): 115.

⁹⁷ Amos Vogel, "The Ultimate Secret: Death," in *Film as a Subversive Art* (London: C.T. Editions, 2005): 263.

⁹⁸ Khayambashi, "Blood and Guts in Living Colour," 404.

⁹⁹ Sue Tait, "Visualizing Technologies and the Ethics and Aesthetics of Screening Death," in *Science as Culture* 18 (2009): 336.

harm the sense of veracity of an image. Julia Kristeva suggested that the corpse is the ultimate abject, in addition to the gory detail that led there.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, the idea of the abject, similar to the umbrella term of good taste, will work well enough to keep curious eyes away. The abject is so successfully used in this way that I would suggest that its invocation leads to a form of *autopsychobia*—*phobia* stemming from fear and *autopsy* from its literal definition, the act of seeing with one's own eyes. In other words, this *autopsychobia* comes as a result of hearing about the abject in enough detail that the curious viewer would refuse to view it. This refusal would take the place of viewing the object, leading to a sense of having-already-seen. This feeling keeps the potential viewer ignorant of what is actually occurring in the image and keeps the image from reaching too many people who could look beyond the abject within the image and see the wrong being signified elsewhere in the image.

Another, more sympathetic reason comes from Elizabeth Dauphinée's belief that bodily pain defies visual representation.¹⁰¹ She continues on to suggest that images of pain only serve to fetishize pain¹⁰² and lead to the replacement of real pain with its representation.¹⁰³ In short, since the pain of another cannot be experienced by a witness, sympathy is merely political and cannot in any way alleviate the original pain.¹⁰⁴ While this is absolutely true, Dauphinée does not take into account action that comes from the visual representation. While pain cannot be sympathized with, it can lead to righteous indignation. And while that indignation can be useless— Dauphinée points to circulation of violent images being a continuation of the violence they portray¹⁰⁵— useful indignation has shown itself capable of creating change. This is to say that the mere act of

¹⁰⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982): 3.

¹⁰¹ Elizabeth Dauphinée, "The Politics of the Body in Pain: Reading the Ethics of Imagery," in *Security Dialogue* 38 (2007): 139.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

viewing these images may well be ethically suspect, but their use to affect change may question Dauphinée's belief.

A third reason behind the lack of such images in the public conscious has to do with the racialized nature of such imagery. In his study on the death of Kennedy, Craig Warren points out that Kennedy's death led to the assumption of the culture of victimhood for white men.¹⁰⁶ After centuries of victimizing everyone around them and decades of image creation of those abuses, white men took on the role of victim in the 1960s, at which point so much of the internal abuse was claimed by them. While racialized people were still suffering, it was often avoided by, for example, focusing on white victims in riots started in response to the victimization of Black people—many Black people died in the LA riots, but Reginald Denny is held up as *the* victim from that period—or focusing on war crimes only when it is the enemy murdering white Americans. This narrative was changed with the arrival of video footage of the victimization of Black people by often white police officers. And the attempts to change the narrative, numerous as they were, simply did not work.

Finally, attention must be given to simple technological changes. Images are an important commodity and, just like any other commodity, tend to be mediated through powerful corporations. As such, images were distributed at the whim of news conglomerates and governmental forces. Therefore, any images that were deemed dangerous, unnewsworthy or otherwise “not in good taste” were easier to keep away from potential viewers. It was only with the advancement of such technology for a wider audience and at a cheaper price, both for creation and distribution of content, that the ability to share such images became more commonplace, owing to a lack of gatekeeping on alternative platforms, ones dedicated

¹⁰⁶ Craig A. Warren, “Presidential Wounds: The JFK Assassination and the White Male Body,” in *Men and Masculinities* 10 (2008): 560.

exclusively to images of death.¹⁰⁷ This begins with cell phones, which, due to their ubiquitous cameras, become an object dedicated to capturing atrocities.¹⁰⁸ Along with the phone camera comes a variety of platforms which can host these images which, owing to the general leakiness of the internet,¹⁰⁹ begin to multiply and spread. The main platforms for such images become social media. Unfortunately, much of social media is similarly owned by corporations. Thus, YouTube videos of atrocities begin to disappear because of their policies, only staying if they are deemed particularly newsworthy or educational.¹¹⁰ As these social media platforms become interdependent,¹¹¹ they also begin to police each other. It is also the fact that Web 2.0 is more difficult to change on a personal level¹¹² and that the majority of any social medium's content is developed by a small number of users¹¹³ that leads to a platform that can very easily censor its content by giving more importance to a particular subsection of its userbase. Reddit has attempted to counter this issue by giving its audience a certain sense of pseudo-anonymity and taking the social out of social media,¹¹⁴ but even they are not above this, shown by its frequent removal of subreddits that deal in graphic imagery. While these subreddits again tend toward the carnivalesque, their content seems to be the real issue.¹¹⁵ This is the contradiction at play here, as

¹⁰⁷ Khayambashi, "Blood and Guts in Living Colour," 398.

¹⁰⁸ Michelle Caswell, "Instant Documentation: Cell-Phone-Generated Records in the Archives," in *The American Archivist* 72 (2009): 138.

¹⁰⁹ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2016): 103.

¹¹⁰ "Violent or Graphic Content Policy," *YouTube*, accessed January 17, 2022, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2802008>.

¹¹¹ José Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013): 41.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹¹⁴ Adrienne Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community and Play: Learning from Reddit* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015): 7.

¹¹⁵ Khayambashi, "Blood and Guts in Living Colour," 399.

the rise in such imagery has also been met by a decline in online locations dedicated to it.¹¹⁶ It is this mixture of theoretical constructs that inform my research in this dissertation.

Literature Review on a Movement

This literature review is not exhaustive of all of the research in this field. Instead, I believe that the literature review should focus on a series of works that most importantly inform my research. These works are from a series of varying academic backgrounds, but they deal with the building blocks of this dissertation, from race and images to policing and spectacle. These four fields ultimately serve as the main components of this dissertation and, within them, they are in turn best informed by ten authors.

First, I would like to begin with some quintessential studies of Blackness, many of them within an American context, that have led to the basis of this research. The first, arguably most important theorist herein is the only one whose work predates the Black Lives Matter movement, even though Fanon's work has unquestionably influenced the movement in many ways. In his works, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon sets the boundaries for Black revolution. In the former work, he discusses the issues of Black self-loathing that are discussed, in less inflammatory language, by the likes of Hooker and Vesely-Flad after him. Fanon posits that the main goal for the Black individual in a white supremacist world is to be white.¹¹⁷ This goal is attempted through various acts, such as learning the colonizer's language,¹¹⁸ attacking those they deem Blacker than themselves¹¹⁹ and starting

¹¹⁶ In the years since my master's research, all but one of the internet death video websites that I studied have closed down. They often give different reasons, but it is an unusual statistic. They often get replaced by another, similar website, but I have not sought out their replacements.

¹¹⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986): 10.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

relationships with white individuals.¹²⁰ After firmly establishing the existence of this goal, in a self-loathing, seemingly anti-Black way, Fanon introduces his belief that it is not enough to understand the world around oneself, but rather one must strive to change it.¹²¹ While Fanon's earlier insinuations seem to suggest an internalized racist mentality, his introduction of the concept of epidermalization shows that his truth is that there is nothing inherently internalized about this self-loathing, as "it is the racist who creates his inferior."¹²² Whereas Fanon states his need for anonymity, his skin makes him stand out in a crowd and leaves him open to violence and ridicule. This is why Fanon calls for a revolution in the latter work. No longer even using the racist language as a rhetorical device, Fanon calls for violent decolonization¹²³—as decolonization, as a response to the inherently violent act of colonization, is similarly inherently violent—to ensure that "the native" is given a voice, a voice that is drowned out by everyone who has a vested interest in the native not being heard.¹²⁴

These explosive works are followed decades later by calmer, but no less angry, academic works. In 2016, Juliet Hooker wrote "Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of US Black Politics," wherein she discusses the paradoxes of a nation that celebrates a dead Martin Luther King while decrying the politics and protests of a contemporary Black movement. She suggests a weaponized form of political gaslighting, wherein Black Americans must acquiesce to their position as American losers and accept their losses in a civil manner in order to not sully the reputation of King.¹²⁵ This is seen time and again when the relatives of dead Black individuals are seen forgiving the people who hurt their family, these people being held up as shining

¹²⁰ Ibid., 39.

¹²¹ Ibid., 17.

¹²² Ibid., 93.

¹²³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963): 61.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 77.

¹²⁵ Hooker, "Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics," 450.

beacons of Christianity, when no such similar thing is expected of white people who openly speak ill of those who harmed them without a second thought. She goes on to attribute this feeling to a series of preconceived notions, such as the perception that non-violent resistance was not itself a radical political act,¹²⁶ that Black anger is inherently illegitimate¹²⁷ and that protests must adhere to inclusivity and existing legal and political order.¹²⁸ Hooker believes that accepting these liberal ideas, even symbolically like in the usage of the submissive hands up, don't shoot gesture, is ultimately harmful to any protest movement and that a struggle against such beliefs is necessary.¹²⁹

Rima Vesely-Flad followed Hooker with her 2017 work, *Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies*, furthering these notions previously put forth by Fanon that the Black body is considered inherently threatening, even if the actions of the body's inhabitant are not.¹³⁰ This belief is what has led to both the criminalization of Blackness and, interestingly, the association of criminality with violence. As Vesely-Flad points out, American prisons originally incorporated a model of rehabilitation, with hard labour meant to teach work skills.¹³¹ While this idea ignores classism and other forms of non-racist discrimination, it is still correct in its assertion that white prisoners were ultimately given a similar chance to succeed as white non-prisoners. In fact, before the 1960s, white prisoners were portrayed as people who had simply taken a wrong turn.¹³² It was with the higher imprisonment rate of Black people with more rights in the late 60s—when resistance was seen as war against the state¹³³—that led to the archetype of the dark-skinned,

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 451.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 458.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 461.

¹³⁰ Vesely-Flad, *Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies*, xvi.

¹³¹ Ibid., 47.

¹³² Ibid., 75.

¹³³ Ibid., 82.

violent criminal who chose evil over good.¹³⁴ This is where Vesely-Flad situates the beginning of the school-to-prison pipeline, with the introductions of various laws that disproportionately affect Black people and lead to further attempts at criminalization and the further need for a new protest movement, as well as images of a new Blackness.

In the same year, Christopher Lebron wrote *The Making of Black Lives Matter*, a historical treatise on what led to the movement. Outside of this historical understanding, he does also have some important insight into the psychology behind the movement's psychology. At the very beginning, he posits that Black Lives Matter was not entirely in response to police violence, but rather to white people holding on to the days when violence against Black people was acceptable.¹³⁵ In other words, this is not exclusively a police problem; it is just that the police are the perfect manifestation of this loss of power over others. He goes on to point out that this idea that all Americans have equal rights is an idea that must be shamed and disproven,¹³⁶ as it does not take into effect that rights are useless for the oppressed in an abusive society.¹³⁷ He concludes this work by suggesting that the white imagination needs to be counter-colonized,¹³⁸ because they spend more time questioning protest against abusive authority than they do questioning why people keep dying to begin with, before concluding with a final Fanonian notion: violent protest is absolutely justified.¹³⁹

The next group of necessary texts are related to the use of imagery, both generally and with death as their content. In *Picture Theory* (1994), W.J.T. Mitchell serves as an introduction to this field with his suggestion that the 21st century's method of communication moves from

¹³⁴ Ibid., 76.

¹³⁵ Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter*, 2.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 133.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 103.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 135.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 156.

Richard Rorty's linguistic turn towards a pictorial turn.¹⁴⁰ This pictorial turn has in turn been confirmed by many who have written since. This pictorial turn goes beyond linguistics and semiotics into a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies and figurality.¹⁴¹ This interconnection leads to the problematization of spectatorship and the confusion of visual literacy.¹⁴² This is also heavily owed to Mitchell's conception of metapictures, pictures about pictures, which continue to complicate the sense of visibility in the modern world.¹⁴³ It should be noted that these metapictures also bleed into the real world, becoming incorporated into Mitchell's theorization around clones and cybernetic reproduction.

Mitchell's theory is heavily dependent on visibility, which is explained in clearer detail by Nicholas Mirzoeff in his 2011 book, *A Right to Look*. He defines visibility as the authority over the ability to look, ultimately the antithesis of the right to look.¹⁴⁴ Visibility is the result of a three-step process: classification by categories, separating the classified by a belief of social organization and making this separation seem correct, the process of aestheticization.¹⁴⁵ This process of visibility is, in turn, used to make all sorts of legal and social decisions, everything from taking the right of seeing away¹⁴⁶ to creating power structures.¹⁴⁷ It is through this process of authoritarian structuring that the use of images is incorporated and used to create sociocultural hierarchies within a society. It is also in response to this visibility that movements like Black Lives Matter begin to use images as weapons.

¹⁴⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): 11.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁴⁴ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 2.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

The next logical step here comes with Sontag, who incorporated ideas of visuality through a photographic medium-specific lens in her 1977 work, *On Photography*, and later got even more specific with the death angle on imagery with 2003's *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Sontag saw the very act of photography as a process of appropriation of who or what is being photographed.¹⁴⁸ Not only is a relationship created between the two sides, but there is also a self-given power to alter the photographed in various ways.¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, photos justify and become evidential,¹⁵⁰ because they are inherently seen as truthful.¹⁵¹ However, Sontag does not see this truthfulness as a positive, as she also sees photographs as proof of non-intervention.¹⁵² Even when they shock and disturb—often seen as more disturbing than the real event¹⁵³—they mainly serve to alienate us from the world,¹⁵⁴ as their purpose is less about truth and more about spectacle.¹⁵⁵ Decades later, Sontag's thoughts on photographs did not change, as she continued to see the use of imagery as proof of non-intervention, believing that most people who acknowledge atrocity photographs are not doing much more than that.¹⁵⁶ However, she does also acknowledge the absolute interconnectedness of photos and atrocity in the 21st century, pointing to the expectation of photo evidence as proof.¹⁵⁷ This proof may be misleading at times¹⁵⁸ or differ based on western ideologies,¹⁵⁹ but what remains is a necessity to provide proof lest the lack thereof lead to conspiracy theories.

¹⁴⁸ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1977): 4.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁵⁶ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 40.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

Jennifer Malkowski could well be seen as an ideological continuation to Sontag, focusing more closely on death imagery, particularly in the time after Sontag's death. In *Dying in Full Detail* (2017), Malkowski's focus lays in the historicity, aesthetics and politics of death images. She introduces the idea of "too late" early in the book as a driving force in the consumption of such imagery, the fact that the viewer is too late to stop, display or witness the event.¹⁶⁰ This temporal disconnect is ultimately a big part of the appeal, but it is not the only part. Malkowski goes on to point to various, more mainstream, important genres of death, connecting them to historical importance, everything from lynching and holocaust photos to the video depicting the death of Neda Agha-Soltan. These photos are held up as politically necessary,¹⁶¹ which gives their display a sort of ethical pass. The Agha-Soltan video is specifically given more focus, as it provided a rare intimate close-up of the dying as well as of a struggle.¹⁶² It is this political signification that also leads to a new style of reporting, wherein the submissive woman from a dangerous country is reported as an ultimate good, whereas the Black American man will be criminalized as soon as the reporting begins.¹⁶³ This is also why Malkowski appeals for contextless, raw video.¹⁶⁴ It is this aesthetic that has made the internet death video such a fascinating commodity. This aesthetic is not uniform but can incorporate signifiers of Hollywood realism, such as shaky cameras and dramatic bleeding,¹⁶⁵ or it could be oddly anti-climactic, even though it is often the bloodshed that goes viral,¹⁶⁶ despite the serene death being far rarer.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁰ Malkowski, *Dying in Full Detail*, 28.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

There are two specific ideas that are covered extensively in individual works that I believe deserve a bit of attention here. First, I would like to look at Alex Vitale’s 2017 work, *The End of Policing*. Vitale has written the most in-depth text on the problem of policing in the United States, explaining why this is not an issue that can be solved with interventive reform, as the problem is one that goes to the very core of policing. This is a result of inherently racist ideology—the broken window policing model continues to echo into modern policing practices and affects racialized people at a much higher rate¹⁶⁸—and the advancement of a police warrior mentality, wherein the police are taught that they are at war with the public instead of their guardians.¹⁶⁹ This intersection of ideologies, along with their inadequate knowledge of law,¹⁷⁰ leads to many more racialized people being killed as their very existence becomes criminalized, owing to a basis of “see unexpected movement, shoot.”¹⁷¹ Vitale also devotes a large segment of his book criticizing the idea of colourblind policing, as he shows that the hiring of racialized police officers has done nothing to solve the issue.¹⁷² He attributes this to the unquestionable fact that the police are merely maintainers of the status quo.¹⁷³ As such, even the most sympathetic police officers will inevitably arrest mostly racialized people for low-level crimes because that is just what is done.¹⁷⁴ Finally, Vitale shows that the definition of a community, in policing terminology, exclusively refers to long-term, property owning residents, so the voices of renters, youths, immigrants and those experiencing homelessness are ignored, leading to even community policing becoming a tool for the status quo.¹⁷⁵ In fact, beyond protecting private

¹⁶⁸ Alex S. Vitale, *The End of Policing* (London: Verso, 2017): 10.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

property, policing has mainly existed to control radicals,¹⁷⁶ worker movements¹⁷⁷ and slaves,¹⁷⁸ with this way of thinking leading to a rarity of felony arrests. In short, policing does not keep people safe.

Finally, a note must be made on a concept that runs the gamut of this entire dissertation and even a large number of the works cited herein. That is Guy Debord's idea of the spectacle, defined and expanded upon in his 1967 work, *The Society of the Spectacle*.¹⁷⁹ In the modern world, everything that I have mentioned so far—death, protest, policing—is a spectacle. Debord defines spectacle as social relation between people as mediated by images.¹⁸⁰ These spectacles, in turn, become a way to present life,¹⁸¹ despite also being a concrete inversion of life.¹⁸² Even though spectacle and reality both contain objective reality,¹⁸³ spectacle is the final result of the dominant mode of production, in this case being society's realized unreality,¹⁸⁴ a result of economic subjugation¹⁸⁵ and the colonization of social life by commodity.¹⁸⁶ Spectacle further degrades being to appearing,¹⁸⁷ capitalizes imagery,¹⁸⁸ fetishizes commodity,¹⁸⁹ alienates us,¹⁹⁰ and reduces time¹⁹¹ and space.¹⁹² In short, spectacle is the peak of ideology¹⁹³ and its confusion

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 41.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 42.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 47.

¹⁷⁹ This book is not referenced in page numbers, but rather with numbered ideas. As such, any number in a citation is the number of the idea and not the page number.

¹⁸⁰ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 1970): 4.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 1.

¹⁸² Ibid., 2.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 8.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 16.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 42.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 17.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 34.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 36.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 32.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 148.

¹⁹² Ibid., 165.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 215.

with reality is at once extremely harmful and almost unavoidable. This is why it is important, throughout this dissertation, to point it out when visible and be aware when not.

Leading into the Issue

It is with these ideas that I begin my dissertation. An understanding of these ideas will, in turn, allow the reader a more thorough understanding of where my research begins and what its base is composed of. The historical predecessors to Black Lives Matter must be understood to understand the lengthy history of Black liberation activism and to understand why this movement came about so seemingly abruptly. The theory behind the dissertation conveys both the knowledge that needs to be gathered to begin the discussion and the ideas that need to be contended with to understand the rhetoric. And finally, the key texts will allow for a necessary, preconceived understanding of the direction this dissertation will go in, both theoretically and politically. With these tools in hand, this dissertation can begin without fear of missing information or misunderstanding.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Images and Actions

We are living in revolutionary times. Throughout the world, young people with left-leaning ideologies are gathering in large numbers to fight an inestimable variety of social ills. One of the most important and most visible of these groups are the groups that have made a mission of holding police service organizations responsible for acts of police brutality and extrajudicial murders against Black individuals. These groups are connected under one name, which also serves as a slogan, a hashtag and a battle cry: Black Lives Matter. What I am most curious about in this dissertation is how images, particularly images distributed and accessed online, aid in the creation of this movement. My first question would ultimately be how did these images cause such emotional and political change? What was it about the images specifically that led to the creation of a national—perhaps even international—movement that was missing from, say, the video footage of the murder of Oscar Grant several years earlier? And what about the choice of images? Many of those who have come out against the movement have questioned the choice of smiling, non-threatening images, while also attempting to replace those images in the media with more candid images of the deceased appearing shirtless, with weapons or showing certain gestures, as if to suggest that those images would prove that the individual was deserving of death, which brings up a further question: how does one go about representing a murder victim, someone thrust into the spotlight long after they have any sense of agency left, when that representation may well be how they are forever seen by history?

This would, in turn, lead to questions about how images work to further and impede the movement as well. How important is imagery for the furthering of a popular activist movement? Black Lives Matter, in particular, has always been a very image-focused movement, coming into

being in the age of online hashtag activism. Beyond the imaged aesthetics of the hashtag, Black Lives Matter has also been heavily predicated on the online proliferation of images and videos of their protests, the movement spreading further only through the viralization of their images. However, even that viral element is not as simple as it sounds: there are various layers to that spreading of information as it relates to the message being heard by the correct public.

So, if an image can be used, to equal degrees of power, by supporters and reactionaries, what is there to be said about images as a political medium? These are some of the other layers that I wish to incorporate into this study, as far as politics in imagery goes. With the rise of Black Lives Matter, there was also a rise in reactionary racism and similar images being created by the other side. These images are just as important to study, if one is to understand how images can be politicized. Even in this case, however, there is some potential for misunderstanding, as the lack of inherent politics in images also means that there is always a risk of misinterpretation, especially in cases of reactionary context collapse, wherein a reactionary individual takes an image used by Black Lives Matter, for example, as an anti-Black Lives Matter text through a bit of simple Photoshop or text addition. Social media, after leading to the creation of “trolls” and similar phenomena, has brought about a world where accuracy sometimes takes a back seat to attempts at causing harm. As such, images whose sole purpose is to cause a reaction will sometimes find their way to an audience who refuses to fact check and takes them at face value: sometimes this is done maliciously and sometimes it is done to troll, the intentional posting of insincerely inflammatory messages to provoke an emotional response, a phenomenon that could be argued to know no political boundaries.

Blatant satire can be repurposed without much issue and, if the audience is looking for something that the blatant satire provides, its perception will not suffer for it. Sometimes, all that

is needed is a negative angle on one's opponents. So, even if the angle is inherently and obviously untrue, all it takes is that viralization to make a falsehood into a fact, an act that is so much easier with photographs due both to the perception of verisimilitude that comes with photographs and the easy availability of photo manipulation technology. In other words, all one needs to create a fact is Photoshop capabilities. Of course, there is the added fact that once a photograph creates a fact, that fact can be verbalized and continue life, knowing that there is indeed visual proof of it somewhere. In short, the questions that are of interest to my research revolve around the political importance of images as they relate to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Research Journey

My research process for this project involved quite a bit of immersion, as I delved into a variety of online spaces and their cultures, leading into a series of visual and semiotic analyses. It is necessary at this point to explain just what will be analyzed. This dissertation required a lot of online lurking: while the events are still fairly contemporary, a lot of the material and discourse I required is inherently ephemeral in nature. As such, while the content can often be found with a bit of work, its context will differ based on the location it is found in, which will in turn dictate the discourse behind it. Since a lot of this material was found on public online forums and a lot of these forums have their own far too often reactionary biases, this provided a roadblock for a more progressive research perspective. This issue was solved by looking at a series of sources with a diversity of thoughts around the same content when necessary or attempting to find neutral sources for the content. A website like Reddit, for example, was a major asset to my research, as the thought processes are fairly well divided: there are forums devoted to left-wing

and right-wing causes as well as forums devoted to mocking the other side, forums devoted to Black causes, anti-police causes, pro-police causes and just about any other cause imaginable.

While these sources were useful for about half of this dissertation, the other half required a similarly divided series of ideologies, but with the addition of something more akin to respectability, even when the platform's pretense of respectability is wholly rooted in lies and slander. This required a thorough research of news sources that dealt with the topics surrounding the Black Lives Matter protests, whether the deaths or the protests and whether they took on a mainstream, reactionary or alternative viewpoint and editorial style. This required stretching the meaning of the word "news" at certain points, as disinformation sources created by nameless individuals often found their way into my searches.

This work relied on a non-random, purposive sample. The biases embedded in this search were mitigated by going to certain websites, knowing the sort of material and ideological biases therein that I was seeking and then picking out the first ones that appeared, whether by recency or popularity. I should note my awareness of the fact that my searches are inherently biased and incapable of being random, not just because of the obvious reasons, but also because of my device's history, which brings with it certain algorithms and search histories that ensure that the results I receive are results that were designed specifically for me. This is not really an issue, however, because ultimately, this is a project that is informed by my own exposure to the content I study. Thus, this familiarity may be a positive.

This choice, deliberate and purposive in nature, is important, because it allows for a sense of realism in relation to how one would come across such content, thrown at you randomly and curated by a community. Obviously, true realism is not replicable, but this project needed a simulation of my own immersion in the zeitgeist of the time. As such, it was much more useful

for me to seek out certain content—content that I remember dealing with in the past—in favour of seeking non-biased but arbitrary choices. In turn, my own biases, while obviously present, are limited by the power of the communities whose content I analyze, whether the online communities, the Black communities or even the racist communities, communities of which I am generally an outsider. This is how I have counteracted my own biases: by seeking out content created by people who hold ideological beliefs that I have witnessed throughout my research in equal amounts, when necessary. This leads to a trove of content that, while not an entirely accurate representation of a realistic collection of such content, is the closest that a simulation could come to such a state.

With the accumulation of this reservoir of discourse, I began to separate it all across a variety of lines, whether temporal, political, spatial or otherwise, and then began dissecting the texts to see just what the sides at the time thought of the events taking place and see what the images they wished to portray were, in regard to both ideology and accuracy. Looking at a representative survey of these images—images of death, images of redemption, images of criticism—will allow for an understanding of the general zeitgeist of the political atmosphere of the time. This analysis of the various discourses around the subject in turn translated into the various chapters. This semiotic analysis, in various iterations, took the form of studying interactions in videos, studying contrasting opinions in various media platforms and even looking at differing participatory media across political lines.

Notes on Identity as Researcher

I have been researching images for the majority of my academic career and the results frequently surprise me more than they could possibly surprise anyone else. With the information that I had at my disposal, I could imagine that the potential outcomes will find a certain

politically fixed bent to the discourse behind the images. This is to say that the images ultimately exist because of the politics behind them, as opposed to being politically sound because of their content: a left-leaning image is only left-leaning because of the way it is presented and/or received, as opposed to the content within it. This seems like the correct answer, at least, until I stop to consider the images which work across political boundaries, the images which create an affective response, which affirm the viewer's political perception, in the left and the right without any changes to the image. What is to be said of those images which have a clear political leaning at their creation, but which, in turn, switch political sides? Perhaps the political landscape in an online society is not as simple as we have convinced ourselves it is.

My research process is owed to my outsider status as related to the Black Lives Matter movement. I went into this research process with a certain set of beliefs, beliefs that I have picked up during my academic career and which have been created through a certain set of identity politics that dictate my day-to-day existence. Since I am not an American black individual, I recognize that I may not have certain deeply held understanding about their day-to-day existences, which could distort my understanding of these images. This is partially why I do not think that I can consider the outcome of the visual and semiotic analyses without a certain set of blind spots. This outsider status could risk pushing my research into more problematic terrain, which is something of which I strived to be more well aware. This could lead to a question of academic veracity, the need to consider whether the truths of the individuals involved with the creation of the movement are more important or whether the deep study with an academic and/or theoretical understanding of things could lead to an equally fruitful dissertation. In other words, it will be necessary to consider whether the author, in a Barthesian sense, is living or dead; of

course, these questions all only arise based on the understanding that there will be a fundamental disagreement between myself and the individuals who founded the movement.

Of course, that academic understanding has to come from a theoretical source, beyond just a somewhat vague methodological structure. There has to be some theoretical backing for my insistence on the importance of imagery for this work to have any academic importance attached to it. My theoretical framework currently mostly revolves around the works within three disciplines: namely the semiotic work of Roland Barthes, the works on theories around pictures and the right to look by the likes of W.J.T. Mitchell and Nicholas Mirzoeff and the visual method theory of Gillian Rose. These works are both fairly canonical and could run the risk of being seen as outdated, but are all deeply engrained in image-based theory and, I believe, have been steadily studied and incorporated into more modern theory in a way that ensures that any blind spots are corrected and that their theories never become fully outdated, especially since all theorists built upon the works of others before them.

Methodological Theory

Roland Barthes' work on semiotics was unquestionably the most important theoretical construct for my study of imagery in Black Lives Matter. As Barthes discusses throughout *Mythologies*, every small detail within a photograph is there for a reason, to advertise or express a thought or concept,¹⁹⁴ ensuring that an image can indeed be worth a thousand words. In Barthes' examples, the image is usually an advertisement¹⁹⁵ or an event,¹⁹⁶ but the semiotics of imagery can also exist in imagery which has not been set up ahead of time, sometimes unintentionally, frequently intentionally. For example, a video depicting the murder of a Black

¹⁹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 109.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

individual at the hands of a white police officer usually has a lot to say about white supremacy, the brute force of police and the societal inferiority of Black people. These are not concepts that have been intentionally placed into the image, but they exist there inherently. They are what Barthes refers to elsewhere as *studia*, what causes an initial attraction to a photograph,¹⁹⁷ with the occasional element becoming a *punctum*, a detail that pierces the viewer's attention.¹⁹⁸ It is with publicity photos and reactionary propaganda that the semiotics tend to become more intentional and important. A strong-looking Black woman standing in front of a low-angled camera can be taken to evoke thoughts of strength, but, with the invocation of the death of the author, these images can also suggest thoughts of arrogance, the same way that an ironic meme can be taken without a hint of irony due to the signs that have been placed within it. Ultimately, the discourse that is created within and without the images is heavily reliant on the signs that are visible through the images, as well as several extratextual and paratextual elements, making semiotics an incredibly important theoretical practice for this work.

In relation to semiotics, I have also made the choice to refer to certain words and phrases as images, often symbolic images. While the phrase “Black Lives Matter,” for example, may not often be accepted as a semiotically important image—in fact, these words may even be seen as more relevant to the linguistic turn—its visual representation is sometimes more important than its aural representation. Not only is this phrase often stylized in protest signs and hashtags—the hashtag itself is an important visual—but the written repetition of a phrase will often serve to turn that written form into an image. As such, I would suggest that any phrase repeated *ad nauseam* in protest signs and hashtags is analogous to an image.

¹⁹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 26.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

The other theoretical construct that influenced the framework for my method was Mitchell's construction of picture theory in the book of the same name. Mitchell has stated that cultural study is at a point where the pictorial turn has replaced the linguistic one, where words are seen as possessing less veracity and honesty than images.¹⁹⁹ This is an age where the lack of a post-mortem photograph leads to conspiracy theories, so this pictorial turn certainly holds some credence. Mitchell, in particular, looks at images as objects which are inherently connected to questions of power. He also takes an early look at what will soon after become a focus for him: a look at representation in digital and online imagery. While this book is not perfect in its attempt, it is one of the few in-depth studies of images in their own right: beyond a variety of theories, including semiotics, which attempt to explain imagery, there is no satisfactory "picture theory."²⁰⁰ Mitchell's work with imagery has been some of the most important work on the subject in more recent years and plenty of his works, ones which deal with imagery across a variety of fields, were extremely useful for this study.

Other studies on imagery came in handy in my writing process, but I would also like to place some focus on Mirzoeff's concept of visuality, introduced in his book *The Right to Look*. Mirzoeff introduces visuality as the opposite of the right to look, the sense of authority placed over the ability to look,²⁰¹ using the hegemonic power given to the concept of aesthetics to take away the rights behind those deemed to be against visuality.²⁰² This concept came in quite handy in the formation of this methodology, as so much of the imagery used in this research was against visuality, gained from a right to look, a right to be seen and a right to make the unseen visual. In fact, Mirzoeff even introduces some concrete historical examples of the right to see

¹⁹⁹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 11.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁰¹ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 3.

being taken away for contemporary political reasons, like the crime of “reckless eyeballing” of white citizens by Black citizens throughout the majority of American history, a crime punishable by the removal of the right to look through the removal of the perpetrator’s eyes.²⁰³ In fact, the right to look has a great deal of importance in American Black history, which I believe shows in this dissertation.

Finally, Gillian Rose’s work on visual studies necessarily fills in the remaining theoretical spaces. Bringing to mind my original field of cinema studies, Rose studies images through their visual presentation, whether their composition,²⁰⁴ focus²⁰⁵ or mise-en-scene.²⁰⁶ It is through this matter-of-fact visual study of an image that a large amount of its meaning can be established: the “contextual information,”²⁰⁷ as Rose refers to it, will practically always tell the average viewer more than any sign ever could. Of course, on an academic level, it does require a “good eye”²⁰⁸ to further a more advanced sense of understanding of an image, an eye that can look at the image through a variety of connected, somewhat simplified methods, but having that eye makes this an important method.

At this point, I find it necessary to refer to the glaring absence of that other three-letter scare tactic, critical race theory or CRT. CRT is a legal and pedagogical framework based in the idea that racism is a normative part of society and that all the systems that govern our day-to-day lives are saturated with racist ideology.²⁰⁹ Its five central tenets are counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, whiteness as a beneficial possession, the belief that white people are the

²⁰³ Ibid., 8.

²⁰⁴ Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies* (London: Sage Publications, 2001): 38.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 43.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 48.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 34.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 33.

²⁰⁹ Edward Taylor, “A Primer on Critical Race Theory: Who Are the Critical Race Theorists and What Are They Saying?” in *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 19 (1998): 123.

beneficiaries of civil rights and the criticism of liberalism as a useful ideology for change.²¹⁰ In other words, CRT is inherently included in such a study, even if it is not consciously. A study of a Black American struggle cannot be devoid of ideas borrowed from critical race theory.

However, the reason that it is not my leading theoretical construct has to do with the role of CRT as praxis. While it is an important framework for racial studies, CRT seems most useful as a modernist form of praxis, while a study of photographs must be much more theoretical at its base.

Technology and Research

This methodology ultimately showed itself to be quite successful for the completion of this dissertation. However, there was one more necessary element to keep track of and that was the importance of the online distribution of imagery for the creation, proliferation and continued existence of the Black Lives Matter movement. If these images are to be understood as revolutionary or historical material, they will need to be preserved. This was an issue that I had pre-emptively considered but which still managed to surprise me throughout the writing process: while the internet ensures that certain images and videos will never disappear, there is still an ephemeral quality to digital media, meaning that all of this evidence could theoretically disappear forever with one mechanical or technological failure. This ephemerality is inherent in digital and online media and cannot be helped without analog technology, technology which will ultimately defeat the purpose of digital media in the first place. The best way to preserve and protect these online images may well be to study them and to ensure that their importance can continue to be felt by others for time to come. Of course, the most important part of this study, beyond this potential utopian ideal, is to discover the importance of imagery in a modern,

²¹⁰ Payne Hiraldo, "The Role of Critical Race Theory in Higher Education," in *The Vermont Connection* 31 (2010): 56.

revolutionary social justice movement, as a way to see if similar use of imagery can lead to more political change or if imagery's importance is overblown. With my history in media studies, I have a lot of trust in the importance of imagery and hope that this study has proven my inherent biases as correct.

Part 1: Inspiration

Chapter 4: The Death of the Black Body and the Birth of Revolution

The Beginning

To everything, there is one inciting moment. For Black Lives Matter, as an organization, a slogan and a hashtag, that moment was the murder of Trayvon Martin at the hands of George Zimmerman on February 26, 2012. While the movement would eventually focus on police brutality and holding police officers accountable, this shooting was committed by a private citizen; what made that transition simpler was the fact that Zimmerman was not arrested for the crime. However, the ideas behind Black Lives Matter did not begin with Martin's death. These ideas go back much longer, being uttered in the works of Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells in post-slavery America. For my purposes in this section, however, I would like to suggest a more modern moment as the catalyst for what eventually became Black Lives Matter: shortly after 2 AM on January first, 2009, in Oakland, California. Oscar Grant was returning from a New Year's Eve party when he got into an altercation with another individual. When the police arrived, he was handcuffed and held down, at which point officer Johannes Mehserle pulled out his weapon and shot Grant in the back. This incident was not particularly infamous, being relegated mainly to the immediate local area.²¹¹ However, despite the lack of reach, this event would become exemplary of other recorded fatal shootings of unarmed or harmless²¹² Black men and boys by American police officers.

²¹¹ Jennifer Malkowski, *Dying in Full Detail: Mortality and Digital Documentary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017): 175.

²¹² I would like to make this distinction right at the beginning. It would be dishonest to refer to all of these individuals as unarmed, as some of them were armed, either legally within American law or with a knife or something that resembled a weapon. However, all of these individuals were murdered in positions where they were harmless and the officers who murdered them did so before attempting to assess whether there really was a risk or

The video²¹³ begins in the middle of the encounter with Grant sitting down with a couple of other detained individuals at the feet of three police officers with a few more nearby. He is being recorded from a safe distance by a Black man on a stopped subway train: there are enough people standing together that there is seemingly no need to fear retribution at the hands of the cops, allowing them to speak back, to speak truth to power. The chatter between Grant, the other detained individuals and the police officers is fairly quiet and subdued. Throughout this encounter, Grant is seen speaking on the phone, seemingly unworried or unaware about what was about to happen, even though the threat against his life is ever present in the form of the laser point of a weapon running across his body. After he hangs up his phone, he makes an attempt to stand up, at which point three officers, desperate to reassert their power in the situation become increasingly louder and begin shoving him back down toward the ground. During the chaos caused by this scuffle, one officer places his knee on Grant's head, a very familiar image in situations such as this, while the other attempts to cuff him. The officer attempting to cuff Grant then pulls out his gun and shoots Grant once in the back, leading to a moment of hushed silence before further protest from the bystanders on the subway train. After being shot, Grant's hands are cuffed behind him, in order to ensure he is subdued, in favour of attempting to help him and potentially saving his life. This point-by-point analysis of the video is important because it will serve as a starting point for understanding the aesthetics and composition of these videos of unarmed Black men being shot to death for little to no reason, as there are some massive similarities between them.

threat to them or anyone else. The issue is not that all of the individuals studied herein were unarmed, but rather that none of them were threatening outside of the fact that they were individuals from a criminalized background.

²¹³ This video and every other video I am about to discuss in this chapter can be found with a simple online search. Many of them are even available on YouTube. However, owing to the ethical implications that would come with linking them here, I will not be providing any links to videos or images of deaths. I will instead attempt to verbalize the most important details to create a mental image.

The video in question is already a complicated matter that needs to be dissected. Firstly, the video is a bit of a misnomer, as these videos are often part of an unofficial competition for which video will become seen as the established documentation. Just as Zapruder became the official documenter of Kennedy's assassination in 1963, despite the numerous available cameras, one video shot by bystander Tommy Cross eventually become synonymous with the shooting of Grant. Since the event took place in 2009, the video evidence is grainy and of lesser quality, but its position as evidence is clear. The video documents everything from Grant sitting down in handcuffs to a little after the moment of his murder, capturing the moment of his murder, although the act itself is obscured by another police officer.²¹⁴ The act of recording the actions of the police acted as an act of sousveillance, the surveillance of those in power,²¹⁵ but it also showed a flaw in the sousveillance model, a flaw that would be visible again and again with every new police shooting, the flaw being the total lack of evidence that sousveillance will do anything in the face of unrestricted police power. In fact, the Grant case has been repeated in almost every other case since with extreme accuracy: the Black community takes to the streets in protest, the police officer in question will be investigated, the investigation will lead to either no repercussions or an incredibly inadequate punishment, and then the next shooting will occur, so the whole process can restart.

These videos may differ in a variety of ways, but the central aspects of them are practically uniform. These aspects include elements such as the visual relationship between subjects within, the visible power structure, the gazes of the witnesses documenting the event and others. This chapter will be dedicated to an in-depth qualitative study of several well-known

²¹⁴ The gun is visible for a moment as it is pulled out. The shot cannot be seen. However, the sound of the gun being shot along with the momentary hush, the police officer closest to the camera standing and the still body of Grant leave no doubt as to what has just occurred.

²¹⁵ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015): 21.

videos of unarmed and/or harmless Black individuals being murdered by police officers in order to discover the visual similarities among them and discuss why these similar visual traits so often lead to acts of protest and perhaps, in turn, why they do not lead to actual repercussions for the murderers captured therein. This will be accomplished through a thorough qualitative study of a curated selection of videos that depict such murders.

To begin with, this selection will only include incidents that were recorded by way of a personal, security or police-operated camera, meaning that some particularly infamous deaths, such as those of Michael Brown or Botham Jean, will be excluded from this particular analysis, as there are no images to be analyzed. Furthermore, the videos involved in this analysis need to be ones depicting deaths, thus excluding videos that depict, for example, the Rodney King beating in 1991 or the shootings of Levar Jones in 2014 or Charles Kinsey in 2016, since the victims survived each incident, often with serious injuries. While Black Lives Matter occasionally protests deaths caused by individuals who give themselves too much power, the videos analyzed here will also be exclusively those caused by active duty police shootings. As such, videos like the one depicting the murder of Ahmaud Arbery will not be analyzed, even though one of the shooters was a former police officer. Finally, the videos must involve named victims, as there are a large number of videos out there which depict anonymous victims whose identities were never publicly released due to the inherent informality of the citizen recording process and such videos would make the research process nearly impossible. It is necessary to ensure a strict, rigid definition of the topic at hand for the most accurate results. Through this rigid definition, I have created a list of twelve incidents that can be used for a semiotic analysis. These incidents are, in chronological order, the murders of Oscar Grant; Eric Garner, John Crawford, Laquan McDonald and Tamir Rice in 2014; Charly Keunang, Eric Harris, Walter

Scott and Jeremy McDole in 2015; Alton Sterling and Philando Castile in 2016; and George Floyd in 2020.

In an attempt to create some context here, I would like to put forth some statistics developed through these twelve videos; while twelve objects of study may seem a bit lacking, it is telling just how similar these twelve videos seem to be, as the commonalities often seem significant. First of all, the most common source for these videos appears to be cell phone camera footage, as eight of the twelve videos (67%) were recorded by a bystander, either one making their presence blatant or one attempting to remain out of view, recording the police actions covertly. Two more videos were captured by nearby security cameras (17%), meaning only two videos (17%) came from official police-operated cameras, whether dashcams or bodycams—cameras placed upon a police car’s dashboard or worn on the police officer’s uniform, respectively—despite the fact that the use of police bodycams has become increasingly mandated throughout the United States.²¹⁶ More than half of these videos show no signs of a struggle from the victim (58%), which is even more concerning than it may seem because I am simply defining a struggle as a forceful effort to get out of restraint. In other words, of the five individuals struggling, only one could be even seen as an attempt to bring harm to the police officers; the others were all attempts at self-preservation, as they likely knew that their lives could be in danger.

As mentioned earlier, it is necessary to differentiate between unarmed and harmless individuals, because Americans have the right to carry weapons. As such, it is also important to point out that seven of the victims herein were completely unarmed (58%), while one was legally

²¹⁶ Justin T. Ready and Jacob T.N. Young, “The Unfulfilled Potential of Police Body Cameras in the Era of Black Lives Matter,” *Slate*, October 1, 2020, <https://slate.com/technology/2020/10/black-lives-matter-police-body-cameras.html> (accessed June 1, 2020).

armed and the armed status of another is unknown.²¹⁷ What is troubling are the two cases that I would call pseudo-armed, the two individuals who were holding fake/toy guns, on one hand raising questions of simulation, and on the other, questions of the worth of the second amendment when an individual can be murdered for such a harmless action. Of course, guns play a particularly important role in this research, as the vast majority of the murders herein were shooting deaths (83%), while the others were asphyxiation deaths, caused by the police officers choking the individuals to death. Following that line, a quarter of the individuals complained about their inability to breathe, often getting a crass response in place of aid. A quarter of the individuals had a knee placed on their necks before dying, making Floyd's death, the most recent, even more confounding, as surely such an action should have been questioned before it could lead to his death. In fact, the police were far from concerned with giving first aid in any of the cases here, as they did not attempt CPR or any other first aid in any of the cases, occasionally just leaving the individual lying where they are until the video stopped. What they did do, however, in half of the cases no less, was handcuff the victim, because that was clearly the most pressing matter.

Finally, the repercussions for these acts of murder were obviously inadequate. A quarter of the cases ended with no repercussions whatsoever. That number can be raised to 42% of cases in the immediate aftermath, but two of the cases ended with the murderers losing their jobs within the next five years. With those two cases, a quarter of these cases ended with the murderers being fired. Half of the cases ended with a charge being levelled against the police officer and a quarter ended with convictions, those convictions leading to an average of a little under twelve-year sentence, often leading to a much sooner release. These numbers conform to

²¹⁷ The police report says he was armed, but his family disputes it and there is no unbiased evidence of the truth. I would however like to point out that this victim, McDole, was a paraplegic.

the established statistics in American law enforcement. A recent report found that, between 2007 and 2017, only fifty-four officers were charged for fatal, on-duty shootings, only eleven of those leading to a conviction.²¹⁸ Among those convictions, the average sentence was only four years, usually due to clear video evidence or testimony from fellow officers, a necessity since they are often the only witnesses to fatal shootings by officers.²¹⁹ The case of George Floyd's murderer finally came to an end on the 24th of June, 2021, when Chauvin was sentenced to 22.5 years in prison for murder. This case skewed the numbers, adding almost four years to the average. It should be further noted that Chauvin, as the most visible aggressor, still remains the only police officer involved in the murder of Floyd to face justice. These numbers are certainly alarming, but they also give a differing understanding of the issue at hand, leading to several previously invisible truths becoming apparent.

Participants in Mortality

The first aspect of these videos to be discussed is the individuals who participate in their creation. While these videos frequently differ in a variety of factors, including the number of individuals present, there are three archetypal individuals who need to be present at all times: the victim, the murderer and the witness/recorder. The victim is the most helpless individual in the frame as his life is inherently endangered. With the context that comes from viewing the video—the video is often entitled something that indicates that these are the last moments of someone's life and is often centred on the victim, as his death is the main point—the viewer is awaiting the death of the victim. Thus, the victim's death apparent, the viewer expects that moment when things go wrong for the victim, a reluctance to cooperate or a moment of panic or even a moment of recognition is often all it takes to victimize the victim. In the case of Rice, the only indication

²¹⁸ Alex S. Vitale, *The End of Policing* (London: Verso, 2017): 22.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

to him that his life was about to end was a police car pulling up in his direction. There is no indication there that violence is about to occur, other than the fact that the police force is inherently violent, of course. All that happens is a police car approaching Rice and, moments later, Rice being shot to death. Of the three individuals in the frame, the victim is ultimately the least nuanced, as his role is finite and repetitive: no matter how things go, his role is to die by the end of the video.

The murderer tends to have a bit more nuance to his²²⁰ characterization, but there is still a sense of uniformity to him, not least of all because of the uniform. The murderer has more nuance because it is not always clear who it is going to be: whereas the victim is often a centralized figure within the frame, the murderer is often one of several figures, figures whose identities are separated by their actions and their words, but undifferentiated by their uniform and general demeanour, the clone-like attitude that is prevalent in the modern police officer.²²¹ WJT Mitchell's study on the war on terror situated the terrorist as a clone, faceless and limitless, an anonymous source of terror;²²² the same can be said of the American police officer in the 21st century. This attitude is much more prevalent in anti-protest action, when literally faceless officers spread out through a populace and commit acts of violence against citizens. However, while the officers often have visible faces in the videos discussed here, their faces are still anonymous by way of their lack of public identity. An officer is an officer is an officer, and when any one of them could be a murderer, it is often difficult to become aware of which officer is to be focused on. Yes, if an officer is already in the process of murdering a victim when the

²²⁰ This gendering of the murderer is intentional, as the murderers are almost always men, almost always white men at that. In the rare cases where the murderer is not a man or is racialized, the support behind the police is less defined, with many such cases that reach the general public leading to a conviction.

²²¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011): 1.

²²² *Ibid.*, 74.

video starts, he is likely the murderer. However, it is when the swarm of officers come in and surround a victim that it becomes more of a question of who will be the one to start the violence and will he even be the one to end it?

Further, the murderer is often characterized by his infallibility. Where the victim is supposed to be portrayed as a dangerous criminal, the murderer is the true dangerous individual—as the title would suggest—due to the fact that even those who are arguing against him keep their distance, as his presence must not be questioned. If one were to see an individual being murdered in broad daylight, unspoken rules of citizenship would suggest that one should help them; when a police officer is the murderer, those rules of citizenship are reversed, because the contradictory rule suggests that harbingers of law and order must be allowed to do their work unencumbered, even if that work goes against the very law and order they attempt to uphold. This is what gives the murderer his menacing power: the fact that he can dispatch anyone within a moment's notice. In fact, the murderer is the only character allowed to be flawed. The victim must have a clean criminal record if he is to be a sympathetic character and the witnesses often have to remain anonymous to avoid retribution.²²³ However, the murderous police officer character can make claims of fear, sorrow or even remorse after the fact as an excuse for his actions; in fact, these excuses often work.

Finally, the third cog in this machine is the witness. The witness is by far the most nuanced individual in this situation. They can be in the frame or not, they can be singular or numerous, they can be incorporeal or even the murderer. In fact, only two-thirds of the videos in this study were witnessed by human bystanders; the remaining one-third was evenly split

²²³ Witnesses to these murders often find themselves arrested, imprisoned and fearing for their lives. Some have even been killed under mysterious circumstances. The fact that they are often members of the same racialized communities as the original victim allows such incidents to be more easily ignored.

between ostensibly unbiased security cameras and the blatantly biased cameras on police equipment and uniform, videos which often go “missing,”²²⁴ but which also occasionally inform on those they are supposed to protect from consequences. The witness’ one constant characteristic is their attempt to hold the murderer accountable for his actions, whether intentionally or unintentionally. This ultimately goes back to Mitchell’s understanding of the clone, who he characterizes as an image, as almost hyperreal.²²⁵ As such, it becomes necessary for the murderer to destroy the image of his own image. This makes it even more important to preserve that image and hold him accountable. This may be difficult due to the identity of the witness placing them in equal danger to the victim or other similar reasons, but it has ostensibly shown itself to be a useful method of sousveillance. All of this ensures that the witness allows for quite a bit of differentiation, which necessitates a deeper multifaceted dive into the identity of the witness.

The bystander witness is the most common type of witness, mainly owing to the agency that comes with recording an event. Whereas video recorded by the police or third-party security cameras is dependent on individuals within the status quo being willing to go against it—why would the police and powerful groups which keep an eye on the populace wish to do something that could bring harm to their hegemonic societal standards—the bystander will ensure that the video gets seen, because they record it for that explicit purpose. If the camera or footage is not destroyed in the process, there would be no reason not to share footage of police violence if they have recorded it. However, even they fall into a couple of categories, depending on their relationship to the victim. Obviously, in a case like the murder of Philando Castile, his partner,

²²⁴ Radley Balko, “Police Cameras are Great, Except When the Video Goes Missing,” *The Washington Post*, March 26, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-watch/wp/2014/03/26/police-cameras-are-great-except-when-the-video-goes-missing/> (accessed June 5, 2021).

²²⁵ Mitchell, *Cloning Terror*, xi.

Diamond Reynolds, documented a large amount of the incident. However, in most cases, the bystander is either a total stranger or just someone who has a cursory relationship with the victim. This is to be expected, as victims are often murdered in locations where they can be isolated. After all, police officers are still aware that they are being watched and would prefer to limit witnesses. Since police officers tend to deal with these situations in clusters, outnumbering the witnesses is practically inevitable. When the officers outnumber the bystander witnesses, those witnesses may also risk becoming victims themselves. This is why bystander witnesses are always made more powerful by larger numbers. In the twelve cases, eight of the witnesses were bystanders and only one of them was definitely related to the victim. Within these eight incidents, three are initially witnessed by a group that outnumbers the police officers present, while the rest are either single individual witnesses or a few witnesses who are outnumbered by police officers.

The outnumbering witnesses are a particularly interesting phenomenon, because, even though they clearly do not have much, if any, power in the situation at hand, there is an overt suggestion that their power is equal to that of the police. While the police, as the murderers, always hold the ultimate power in these interactions, due to the unquestionable potential and ability towards “justified” violence, they are also lacking in the necessary menace that comes from outnumbering their opponent. As such, the bystanders now find it easier to speak truth to power from a distance. Of course, the police officer’s insistence on power is crushed by the smallest questioning of it, so questioning him is the closest that a witness can get to committing violence against him. In the three videos where bystanders outnumber the murderers—Grant, Keunang and Floyd—the bystanders do not merely question the legality and morality of the issue at hand, they directly argue against it. Realizing that they are above recourse—a realization that

surely must go both ways—they see in themselves the right to make their opinions known. Those who saw Grant die were more wary of getting involved, as the power that comes with being a recording witness was still largely foreign to them.

This becomes apparent in the Keunang and Floyd videos, six and eleven years later, respectively, as the bystanders have no issues showing their disagreement, swearing at the police officers and questioning their credentials without fear of reprisal. Again, the unbalanced power structure is still very much apparent by the fact that none of the bystanders attempt to intervene physically, because that action would make them individuals separate from the crowd, just like any of the victims. However, this also means that there is a suggestion that the officers separating from their clump would similarly put them at a disadvantage; this is not true, but the suggestion is enough to keep them in line. It is this that ensures safety, at least for the witnesses, in the face of the murderers. In none of these cases were any of the witnesses arrested or otherwise harmed in any physical way.

One of the outnumbered witnesses must be seen as separate due to a variety of extenuating circumstances and that is the Castile case. To begin with Reynolds, Castile's partner, used an until-then unprecedented medium to capture the murderer's actions. She did not simply capture the video and upload it later: she had a direct feed of the actions of the officer being transmitted to a group of viewers, an audience that could very easily grow to a number much larger than the number of people in a bystander crowd. So, in theory, Reynolds was at once alone and in a crowd of an infinite size. Of course, theory does not hold much power in such a situation, so she was essentially alone with her child. However, in the time since then, with the proliferation of live broadcasting social media, where could this innovation lead? This platform has been host to a variety of violent acts, including at least one well-publicized act of murder, so

this could lead to greater and more useful and successful surveillance/self-surveillance, allowing eventual victims assurance that acts of violence against them will be seen without necessitating the actions of the hegemonic powers who are themselves trying to hurt them. This could well lead to more lives being saved, although these are all assumptions being made on my part.

All of the remaining bystander witness videos involve either one witness or fewer witnesses than potential murderers. Thus, the most common signifier of these videos is the silence of the witnesses. While not always absolutely silent, these witnesses are quieter and attempt to remain unseen, due to the fact that they could just as easily become the next victim; after all, while they are witnessing an act of violence, there is no one else there to witness a potential act of violence against them: just like the question of who watches the watchmen, who can witness the harm brought to the witness? This is where the question of gaze becomes an important one.

In her important work on the concept of recorded death, “Inscribing Ethical Space,” Vivian Sobchack suggests six differing gazes that can be utilized to record death. These gazes run the gamut from the accidental gaze, capturing an image of death unintentionally or without being aware,²²⁶ through to the professional gaze, a term that places the importance of capturing an image or a story over the life of the subject, usually a scenario where the subject could have been saved by the photographer.²²⁷ The humane gaze may seem like a fair assessment of these videos. However, that refers to a much more nuanced, long-term, empathetic style of recording,²²⁸ while the witnesses recording the last moments of a victim’s life have empathy in mind, the footage is often less concerned with that and more concerned with gathering evidence

²²⁶ Vivian Sobchack, “Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation and Documentary,” in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 249.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 254.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 253.

in case of necessity. Instead, these videos tend to fall into the categories of the helpless and the endangered gazes. An argument could be made for an interventionist gaze, but that would require an active form of participation whereas recording the actions without getting oneself involved is an inherently passive act.²²⁹

Now that the gaze has been narrowed down to two sections, it is necessary to define and differentiate between these gazes. The helpless gaze refers to a scenario wherein the witness is aware that a death is about to occur—and that they are about to record that death—but is incapable of stopping it from occurring.²³⁰ The endangered gaze is similar in its awareness of the matter at hand. However, what differentiates the two is the fact that the witness behind the endangered gaze is not just helpless to do anything, but aware that even their presence could cause danger for them.²³¹ The differentiation within the videos being discussed here, however, are not quite that clear cut. As mentioned earlier, an interventionist act could very easily lead to an arrest and further violence towards the intervening witness. As such, it is necessary for the witnesses to remain separate from the murderers. However, due to their above-the-law status, the murderers do not even really need a reason to victimize the witnesses. This is why the sole witnesses often show signs of endangerment, even if they are not doing anything illegal or incorrect. All it takes is a look at three cases, namely those of Castile, Garner and Scott to show the overt endangerment that comes with being a solitary witness.

Reynolds, Castile's aforementioned partner and sole witness, almost instinctively goes into endangered mode as she records her partner dying. Where the murderer should be the one in fear of his life, it is in fact the witness who fills that role here, because the murderer cannot even

²²⁹ Ibid., 252.

²³⁰ Ibid., 250.

²³¹ Ibid., 251.

consider himself as having been in the wrong, continuing to hold on to his authoritative stance, continuing to scream commands at the occupants of the car. As far as the murderer is concerned, he has done nothing wrong, because his actions are inherently correct. At the end of the video, it is in fact Reynolds who is arrested and taken to the police station and even that is done in such a way that could lead to her death. She has several commands screamed at her, forcing her to come out of the car and walk towards them in a certain way that, at once, endangers her, gives them a sense of safety and criminalizes her and the victim in the process. She only gives herself permission to grieve the violence perpetrated upon her and her partner after she is in a position where her grieving cannot be misconstrued as violence.

There is some difference in the witness to the death of Garner, in that his friend Ramsay Orta, a member of Copwatch—an established organization dedicated to the sousveillance of the police—showed his defiance to the powers that be; instead of being fearful, he was fearless in the faces of the murderer and his accomplices. This was likely made simpler due to the location of the murder, open space with lots of other potential witnesses, but this did not mean that Orta's brazen attitude would remain unpunished. After all, if the police are always good and the opposite of good is bad, opposing a police officer must criminalize the opposition. This simplistic equation led to a campaign against Orta that eventually led to his arrest and a four-year prison sentence. Garner's murderer, Daniel Pantaleo, was not even charged for his negligence leading to Garner's death.

This is why Scott's witness showed such caution in his recording of his murder. Feidin Santana saw an illegal act taking place and took the chance to document it for evidence; he was being a good citizen. However, the fact that he was a solitary individual who was recording a police officer meant that he had already become criminalized. This case is the perfect example of

the endangered gaze, as Santana's demeanour gives away the terror of his position. Far from making his presence known, he actually sneaks around the scene, remaining quiet, his voice never going above a whisper, as he films the act taking place. On one hand, his silence ensured that the murderer and his accomplice would act as if they were not being watched—the video shows what is alleged to be planting of evidence, the dropping of a taser near Scott's body to allow the officers to justify the murder—but there is still something to be said for the fact that the police, a force allegedly created to maintain peace, could be so terrifying to a group of individuals that it becomes necessary for them to hide as they speak truth to power. This is just another addition to the criminalization of a skin colour, the same criminalization that made the murderers of Tamir Rice tackle his young sister moments later because they saw her attempting to run past them to the body of her brother: her small feminine frame was ultimately disregarded due to the status attached to her skin colour.

There is another victimizing aspect of being a witness that is not often regarded. A recent BBC article by Joshua Nevelt shows that witnesses will still face a variety of side effects as a result of recording the footage. While police reprisal is a serious concern, it is not the only one, as this article shows that individuals who have found themselves embroiled in these cases have to deal with everything from post-traumatic stress symptoms to racist messages to accusations of clout chasing and even death threats.²³² Unfortunately these witnesses will find themselves in the crosshairs of both sides of the debate: the pro-police/racist side will attempt to silence them for obvious reasons, upholding the status quo. The anti-police/anti-racist side, meanwhile, will occasionally find them as the only target of harassment once the police are found not culpable of

²³² Joshua Nevelt, "George Floyd: The Personal Cost of Filming Police Brutality," *BBC News*, June 11, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52942519> (accessed June 13, 2021).

any wrongdoing. This happened to George Holliday when he recorded the beating of Rodney King and has not stopped since.²³³

Before moving on to the non-human witnesses, it is necessary to make a note on the act of sousveillance, as a way to better understand the bystander witness. Simone Browne situates the act of sousveillance—defined by Steve Mann as a system put into place to allow the subjugated to access data about their surveillance and neutralize it in the process—as a new act of “dark sousveillance,” a similar process against racialized/anti-Black surveillance, wherein Black individuals can regain their ability to be out of sight.²³⁴ Browne suggests that Black people are at once invisible—particularly when in danger—and hypervisible,²³⁵ their skin making them the subject of oversurveillance, necessitating the aforementioned invisibility.²³⁶ A large part of this sousveillance is the need to watch the watchmen, so to speak; to observe those in power. Since the established media of surveillance are all designed with a hegemonic notion in mind, they are essentially useless to Black individuals. After all, as Fanon points out, the security cameras are not just trained on the thief, they are also trained on the worker.²³⁷ In other words, security cameras, whether on the streets or on police officers, have one job and that is to further the whims of the status quo and ensure that certain individuals, whether lower class or racialized, are kept out of sight and out of mind. Furthermore, as Katherine Williams and Craig Johnstone have shown, beyond the statistical ineffectiveness of security cameras to limit crime, their whole purpose is to accomplish what the authors refer to as the “mallings” of public space.²³⁸

Essentially, this malling occurs when the single most important policing feature of public space

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Browne, *Dark Matters*, 21.

²³⁵ Ibid., 57.

²³⁶ Ibid., 38.

²³⁷ Ibid., 6.

²³⁸ Katherine S. Williams and Craig Johnstone, “The Politics of the Selective Gaze: Closed-Circuit Television and the Policing of Public Space,” in *Crime, Law and Social Change* 34 (2000): 192.

becomes the need to keep undesirable individuals out. Since security cameras are a visual medium, their entire preventative model has to incorporate assumptions made based on visual signifiers. As such, the undesirable individual that is meant to be kept out and away from the eyes of more desirable higher-class individuals will inevitably be someone who looks different from said desirable individuals; this usually means racialized, poor or disabled individuals.²³⁹ These cameras serve no other purpose than to homogenize public space in order to make the dominant classes feel safer by removing that which causes them to think about their position. Therefore, these security cameras serve no purpose for Black or otherwise racialized people, instead working almost exclusively against them. This is why sousveillance is a necessity; the security cameras tend to take on the position of those in power and must be treated as such. This is to say, they must be watched, certainly, but they must also be re-appropriated in order for the downtrodden to use their data as evidence for their own safety. While it is important to remember that surveillance cameras are inherently meant to be used as a weapon against the poor and racialized, people living in a world where their ubiquity is beyond question should learn to make them more equitable. While it is important to be aware that surveillance encompasses a series of ethical dilemmas and that its elimination may ultimately be the best option, its appropriation by the powerless may be the second best option for the moment.

This is why the four videos not shot by bystander witnesses must be discussed separately. These four videos have no humanity to them, no particular gaze, and yet they made a case against those they were meant to protect, even if not a legal one. Williams and Johnstone suggest that this gaze is a selective one and there is definitely a lot of truth to this assessment: the cameras are usually placed in locations where their judgement of desirability is most important,

²³⁹ Ibid., 193.

locations where criminalized bodies congregate and their every act can be viewed and surveilled, but they can also be easily displaced. A frequent issue after a seemingly suspicious police shooting is the lack of visual evidence, due to body cameras being turned off or misplaced or otherwise ineffective. This is something that happens frequently, because the officers are aware that images can be harmful to them, even if they are in charge of their context and presentation.²⁴⁰ Images have always been an issue with individuals in power in white supremacist contexts. As Nicholas Mirzoeff points out, the right to look has always been a contentious issue within white supremacist societies, especially in relation to Black people: Black men were often lynched for “reckless eyeballing,” the act of making eye contact with a white man or looking impurely at a white woman.²⁴¹ This idea has simply evolved in modern times to taking away the right to see, to see proof of extrajudicial criminal behaviour, to disallow Black individuals and those who empathize with their cause from seeing and politicizing these acts, in turn stopping them from having reason to question the hegemonic forces subjugating them.

This is why these videos, captured by cameras meant to uphold the status quo, can often be so helpful, which is also why it becomes more difficult to simply refer to them as holding a selective gaze. After all, if they can be displaced, a result of distrust, how can they be simplified to a selective status, especially considering the fact that a human could just as easily hold a selective gaze, as a result of danger or lack of awareness. It would be more accurate to refer to them as holding a mechanical gaze. This would allow for the gaze to be turned on the owner.

²⁴⁰ Such an incident occurred in the April 2022 shooting of Patrick Lyoya, when the officer’s camera suddenly went dark moments before the shooting took place. A similar incident occurred in Atlanta with activist Oscar Cain, leaving no evidence at all. In an unusual twist, there is even bodycam footage of Kim Potter, a police officer who later shot and killed Daunte Wright, arriving at the scene of a fatal 2019 police shooting and telling the officers who had shot Kobe Dimock-Heisler to turn off their cameras.

²⁴¹ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011): 8.

This is why security cameras are occasionally useful for the cause: because there is no inherent political bent to the camera. It is its establishment as a security camera that politicizes it.

Removing that context could turn the security camera into the police officer's worst enemy.

It is important to note here that, of the four videos captured by non-human operated cameras, two of them led to charges. What is fascinating is that the charges were both for police cameras. Whereas the Rice and Crawford incidents, captured on a public security camera and a Walmart security camera, respectively, ended with no charges and no repercussions, the McDonald and Harris²⁴² incidents, captured on a police dashcam and bodycam, respectively, both led to charges and prison time. This may well be a result of the power relations that arise from these interactions. As mentioned earlier, police officers/the murderers always hold the power in struggles with citizens, whether victims or witnesses. This means that even a security camera, as long as it is a "civilian" camera—which is to say corporate or even governmental, but not judicial—has no power over the police. However, if the camera is issued by the police, it holds similar powers as them. A camera on the chest of a police officer might as well be wearing its own badge. This means that a police-issued camera is truly irrefutable. Even though, for example, the Walmart security camera shows, without a doubt, that Crawford was not committing a crime and his murder was unjust, that is not enough to bring the power of the police under question. That camera holds no real power, due both to its lack of police connections and the lack of humanity behind it. The deaths of McDonald and Harris, however, are unquestionable because the same force that gave the murderers the power to shoot also gave that camera the power to entrap them. The fact that both officers received incredibly short

²⁴² It may be necessary to note that Robert Bates, the police officer who shot Eric Harris, was a reserve officer with minimal qualifications, so his arrest and sentence may well have been because he was seen as expendable.

sentences for their crimes is another matter, of course, but if these crimes were caught on something less official, who knows what the result would have been.

One final question needs to be asked with regard to these issues of power in relation to video evidence and that is are these videos actually important? Are they even making a difference? Of the twelve videos discussed here, less than half of them actually led to a conviction and those convictions were often inadequate for the crimes. The convicted were sentenced to an average of about eleven years—this average was heightened by the twenty-year sentence given to Michael Slager, the officer who murdered Walter Scott by repeatedly shooting him in the back, and the 22.5 year sentence for Chauvin—with most of those sentences being ended extremely early due to good behaviour and paroles.²⁴³

Ethan Zuckerman was a believer in the power of sousveillance, by way of wearable cameras and citizen journalism, forcing the police to police themselves. He has since rescinded that belief due to the death of George Floyd and, more specifically, due to the fact that Floyd's murderer, Derek Chauvin, stared directly into one of the cell phone cameras as he kneeled on Floyd's head.²⁴⁴ Zuckerman suggests that this total lack of fear of repercussions or reprisal means that the police officers in these situations are well aware that they are immune to criticism, let alone punishment. As he phrases it, "it turns out that images matter but so does power."²⁴⁵ The earlier belief, he suggests, is simply a continuation of a techno-utopian fantasy that does not take into account these power imbalances between not just murderer and victim but

²⁴³ Of the officers who received prison sentences, Johannes Mehserle served 11 months of a two year sentence, Jason Van Dyke served three years of a nearly seven year sentence, and Robert Bates served one and a half years of a four year sentence.

²⁴⁴ Ethan Zuckerman, "Why Filming Police Violence Has Done Nothing to Stop It," *MIT Technology Review*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/06/03/1002587/sousveillance-george-floyd-police-body-cams/> (accessed May 12, 2021).

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

also murderer and witness, and which similarly does not take into account that only 48 officers have been charged with murder or manslaughter due to use of lethal force between 2005 and 2014, even with the deaths at the hands of police officers numbering over a thousand per year.²⁴⁶

I would like to suggest that the Floyd video will lead to a change for one reason which has already led to some differences in comparison to other videos. The acceptance of Black Lives Matter, as an organization and a statement, is at an all-time high and I believe that that is related directly to the Floyd video. Often, when Black lives and police violence become a topic of discussion, the most well-known and discussed cases are not the ones with videos. For example, when Michael Brown was the topic of discussion, Garner, Rice and Crawford were murdered with less fanfare. This led to quite a bit of mythmaking: the incidents lacking evidence were twisted into political narratives, while the videos were not seen until those similar narratives were twisted and created. Floyd reached viewers just as the narrative was becoming nascent. Concurrently, as Zuckerman points out, when videos of Black men dying are used as evidence, whether in court or the public sphere, they are often shown at a regular speed,²⁴⁷ in order to remove the nuance and to sell the audience on the idea of the frantic scenario the police officer allegedly had to deal with. This is why these videos are so often so powerful for the right wing: even though the men are unarmed and/or harmless, the frantic paces of the videos are used as proof of might as right. The differences with Floyd's video, the video's biggest strength, are the length and the speed. The video runs about ten minutes and there is no franticness to be found within it. Suddenly, the video can no longer be described as a struggle and it cannot be mythologized. It becomes apparent that this was not a split-second decision and that the murder

²⁴⁶ Safia Samee Ali and William Sherman, "Why Police Officers Often Aren't Convicted for Using Lethal Force," *NBC News*, July 30, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/why-police-officers-often-aren-t-convicted-using-lethal-force-n619961> (accessed June 5, 2021).

²⁴⁷ Zuckerman, "Why Filming Police Violence Has Done Nothing to Stop it."

must have become an intentional act at some point. After all, there is not a hint of anything resembling a struggle in the video.

One final question that needs to be asked, then, is why don't the police police the police?²⁴⁸ In other words, when there are four or five police officers at the scene of a murder, why would one officer not attempt to stop the violent act? There are two prevailing answers to this question: the first is that they avoid this line of thinking due to a fear of losing their jobs, a result that has occurred occasionally in the past when a "good cop" attempts to intervene on behalf of a victim of police violence; for example, Cariol Horne was a police officer who observed her colleague placing a black man into an illegal chokehold in 2006. After interfering to save the victim, she was fired and lost her pension; this is not an isolated incident. The other potential answer is that the officers who do not intervene simply agree with their own right to inflict racist violence. Each of these lines of thinking leads to its own increasingly problematic conclusions: either the police system is broken due to power hungry political strategies and needs to be disassembled and rebuilt or it is a failed, deeply and inherently racist construct that needs to be abolished and replaced. While "good cops" have shown themselves to exist—even if only for a short time before being removed from their positions—they also seem to be few and far between, as most of the officers seem more than happy to follow orders. This is what leads to the next series of questions: the inherent racism that is displayed by the police officers in these videos.

²⁴⁸ This statement can be problematized because it suggests that the police would have an issue with officers shooting to kill suspects. In fact, that is generally the policy of most American police departments, owing to a culture of fear that comes with warrior mentality training as a part of "killology." This training, popularized by Dave Grossman, teaches new police officers that they are in a state of war with civilians and that they will die if they are not ready to kill. While some departments are banning killology training, many others are not. This style of policing teaches officers to shoot-to-eliminate instead of shooting to incapacitate. As such, if the suspect is still capable of shooting, they are seen as a threat. Groups working for police interests, such as the Force Science Institute, even create pseudo-scientific studies such as the one linked here to suggest that the idea of shooting to incapacitate "doesn't make sense": <https://www.police1.com/patrol-issues/articles/why-shooting-to-wound-doesnt-make-sense-scientifically-legally-or-tactically-6bOdYvNUEECtIWRI/>.

Epidermalization and Criminalization of Blackness

After looking at the videos in detail, it is necessary to discuss the victims in more detail or, more specifically, to discuss the institutional racism that turns them into victims. This is to say that the very Blackness of the victims is an important aspect that needs to be dissected in depth. First, I would like to define two very important terms whose understanding is an absolute necessity for this section, two terms that go hand in hand to ensure the subjugation and minimization of Black lives. The first is the concept of the epidermalization of inferiority, put forth by Frantz Fanon. In *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon posits that Black individuals are taught at birth to want to be white, spending their lives striving for whiteness and hating those more “black” than themselves.²⁴⁹ Thus, this epidermalization refers to the inscription of that inferiority onto Black skin, ensuring that those with that shade of skin will be aware of their inferiority. This, of course, leads to internalized racism and a refusal to try to fight for change, as the time that would be put towards that fight is put towards changing oneself internally. However, it would be a mistake to suggest that epidermalization solely affects Black individuals, as the suggested superiority of white skin ensures anti-Black racism from that side as well. This concept works along with the criminalization of Black skin from the outside. Criminalization of Black skin, as put forth by Rima Vesely-Flad, is a direct result of a historical consensus of Black skin as threatening, even when the actions of the wearer of the skin are not.²⁵⁰ This tendency has formed American history and their relation to Black people, leading to everything from justifications of slavery²⁵¹ to the popularization of hard labour as a punishment²⁵² to the

²⁴⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986): 148.

²⁵⁰ Rima Vesely-Flad, *Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies: Moral Pollution, Black Lives and the Struggle for Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017): xvi.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 47.

penalization crisis among Black Americans.²⁵³ It is this historical gaslighting of Black self-hatred and concurrent white superiority complex and fear that has led us to where we are right now. As such, many of the cases discussed here can be directly linked back to these notions that Black people are, at once, to be pitied and feared, powerless and yet could destroy the hegemonic elites any time they please.

To begin with, it should absolutely be noted that Black Lives Matter may well be a direct response to this necessitated inferiority complex. The message itself does not, or rather should not, need to be said and yet the very benign statement behind it has led to anger from white people in power and accusations of everything from racism to anti-police rhetoric to allegations of “Black supremacy,” all because they refused to “grin and bear it” as it were, refusing to give into this epidermalization and demanding to be treated like others. This is where criminalization helps a little bit, designating individuals who fight for these rights as everything from thugs to terrorists. Of course, this criminalization is also inherent in practically all of these videos and not just for the more obvious reasons. While a Black man with a weapon or an attitude or a lack of fear is already seen as threatening and criminal, that does not mean that his criminalized designation will cease once he has been subdued: in fact, the very aesthetics of Blackness on the human skin are so threatening to the notions of white supremacy that police work is tinged with a lot of less blatant racism when it comes to Black suspects, racism that is visible in the background of these videos.

The most obvious of these forms is the criminalization of the Black body, even at a post-mortem or dying stage. Watching these videos, videos which do not always capture every last moment of a struggle between the murderer and the victim, I was struck by something that I had

²⁵³ Ibid., 94.

not paid much attention to earlier. The police officers in these videos, perhaps the most important protectors of American white supremacy, are all more concerned with subduing these innocent Black men than they are with protecting them. This is to say that in half of the cases, an arrest is made before the end of the video. This may not sound unusual but remember that these videos all involve someone getting shot to death and every arrest is made after the shooting. This means that the subdued, bleeding or gasping victims are, in every video, being handcuffed after being shot, because these officers are still threatened by the very Blackness of their victims, even though those victims were on the ground dying, completely subdued or otherwise compliant; it is not the actions of the victims that led to their deaths, but their very corporeal existences that made the police officers “fear for their lives.” The explanation for this fear of Blackness is often related by proponents of the police as being related to a higher rate of criminality by Black people, but, as Vesely-Flad posits, this higher rate of criminality is directly related to the position of Black people in society, with the position given to Black people in a society that gives higher social standing to white felons than Black non-felons.²⁵⁴ This also leads to spaces where Black people live and congregate being designated as criminal or dangerous spaces,²⁵⁵ leading to further criminalization, allowing the cycle to continue.

This fear of the Black body, the need to arrest a corpse so to speak, is essentially a monsterization of the Black individual. When a police officer sees the need to place someone under arrest who, like George Floyd, had not so much as moved for several minutes, what is being said is that there is a fear that this immobile body may come back seeking revenge. While I would not go so far as to make a direct connection, it is not difficult to see a connection to the zombie as an object of horror. Zombies have colonial roots, with voodoo practices in Haiti and

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 112.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 127.

the Caribbean giving birth to the early zombie stories, those zombies being transformed to become slaves for their masters. The early zombie stories and their popularity in western cultures was by no means a pro-Blackness phenomenon, but the idea of individuals, originally from Africa, getting close to the western world—places like Haiti are othered, but also close enough to be a threat, just like the poor criminalized Black body—through slavery and eventually seeing a reason to return and rise up against their oppressors is definitely threatening to white supremacy. This is why a Black man who is obviously dead has a higher chance of being seen on video getting handcuffed than he does of being seen receiving medical attention and therein lies the other problem that needs to be discussed.

The monster myth has become legitimized enough to gain its own ill-defined psychological model. Excited delirium refers to an alleged mental state wherein an individual, often one who is in the middle of being arrested, goes through a process of potentially fatal agitation and delirium, accompanied by aggressive behaviour and tolerance of pain.²⁵⁶ Even zombies have a weakness, but the individual suffering from excited delirium is defined as an almost superhuman individual whose death can then be attributed to their own actions, similar to other theories attributing violent deaths to medical reasons. What makes this diagnosis even more suspect is that it can only be attributed post-mortem²⁵⁷ and its diagnosis has been shown to have a very high correlation to the use of potentially fatal restraint.²⁵⁸ This medicalization of

²⁵⁶ Ellen M. F. Strommer, Wendy Leith, Maurice P. Zeegers and Michael D. Freeman, “The Role of Restraint in Fatal Excited Delirium: A Research Synthesis and Pooled Analysis,” in *Forensic Science, Medicine and Pathology* 16 (2020): 680.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 681.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 683.

police brutality has even been repudiated by the American Psychological Association due to its non-specificity and lack of additional research.²⁵⁹

In these twelve videos, not a single one of the victims is seen receiving medical aid, CPR or any other intervention to attempt to stop them from dying. Essentially, Black life is seen as so expendable that these officers are more likely to arrest a dying Black man than do anything to save him. As mentioned already, six of the Black men in these cases were cuffed, another was left to bleed out in his car and the rest were simply left to die on the street or on the floor of a Walmart. While CPR may have been performed afterward, these videos show that it was not the most important measure right after the shooting, with the murderers preferring to arrest the victims or threaten and yell at witnesses instead. This ultimately shows a sadistic bent to these arrests, further showing that the “protect” part of protect and serve definitely does not apply to Black individuals. In fact, as Floyd lay dying, he seemingly knew he was not getting out alive: in the video, he can clearly be heard saying “they’re gonna kill me,” made even more damning by the fact that not only was that statement not refuted, it did not even lead to a change in anyone’s position.

Speaking of position, two oddly specific moments appeared in a notable number of these videos, made even more notable by Floyd’s case: one quarter of these videos show a knee visibly placed on someone’s head and/or neck and one quarter of these videos include someone audibly complaining about their inability to breathe. These two actions, ones which were played up by some news organizations and commentators as if they were unprecedented incidents, have shown themselves to be a part of a pattern of violent behaviour and inhumane treatment towards Black

²⁵⁹ American Psychological Association, *Position Statement on Concerns About Use of the Term “Excited Delirium” and Appropriate Medical Management in Out-of-Hospital Contexts*, Council on Psychiatry and Law, 2020.

individuals. The major difference between Floyd and the other knee cases is that the others were shot before having a knee placed on their heads. Furthermore, a complaint about an inability to breathe is audible in the two cases where the individuals died of asphyxiation, but it was also heard in the case of Eric Harris, a man who was attempting to get away from the police who eventually murdered him, who was allegedly shot by accident, according to the voice of the shooting officer. As he is held down after being shot, Harris can be heard telling the arresting officer that he is “losing” his breath, to which the officer responds “fuck your breath”: all of this because of the crime of allegedly attempting to sell a gun to an undercover officer and attempting to escape other officers unarmed. Due to what essentially amounts to non-violent crime, Harris lost his most basic of liberties, the right to live and breathe.

Chokeholds are incorporated as a part of police procedure, supposedly as a form of less lethal restraint. This less lethal designation compares the chokehold to bodily strikes, finding that choking leads to less lasting damage,²⁶⁰ although that data comes from combat sports which occur within a controlled environment.²⁶¹ Police policy utilizes two forms of chokehold, the air choke, which stops the suspect’s ability to breathe and the allegedly safer option, the carotid choke, which stops oxygenated blood from reaching the brain,²⁶² limiting rather than stopping the ability to breathe.²⁶³ Policing language ensures that deaths resulting from chokeholds cannot be used against the police, as such chokeholds are safe in a theoretical standard which is rarely followed by the law. As such, any choking death could easily be explained away as a freak accident that occurred outside of procedure. Furthermore, even the realization of the danger behind chokeholds has not done much to dissuade their use, often leaving loopholes open. For

²⁶⁰ Trevor George Gardner and Esam Al-Shareffi. “Regulating Police Chokeholds,” in *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 112 (2022): 116.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 115.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 118.

example, after the death of Floyd, Trump introduced an executive order to ban the use of air chokes unless necessary as a part of lethal force.²⁶⁴ Therein lies the problem with this type of token legislation, as it leaves so much room open for interpretation. Meanwhile, bills to end chokeholds without this style of wording flounder and never get passed.²⁶⁵ At the state level, there are seventeen states that have banned chokeholds by the police,²⁶⁶ all but three passed after Floyd's death and all but six leaving some loophole.²⁶⁷

This all leads to a total disregard for human life, specifically Black life, which further explains the lack of forethought that comes with these extrajudicial executions as seen in these videos. This disregard is particularly important when you notice the quickness at which the police officers in these videos are willing to commit these acts of murder: in fact, a common theme throughout these videos is the willingness to pull the trigger. In the murders committed by shooting, two of them happen within moments of the initial interaction between murderer and victim. This may not sound alarming, but it is important to note that this initial interaction refers to the moment when the police officers arrive: Rice and Crawford are shot practically on sight, as if the very visual of Black skin is enough to sign a death warrant. The other shot individuals were not exactly seen as particularly valuable either: all of these videos show a resistance to de-escalation. Where a layperson sees an ability to de-escalate—especially in situations where there is no threat of even the minimal amount of violence—the police officers see an opportunity to escalate to fatal violence. This is especially blatant in the death of Castile, where the officer, having been informed that Castile is carrying a concealed weapon goes into defensive mode immediately, shooting him moments later. This is a recurring theme, with Grant being murdered

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 119.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 121.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 122.

²⁶⁷ These loopholes include only banning one type of chokehold, allowing them as lethal force or not making it a duty to intervene on the victim's behalf.

moments after attempting to stand, Scott being murdered moments after running, McDonald being murdered moments after making a strange movement at a distance with a knife and McDole being murdered moments after pulling himself up in his wheelchair. The very act of existence while Black is seen as criminal and dangerous—as criminality in (neurotypical) white individuals is ultimately seen as less dangerous on average—and in need of solving through violence.

Finally, it would be irresponsible to ignore the gender aspect at play within all of these videos of white men killing Black men. While race is obviously the defining quality in these conflicts, the position of a Black man in a white supremacist society should not be understated. As Fanon has pointed out, Black people have always been feared on a sexual level.²⁶⁸ When one looks at sexual myths about Black men and their supposed desire to take out white men and “steal” white women, these racially motivated murders begin to take on a whole new light. Essentially, the need to destroy a Black male body is seen by the racist white man as an attempt to save his own position. Whiteness and masculinity may give the white male police officer power over many others, power that he can use to demand respect, but this also leads to a fear of losing his masculinity. Black men are depicted as overly masculine, threatening the masculinity of the police officer. This is where the police officer sees it as a necessity to reassert his masculinity and enforce his dominance on the Black man. Of course, the Black man is already aware of his position, as he is playing by a different set of rules: while not concerned about his masculinity, he is concerned about his racial position, which places him in an endangered position, and about his life, which he knows through centuries of practice, is in danger. Of course, in a white supremacist society, attempting to protect oneself from harm is a right only

²⁶⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 157.

afforded to certain individuals. This is why fleeing or fighting back or otherwise attempting to avoid harm is seen as a transgression against both the police officer's white superiority and his threatened masculinity, and must be responded to with violence and loudness, both animalistic signs of superiority.

An argument could be made against this position in at least one of the cases, the murder of Keunang, who was shot by a Black police officer. This video is a fascinating anomaly in that all three of its participants—the victim, the witness *and* the potential murderer²⁶⁹—are Black. This is where things get even more complicated. The badge and gun still provide protection, but the Black skin minimizes that. Where a white officer would remain at least somewhat unquestioned by a Black witness—at the risk of turning the witness into a victim—the Black officer is not afforded fearful respect by a Black witness. This clearly angers the officer, but even he realizes that his rage is impotent, as the American police force has shown repeatedly that there is a difference in place between the white male police officer and others within the police force. After all, while many of the officers discussed here have gotten away with murder, the two most high-profile cases of non-white or non-male police officers committing a murderous act have both ended with a twelve-year prison sentence, with Amber Guyger imprisoned for the murder of Black American Botham Jean and Mohamed Noor imprisoned for the murder of White Australian Justine Damond. While these sentences are still quite inadequate, it is remarkable that they happened at all within their contemporary climate, with Noor getting practically no support

²⁶⁹ While three police officers shoot Keunang repeatedly, the Black officer is called out by one of the witnesses as the murderer.

from the usual police supporters, with Michelle Bachmann infamously disparaging him as an “affirmative-action hire”²⁷⁰ for doing what many white police officers had done before him.

This is, of course, related back to the earlier point about the fear of Black masculinity. The reason that the officer who murdered Keunang cannot find it in himself to defend himself from criticism or that Noor is not protected with the same fervour as white male murderers is that, even if they are police officers, Black bodies are still criminalized and still seen as dangerous and expendable. This white supremacist notion does not end with the addition of a blue uniform. Instead, it just becomes more latent, moving ever so slightly beneath the surface. What makes it even sadder is that the Black officers are obviously aware of this, which is why they have been shown time and again to be more sadistic and violent towards Black individuals,²⁷¹ as a way to show that they are like them, that they are willing to buy into white supremacy, if it means that they can be included. Black police officers buy so deeply into Fanon’s idea of epidermalization of inferiority that they will work against their own interests and their own people to further white supremacy. And if that means ultimately dehumanizing their own people, then that is simply the risk that they are willing to take, just like a non-African Black person will look down on an African Black person, seemingly unaware that the white people see no difference between the two of them.

Of course, this is the final result of this epidermalization and criminalization: dehumanization. This is all done to ensure that the Black skinned individual reaches a point where he is no longer allowed the same rights as other humans: he does not just lose his freedom, he loses his life, his right to breathe, his right to congregate in certain places and do certain

²⁷⁰ Todd Melby, “Officer in Minnesota Shooting was Celebrated in Somali Community,” *Reuters*, July 20, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-minnesota-police-shooting-profile-idUSKBN1A52SE> (accessed June 5, 2021).

²⁷¹ Vitale, *The End of Policing*, 16.

things. Even his corpse is not allowed to be free, as he must remember his position. If these videos are any indication, many Black individuals have died in a state of lack of freedom, their freedom limited by police officers, proponents of white supremacist notions, cuffing them, kneeling on them or otherwise ensuring that their basic human rights and necessities are not met. This is the endgame of a concentrated campaign that has existed all throughout American history. As Fanon posited, “it is the racist who creates his inferior”²⁷² and no matter how much people may attempt to suggest things have changed, the very roots of anti-Black racism are present in American judicial ideology, from the police to the justice system to the prison system. In fact, dehumanization of Black people makes these systems work, as it allows them to make money off of this modernized form of slavery, since the thirteenth amendment to the American constitution will only allow Black people to return to slavery by going through the system. However, it is far too easy to lay all the blame on the thirteenth amendment, as, even at the genesis of the constitution, Black people have never quite been treated the same way under the constitution at its most basic levels. I would like to suggest that Black American life is wholly unfree even before the eventual arresting of corpses. In fact, Black Americans are not even afforded the rights guaranteed by the first and second amendments of the American constitution and that fact is even obvious in these videos.

The Black Experience under the First and Second Amendments

While the American Declaration of Independence stated, as a self-evident truth, that “all men are created equal,” it has never been true. In that age, slavery was a norm of American existence and, while slavery has been disallowed, equality/equity has still not been reached. This is plainly evident in these videos and how they relate to the first two amendments of the

²⁷² Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 93.

American constitution. The first amendment promises, among other things, “freedom of speech” and “the right of the people [to] peaceably...assemble and to petition the government for redress of grievances,” while the second promises “the right of the people to keep and bear arms.” These two rights are often suggested by proponents of American exceptionalism as the most important to keep their country free and yet these two rights are constantly infringed upon against Black Lives Matter and, more importantly to the case here, within the videos studied herein.

First, the American police force has shown itself incapable of enforcing the first amendment, but that will be discussed in more depth elsewhere. The free speech and right to assemble being infringed upon here has to do with the witnesses to the murders captured in these videos. The right to speak truth to power is one of the most important rights within a construct of free speech and that right is consistently infringed upon by the police, both immediately and in the future. The most immediate example of this can be found in what happens when you question a police officer’s authority. This authority is, once again, tied deeply into their masculinity, which is why they cannot have it questioned. Frequently, these videos show just how fragile these officers are, as the slightest questioning of their authority is often met with verbal violence, violence which surely only stops short of physical because of the large number of witnesses.

The most blatant example of this appears in the Floyd video. Police officer Tou Thao is seen standing between a gathered crowd of witnesses and murderer Chauvin, attempting to keep them separate. Again, the witnesses were well aware that they could do nothing physically. However, they could fight back verbally. At various points, witnesses exclaim “he’s not even resisting” and “he’s enjoying that shit, bro,” undermining the officers’ internalized idea of themselves as the good guys, the only thing standing in the way of evil prevailing. What the crowd suggests instead is that they are the criminals in this scenario, claiming that they do not

know how to do their jobs—the suggestion being that the people in the crowd know how to do their jobs better—and that Chauvin is a sadistic murderer, the prototypical public enemy number one of the state and the biggest conquest for a police officer. Capturing a sadistic killer is often a huge deal for a police officer and comparing the two is a definite character assassination. While the officers continue to not fight back physically, the threat soon after becomes blatant, as Chauvin pulls his container of pepper spray out of his holster, indicating that he is the one with the power in the situation and he will not be dissuaded. Meanwhile, Thao randomly says the seeming non-sequitur “don’t do drugs, guys,” trying to reclaim his position as the good, the law and order.

The most egregious moment, however, comes when one of the witnesses calls Thao a bitch. The officers are surrounded by a group that consists predominantly of Black people and women, so this is already unacceptable to them. Hearing that someone in this group, a feminine voice, likely a white woman who appears earlier in the video, would dare to question his masculinity is a major blow to his confidence and to his self-designated position.²⁷³ This is where Thao resorts to the only two techniques he possesses: condescension and violence. After being called a bitch, his immediate response is to call out the speaker as unprofessional. This is a prevalent modern right-wing technique, wherein the person being questioned sees it in themselves to be as unprofessional as they please, while their respondent must remain wholly professional and unemotional throughout the conversation. This is particularly common in American politics. The suggestion here is ultimately that questioning the authority of an agent of white supremacy is more inappropriate than murder. Of course, when that fails, Thao

²⁷³ It should be noted that this interaction is a complicated one, as, beyond the power dynamics of police officer and civilian and man and woman, this is also a white woman using a misogynistic slur against an Asian man, a mistreated racialized group and a group whose masculinity is often brought under question. These situations are never quite so black and white.

immediately resorts to violence, raising his voice and threatening someone who he claims attempted to attack him, despite the lack of evidence and the lack of purpose, as Floyd's body had already been carried away by that point.

This loudness as a sign of authority is audible in a lot of these videos, as the very act of speaking is responded to with the yelling of orders, like an animal attempting to show dominance. As Castile lay dying, his murderer screamed orders at his partner; as Sterling attempted to get away from the police who shot him, an officer can be heard yelling "you fucking move, I swear to god;" and after the murderer of Keunang was called out for his actions, he immediately yells at the witness who made that statement to "back up," even though he had not moved from his position throughout the video. What made this incident noteworthy is the fact that this witness refused to be intimidated and responded to him, yelling back "fuck that." As the other officers joined him in their intimidation tactics, the witness made it obvious that he was not going to be intimidated and that he would not comply, even at the risk of becoming another victim. Realizing that their yelling is not working, the officers simply hang up some police tape and walk away.

It should also be noted that speech can easily be misused by the police officers in situations like this. Aware that they are being watched, whether by individuals or cameras, police officers have learned that screaming misinformation can actually help them out. This is why officers are often heard screaming things like "drop it" or "stop resisting" when evidence shows otherwise: screaming something about a gun before shooting someone will be more helpful in the winning of hearts and minds, especially if there is no immediate way to disprove it: in a high-profile case, people are usually more likely to read the original story about an armed suspect than to read the follow-up about how he was found to be unarmed. This is also why it is often

important for witnesses to call out this misinformation. In several of these videos, including Keunang, Garner and Castile, a witness ensures that the events are not filmed without context. In the Keunang video, an officer yells at the victim to drop his weapon, but the witness can be heard correcting the misinformation, informing the eventual audience that the victim did not have a gun and that the police chose to murder him in favour of less deadly options. Garner and Castile's videos have a more thorough context-setting, almost like a narration, with the witness explaining exactly what led up to the situation, what happened and what is happening as they speak. This ensures that the first voice of the incident gets their say before the facts become distorted by other sources.

Of course, this first amendment infringement also occurs afterwards. Witnesses whose names have become public information have been the subjects of harassment campaigns, death threats, racist attacks and even prosecution. Perhaps the most blatant case is the aforementioned case of Orta, the man who filmed Garner's murder. Orta alleges that the recording of the incident was followed by a lengthy harassment campaign, that eventually led to his arrest for unrelated weapons charges and a lengthy prison sentence. While in prison, he claims that he was a constant target of threats and violence, as the guards knew exactly who he was.²⁷⁴ He even recalls one incident where the guards attempted to poison him by putting rat poison in his food, which he refused to eat; the others who did eat the food showed signs of poisoning afterwards.²⁷⁵ While this may not be the most common response to free speech or the right to peaceful assembly, the mere fact that it even occurred is disgusting in and of itself.

²⁷⁴ Chloe Cooper Jones, "Fearing for His Life," *The Verge*, March 13, 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/3/13/18253848/eric-garner-footage-ramsey-orta-police-brutality-killing-safety> (accessed June 5, 2021).

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

The second amendment is a more complicated situation, as historically, the second amendment has shown itself to not be equitable. In fact, the United States' strictest anti-gun laws were instated in the 1960s when the Black Panthers were advocating for Black people arming themselves for protection against the police.²⁷⁶ In other words, fear of Black skin has even managed to outplay the American fetishization for guns, while also supporting that fetishization through a fear of Black skin and the crimes that are attached to it. It is not just historical, though, as three of these videos further show that double standard when it comes to the right to bear arms. First, the most egregious example is Castile, just one of many Black men shot for carrying or using a gun in a perfectly legal way.²⁷⁷ Castile was pulled over by Jeronimo Yanez for a broken taillight. After being asked for his license and registration, he informed the officer that he was legally carrying a firearm. Since the idea of a law-abiding Black American with a gun seems so foreign to members of the police force, Yanez's first response was to tell him to not reach for it and not to pull it out—perhaps also a similar scenario to the aforementioned instances of yelling a command to justify one's own actions afterward—before shooting him. Two important things to mention here: telling someone to reach for their license but not for their gun is ultimately a bit of a contradictory statement. It is impossible to determine what is being reached for and it becomes something of a Schrodinger's weapon. Therefore, this is essentially entrapment, as asking for someone who you know to be armed—someone who has just voluntarily informed you of that fact—requires a bit of trust, trust which is clearly missing by the

²⁷⁶ Adam Winkler, "The Secret History of Guns," *The Atlantic*, October 6, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/09/the-secret-history-of-guns/308608/> (accessed June 13, 2021).

²⁷⁷ While it is not relevant to this study, I would like to take a moment to mention Jemel Roberson. Roberson was a security guard who worked at a bar in a suburb of Chicago. On November 11, 2018, a shooting occurred in the bar where he worked. Springing into action, he pulled his legal firearm and held the shooter until police arrived. Coming onto the scene, police officer Ian Covey saw a Black man with a gun and did not think twice to shoot him dead. Not only was Roberson not in the wrong, he was the prototypical "good guy with a gun" that gun rights advocates constantly advocate for. Covey was not arrested for committing this murder. The police department first attempted to blame Roberson for not following commands.

police in relation to Black Americans. Secondly, how is it that white Americans can walk up to government figures with far-reaching power with their weapons visible and not suffer any pushback and yet a Black American practicing his freedom to bear arms gets murdered for doing just that? It becomes apparent here that Black and white Americans live according to different rules, but this is just the beginning of these violations of the second amendment.

Rice and Crawford should perhaps be mentioned together here, because they were both guilty of the same crime: holding a toy gun, although in different circumstances. Rice was a twelve-year-old child playing with a toy gun, while Crawford was a twenty-two-year-old man who was standing in a Walmart holding a BB gun that was for sale there and that he was planning to purchase. Both of these incidents occurred in Ohio, a state that allows for individuals to openly carry firearms without a license. The police were called on both: the person calling about Rice stated that the gun might be a toy, while the person who called about Crawford lied about him waving the gun around at other customers. The end results of both incidents were the same, however: the police arrived and shot and killed the individuals within several seconds. Neither individual was doing anything wrong and, even if the guns they were holding were real, they would still not be doing anything illegal. And yet, the fear and criminalization of Black skin ensured that two Black individuals were murdered.

This is proof positive that American amendments, these proofs that “all men are created equal,” have always been spoken with one particular type of person in mind. As a lingering remnant of the historical white supremacy of the United States, second amendment rights have only ever truly applied to white people. From the aforementioned laws to keep Black Panthers from being seen with guns to the bombing campaign against the Afro-anarchist MOVE group to the more modern murders of Black men for the crime of appearing to be holding a gun, these

amendments have never been protective of Black people. In fact, these amendments have always been there to ensure that Black people live in fear, while white people have something to protect them from what they fear. In other words, the first amendment is there to allow white people to place Black people in positions of fear, while the second is there to ensure that Black people always know their place. After all, the prototypical image of a second amendment advocate is white, male, middle-aged, conservative and racist. Meanwhile, the image that people like this have of Black people with guns, particularly Black men, is gang members, criminals or haters of white people, the alleged “reverse racists.” Ultimately, these Black men are seen either as criminals against the law or criminals against the notions of white supremacy and it is difficult to tell which is the bigger crime. This is why Black skin can only be protected by the second amendment if the Black individual is willing to become more white, willing to give into some of these white myths and become “one of the good ones,” as it were. Otherwise, his life will be in danger. This is the America that Black people are expected to live in, an America deeply steeped in white supremacy that wants them to believe that they live in a post-racism society.

Death of Blackness

Through a thorough survey of twelve videos, many uncomfortable truths have been exposed: truths about being Black in America, truths about being white in America and truths about dealing with the police in America. Of course, these truths paint a bigger picture about American existence on a day-to-day basis. At the centre of this whole issue are the facts of accountability and power: the police are given too much power and too little accountability, allowing them to go mad with power without any force in place to stop or moderate them. This lack of moderation, this lack of people watching the watchmen, is ultimately the main issue at play here, but it is also just one part of a bigger societal issue, the issue of ingrained white

supremacy in American society and politics. If these police officers were held responsible for their actions, changes could be made to the structure of the police force, but those changes would ensure that the police force could no longer be used as a tool of enforcing white supremacy, which is exactly why no one is being held responsible; the hegemony that those in power want to uphold is inherently racist, so dismantling any part of it would lead to consequences that they would not appreciate.

This is the reason that Black people are murdered for non-crimes, that witnesses are intimidated for trying to speak truth to power and that basic human rights are withheld with such ease: because white supremacy has always been more important than anything else that Americans claim to stand for. While they will always claim their devotion to the American Constitution, white America is willing to forget about the Constitution if it means that they can continue to feel better than their neighbours and they can continue to hold racist beliefs without fear of reprisal. The Constitution has always been seen as for them and for them only, but this is especially true now in these times of racial socio-political uprisings, as white America has shown itself to be extra worried about Black people letting go of their epidermalization of inferiority and demanding to be treated the same way as them; after all, what is scarier to a racist than being equal to a Black person.

Of course, it is not just the police that are a weapon for the upholding of these racist notions. While the police provide the physical brute force behind white America's brutality, they are not a particularly useful tool for the spreading of ideology and propaganda. Instead, the media needs to fill that role. Despite the massive amount of distrust for the media in Trump's America, the media has also been an important tool for upholding white supremacy, going back to the days of lynching announcements in the daily newspapers. However, the next chapter will

again focus on a specific timeframe and look at the representation of Black Americans who have been murdered by the police on American news.

Chapter 5: The News Coverage of the Black Body

Representing the Victim

After death comes the news coverage. In the 24-hour news cycle, death is an absolute necessity, but a series of deaths that follow a pattern are a blessing. News media are dependent on these types of events, whether war, mass or serial murder or, like in this case, a series of preventable deaths that come in close succession to each other with a similar related issue. This is not even specific to mainstream media, as alternative and even reactionary media sources often find themselves just as dependent on such events. This diversity in views also ensures various viewpoints on the presentation of the victim and his representation in the imagery distributed to a viewing audience. These views run the gamut of victimization to criminalization, throughout both space and time, criminalization that has already been put into motion at the time of their murders.

The news stories often take on a generic path from the beginning. A story breaks that a Black man has been murdered by a police officer. Immediately, the news producers go to social media platforms and family members of the deceased in search of representational photographs. Often, these photos are selfies taken by the victim or photos taken by the victim's loved ones in moments of peace and calm. Occasionally, these photos are ignored in favour of mugshots, but at such an early level, the criminalization is avoided in order to not show a bias. Soon after, upon the reactionary media platforms' realization of the story at hand, the discussion begins to be moved in another direction. Owing to both the racialization of the victim and the right-wing propensity for police-worship, these stories often fit perfectly into the crossroads of right-wing identity politics. As such, these reactionary media sources take it upon themselves to find a way to criminalize the victims. Owing to the United States essentially criminalizing the Black body, it

is extremely simple to find some past criminal activity to bring question to the victim's status as a victim, because right-wing sources believe that a past crime committed by a Black individual is reason enough for summary, extrajudicial execution. However, these crimes do not even need to be capital crimes, as acts like shoplifting, possession of cannabis and even smoking in a car with a child present have been used as evidence against the victims' character, thus bringing into question the victim's perfect victim status. Of course, even in cases where crimes were not present, owing to the victim's age, other characteristics are used. When Trayvon Martin was murdered and the media used youthful images of him, others dug up images that portrayed him in a more sinister way to counteract the "bias" shown toward the victim. When twelve-year-old Tamir Rice was murdered by a police officer, the lack of criminal record or incriminating photographs was still counteracted with the suggestion that he looked older than he was. As Ben Stein once unanalytically put it, the Black body is ultimately portrayed as a weapon,²⁷⁸ ensuring that the mere act of existing can be not only perceived as a threat, but also as a justification for murder. Kelly Brown Douglas takes this notion one step further, pointing out that, in the United States, "a dead Black boy is always more guilty for his death than his white killer."²⁷⁹

This is where the struggle begins between those who wish to present the victim in the usual victim format and those who wish to slander the victim under the pretense of fairness. This is not an unusual crossroads: as Meg McLagan and Yates McKee point out, in their visual study of activism, photos do not portray refugees; it is the regime that imposes the term.²⁸⁰ Similarly, the photos of victims do not portray their end or their criminal histories, they merely portray the

²⁷⁸ George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017): 5.

²⁷⁹ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2015): 59.

²⁸⁰ Meg McLagan and Yates McKee, *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Politics* (New York: Zone Books, 2012): 41.

deceased and allow for those with power over their spread to dictate exactly what the photos portray. And then, these photos are left for the viewer to ultimately decide on. Speaking on images of atrocity, Jacques Ranciere points out that an image of imperialist atrocity, for example, can only condemn those atrocities when viewed by an individual who feels guilty about those atrocities, lacking any power otherwise.²⁸¹ Well into the twenty-first century, there are still plenty of individuals who do not feel guilty about racist American atrocities—a feeling that would hopefully be put to good use and lead to some actual action—and therein lies the divide between the two groups.

This chapter will focus on the visual representations of the victims of these extrajudicial police murders. Due to the vast field of candidates, I will specifically focus on what I consider to be four waves of Black Lives Matter-style activism with four high-profile victims. The first victim is Oscar Grant, whose 2009 murder I would describe as a pre-Black Lives Matter case and the first such victim whose murder incorporated video evidence, social media and a grassroots campaign. While Grant is predated by high-profile victims, such as Amadou Diallo, it is this media savvy presentation that makes him the first proto-example of this style of activism. The second victim is Michael Brown, whose 2014 murder focused the movement's objectives—Trayvon Martin's murder created the movement and angered people enough to protest, but Black Lives Matter was hazier as a motive until the death of Brown. After a short lull in outrage, the third case is that of Philando Castile, whose 2016 murder was greatly amplified by live video of his dying face, as well as his seemingly untouchable victim status.²⁸² And the final case and the most recent is the 2020 murder of George Floyd, arguably the most contentious of all of the

²⁸¹ Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2011): 85.

²⁸² The right-wing media still questioned his victim status, created disinformation to aid them and magnified every small detail they could. All this ultimately did was clearly point out their hypocrisy.

cases, because it included unquestionable footage of the murder of Floyd and threatened to bring about the end of American white supremacy. I will look at the visual representations of these four cases across a variety of media platforms to see the differences in how these four individuals were displayed across political ideologies and throughout time, as facts began to come to light in real time.

This study will be done through a general survey of American media platforms, with an attempt to give equal attention to mainstream media, alternative media and reactionary media and an even split between television and print sources, ultimately focused mainly on each one's website. While I would have liked to incorporate specific media platforms, a great difficulty becomes apparent, which is that alternative and reactionary news sources tend to react to news more than break news. This is to say that, instead of discussing the event wherein, for example, Philando Castile died, they are far more likely to discuss the reaction to or analysis of his death. These sources are often less concerned with facts than they are with analysis. Furthermore, these styles of content creation often appear in waves, so many of them will not be old enough to have been around in every one of these cases. This general survey will give a full understanding of not just how media sources treated the victims of these murders, but also how these representations were misrepresented by other media platforms. This will lead to a more in-depth understanding of how American media represents racialized bodies murdered by authority figures. It is important to note that this still will not lead to a conclusive understanding of this matter, as even news sources that appear on the same ideological side of an issue will often differ in their individual standards and practices, further exacerbated by sources parasitically borrowing from each other; this will however lead to a satisfactory understanding for my purposes.

Oscar Grant: Before the Culture Wars

Oscar Grant was murdered by police officer Johannes Mehserle on New Year's Day 2009. He was being held down when Mehserle shot him. He was twenty-two years old. Grant's murder came three years before the murder of Trayvon Martin and the birth of Black Lives Matter as a slogan, which would eventually blossom into a movement. He was far from the first Black man killed by the police, but his death was unique because it was captured on video. The capturing of police brutality on video has been a monumental phenomenon since George Holliday caught the beating of Rodney King on video in 1991. That beating infamously did not result in any punishment for the four police officers, which led to the Los Angeles riots the next year. Despite that lack of legal results, many still hold the belief that video evidence will result in some liability. Perhaps this is only because of all of the Black men murdered by police officers before Grant whose murderers got away with their crimes because of a lack of evidence. Whatever the reason, Grant's death and subsequent video evidence led to some results: protests occurred in Oakland and the murderer received a prison sentence, an insultingly short four years, less than half of which was served.

How was Grant represented through all this? The short answer is not much! All of the details of this case were similar to Black Lives Matter but on a smaller scale. As such, the media response was also similarly smaller. After all, before Black Lives Matter became a national and then an international movement, deaths of Black individuals frequently stayed local. As Susan Sontag has stated, "the memory of war...is mostly local."²⁸³ The death of Grant brought great pain and anguish to those who loved him—his partner, his family, his friends—but also to those who resembled him. There are many individuals who likely never met Grant, but who share a

²⁸³ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2004): 35.

skin colour, a culture and a home. Under capitalist pressure, people may not have the time or resources to mourn the death of someone who has no resemblance to them; after all, there are violent deaths occurring all over the world right now that do not get even the press coverage of Grant. Pain and anguish are results of proximity.

However, war is not always waged in person. Jennifer Malkowski analyzed Grant's death in relation to the death of Neda Agha-Soltan approximately six months after and halfway across the world. She points out that Grant's death only received minimal American news coverage outside of Oakland, while Agha-Soltan became an American icon for the green revolution in Iran.²⁸⁴ This ultimately exposes two facts: Grant's death had not yet become part of a culture war and the deaths of Black people had not yet become a subject of importance for the American public. The veneration of Agha-Soltan in American mainstream news was in fact a continuation of a proxy war between the United States and Iran. There was something to be gained by the American side through constant discussion of the video, whether that thing is ratings, propagandistic changes of opinion or the people's hearts and minds. These were things that were not to be earned though discussions of the murder of Oscar Grant, especially not in the year 2009. Things would change with the death of Trayvon Martin and the arrival of the culture war started by Black Lives Matter, but until then, the media remained quiet.

Furthermore, many Americans were simply not ready to admit that their country was founded on racist, white supremacist ideologies. Returning to Ranciere's intolerable image, these Americans were not—and perhaps still are not—prepared to feel, or at least admit to feeling, the guilt of their racist past. The video of Grant's murder was unquestionable proof of not just the officer's guilt, but also the guilt of the American society at large. After the raw video came out,

²⁸⁴ Jennifer Malkowski, *Dying in Full Detail: Mortality and Digital Documentary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017): 177.

many Americans decided to simply ignore it. Of course, others went to the other option, which was criminalizing the victim, an act that has become commonplace since.²⁸⁵ If you cannot convince yourself that your way of life is good, you can simply convince yourself that the victim of your way of life is bad. As Sontag puts it, to the militant, identity is most important, leading to a state of mind wherein the only thing that is important is who is killed by whom.²⁸⁶

Grant was portrayed in the news, however, despite the overwhelming lack of coverage. The majority of the coverage came from almost-local source *SFGate*, the online arm of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. They followed the case quite closely, but their choice of imagery suggested that the news story was the murder rather than the murdered individual. The early stories were all illustrated with a still image from the video of Grant's death, what Barbie Zelizer would refer to as an "about-to-die" image,²⁸⁷ a mnemonic device for a death,²⁸⁸ which can also be used to mean anything the user of the image wants.²⁸⁹ The about-to-die image is a simple way of representing the deceased without any "biased" intertextual elements being added to the story; the story is "this individual died." Later on, as more details became apparent, the about-to-die image began to be joined by other, more personal and human images. A family-provided photo of a calm Grant smiling and holding a baby began to appear with these stories, even appearing on a CNN story about the case. However, the about-to-die photo never quite disappeared. This is a common feature in these stories.

Since this event predated Black Lives Matter, the reactionary media did not get involved with it, with Grant's story only really appearing on Fox News as a nondescript news story, using

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

²⁸⁶ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 10.

²⁸⁷ Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010): 24.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 303.

the same image used by CNN. However, the alternative media was most important for the spread of this news story. *The Socialist Worker* and *In These Times*, both left-wing, socialism-minded online news sites, carried the story of Grant as it happened, illustrating the stories with images of Grant being used in protests. Meanwhile *Worker's World*, a similarly leaning news site, took it one step further, using images of Grant with family, as well as an image of Grant's mother during a protest. While others limited Grant to his death or even non-descript images, the left-leaning sources humanized him, leaning on the old adage that the victim had a family. These images are often used in American media when a white man kills his family, but they are missing from mainstream news sources for victims of police violence, because they go against the hegemonic forces that own the news media. Despite this, after Grant, these stories began to sell.

Michael Brown: After Trayvon and Black Lives Matter

By the time Michael Brown was murdered by Darren Wilson, the term Black Lives Matter was on everyone's lips and a culture war had already begun, between those who wanted Black people to be able to live without fear of dying at the hands of a governmental institution and those who were concerned about police officers or the semantics of speaking about the lives of Black people. People who were insisting that racializing police violence is inherently racist were also going out of their ways to criminalize each and every Black victim of police violence. What was ultimately one of the biggest battlegrounds in this culture war was Black Lives Matter's refusal to give in to respectability politics, insisting that no Black individual, no matter their background or criminal record, should be a victim of extrajudicial murder at the hands of the police.²⁹⁰ This was ultimately one of the root anti-Black Lives Matter talking points that the reactionary opposition latched on to, leading to the birth of BLMization. After all, one of the

²⁹⁰ Barbara Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018): 13.

most important points of the reactionary argument have always been the moral pollution of Black people,²⁹¹ a point that they can use to derail an argument, but what good is such an argument if your opposition does not care?

The arrival of the culture war between Black Americans and supporters of the American police brought with it a divide in how those individuals are represented in the media when they are victimized. Where the victims were once represented by about-to-die or Facebook photos, ostensibly neutral ones, the choice of photos became a part of the representation of ideology within each news media platform. In fact, the very act of using photographs as representation has shown itself to be a highly political act time and time again. On a more obvious level, a photo placed in a newspaper says something completely different from a photo placed in a gallery.²⁹² On another front, power struggles expose themselves in how a photo is obtained as well, the photographer often dictating the meaning behind a photograph.²⁹³ As such, with the access to various sources of photographs, reporters can allow the dead to speak from beyond the grave through a social media post,²⁹⁴ the family to speak on their deceased's behalf through personal photos or the various state organizations to speak ill of the deceased. With Brown, this choice definitely leaned toward one side when the allegedly left-leaning *New York Times* published an article, stating that Brown was “no angel”²⁹⁵ along with a heavily oversaturated closeup of his face, an image suggesting criminality through the use of security camera aesthetic conventions, an image that was also used by Fox News as their less blatantly reactionary image.

²⁹¹ Rima Vesely-Flad, *Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies: Moral Pollution, Black Lives and the Struggle for Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017): 34.

²⁹² McLagan and McKee, *Sensible Politics*, 10.

²⁹³ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008): 85.

²⁹⁴ Kathleen M. Cumiskey and Larissa Hjorth, *Haunting Hands* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 4.

²⁹⁵ John Eligon, “Michael Brown Spent Last Weeks Grappling with Problems and Promise,” *The New York Times*, August 24, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/25/us/michael-brown-spent-last-weeks-grappling-with-lifes-mysteries.html> (accessed July 13, 2021).

Brown's representation is of particular interest, because the early photos that were used to represent him all appear benign and neutral, photos which have some sense of his participation in them. And yet, the choices are often quite telling. There are two photos that are ultimately more common in mainstream media sources: one depicts Brown wearing a pair of headphones and looking sidewise into the camera.²⁹⁶ This is ultimately the most neutral photo available within these articles, appearing in articles published by ABC, CBS and CNN. A second photo depicts Brown dressed in a graduation robe and other garb on the day of his high school graduation.²⁹⁷ This photo appeared in articles published by ABC and NBC and was a great source of controversy within reactionary media sources, as they felt that it portrayed him as exactly what he was, a teenager ready to become an adult. The belief was ultimately that the image was emotionally biased. This alleged bias was counteracted by reactionary media sources in several ways, some more abhorrent than others.

One of the less inflammatory representation methods involved finding candid photos of Brown that depict him in a worse light, at least in a hegemonic sense. This is why *USA Today*, for example, used a photo that may be seen as a contradiction of the graduation photo: a photo of Brown in a basketball jersey, giving a sideways peace-like gesture with his hand, in an attempt to make it appear to be a gang sign to the audience they are hoping to reach.²⁹⁸ Similarly, conservative online news aggregator website *Drudge Report* reported on Brown's murder by using an image of him showing the middle finger to the camera. These images ultimately take decontextualized images of teenagers doing the sort of thing that teenagers do and use them to criminalize those that they decide must be feared. This leads to perhaps the most commonly used

²⁹⁶ This photo can be viewed at https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/8.2_Michael%20Brown%202.jpg.

²⁹⁷ This photo can be viewed at https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/8.3_Michael%20Brown%203.jpg.

²⁹⁸ This photo can be viewed at https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/8.1_Michael%20Brown%201.png.

image in reactionary sources. After further research was done, security camera footage was released of Brown choking a store clerk.²⁹⁹ Suddenly, an event of which Wilson had no knowledge became the leading evidence in a murder case, an indication that Brown was no longer the victim, but rather the criminal the reactionary sources were seeking. Overnight, platforms including *USA Today*, *Fox News* and *Breitbart* began to exclusively use a frame from the security footage—the frame depicts Brown towering over the clerk with his hand around the clerk’s throat—in its stories about Brown, who was no longer given any pretense of innocence. This representational method eventually led to this blatant act becoming recognized by the general public.

This led to the founding of another socially conscious hashtag: if they gunned me down. This hashtag recognized the beginning of the use of this weapon in the culture war, the use of visuality to shift the narrative. As Nicholas Mirzoeff has pointed out, visuality is controlled by means of hegemonic power, in order to ensure that only those in power have the “right to look.”³⁰⁰ This takes on a very literal meaning when it become apparent that it is the media wings of various conglomerates that are ultimately in charge of deciding what an individual will look like, post-mortem. Hundreds of individuals went online and posted two images of themselves, one showing them in their best light—often images that incorporate education, social status or familial positioning—and a second showing them in a bad light—often images that portray them as “too ethnic,” so to speak; this might include images of “scary-looking” individuals smoking, drinking or generally not partaking in socially acceptable behaviour. These images essentially followed the formula of the Brown images, looking collegiate on one side and “thug-like” on the

²⁹⁹ One oft-used still from the footage can be seen at <https://i.ytimg.com/vi/mkOfqIXkBRE/maxresdefault.jpg>.

³⁰⁰ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011): 4.

other. It is this power that leads to murderers flying under the radar, while the victim becomes the subject of a story which unequivocally states that he was “no angel.” However, while Brown may have not been an angel, the next murder victim was as close as one could get to an angel in a case where a Black man is killed by the police. Unfortunately, the weaponization of the Black body is also in full swing at this point.

Philando Castile: The Need to Criminalize

Castile was murdered by police officer Jeronimo Yanez on the sixth of July, 2016. Yanez and another officer had pulled Castile over for an alleged driving offence when Castile informed them that he had a legal firearm on his person, a firearm he was licensed to carry. At this point, Yanez became paranoid, becoming convinced that Castile was reaching for the firearm, before shooting him multiple times and killing him. This case became a complete and utter outlier in these similar incidents in various ways. First and foremost, the narrative was not immediately controlled by the media. Before anyone could report on the story, Castile’s partner Diamond Reynolds ensured that they would get ahead of any potential disinformation by recording the aftermath of the shooting and broadcasting it live through social media. By keeping her calm and practicing an act of citizen journalism, she created the first bit of evidence before it could be sullied by outside information. The police car dashcam was later made public, but the narrative had already been dictated by that point. Secondly, Castile was a perfect victim. He worked in education, he owned a legal firearm and he did not have a violent criminal record—he had an extensive record of driving offenses, but that can be explained away as a result of the crime of driving while Black; Castile made it exceedingly difficult for the media to slander him, but his identity ensured that he would be slandered by someone.

Mainstream news sources, after experience from previous murder victims, decided to be cautious about their representational photographs. There were plenty of photos to choose from and, for once, a lot of mainstream news sources used different photographs, perhaps to tell different stories about the same individual. CNN used a very casual, almost non-descript Facebook photo of Castile,³⁰¹ while NBC News used a neat photo of him while at work, wearing a button-up shirt and a lanyard with a key card,³⁰² again portraying that collegiate standard of Brown's representation, this time an education employee instead of a student. *Time* used the same method, using a photograph of him at work, in professional attire, along with a co-worker.³⁰³ Essentially, most of the mainstream news sources emphasized Castile's legitimized form of employment and the respectability that goes with it; they played with respectability politics to suggest that he did not deserve to die *unlike* the others that came before him. Left-of-centre alternative media source *Vox*, meanwhile, used images of Castile with his family,³⁰⁴ ultimately questioning the respectability politics used elsewhere to point out that his humanity should be enough to condemn his murder. *Vox*'s refusal to push the respectability angle also involved using an image of Castile that appears less than respectful to the reactionary eye, an image of Castile when he was simply existing and not performing, a Facebook image of him in a polo with braids, backwards baseball cap and a chain,³⁰⁵ an image that could be compared to the infamous "gang sign" photo of Brown, images that will inevitably be twisted to further a reactionary narrative.

³⁰¹ This photo can be seen at <https://www.twincities.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/castile-philando-2.jpg>.

³⁰² This photo can be seen at https://media-cldnry.s-nbcnews.com/image/upload/newscms/2016_27/1610311/160707-philando-castille-03.jpg.

³⁰³ This photo can be seen at https://api.time.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/13620761_10208800296217486_1061220960635365205_n-e1468011588565.jpg.

³⁰⁴ This photo can be seen as the header of <https://www.vox.com/2016/7/7/12116288/minnesota-police-shooting-philando-castile-falcon-heights-video>.

³⁰⁵ This photo can be seen as the header of <https://www.vox.com/2016/7/11/12147878/philando-castile-driving-while-black>.

On the topic of reactionary narratives, Castile's positive image could not be used as part of the right wing's portion of the culture war. Not only that, but the National Rifle Association's refusal to make a statement about the incident brought some racist truths to the surface. As such, it was useless for reactionary sources to mention the case, so they did not. *Breitbart* only focused on the end of the trial, the later arrest of Castile's partner, Reynolds, and celebrities referring to it, tangential stories that confirmed their biases without the discomfort of having to admit that they were wrong about a single thing. As such, they also did not have much reason to use images of him, settling for the about-to-die photo any time a photo was necessary. On one occasion, *Breitbart* used the image that was used by *Vox*, which was a great demonstration of the differences that come from the medium or location of a photo. As an image will have different meanings when in a newspaper and in a museum, that same image will have different meanings in a left-of-centre article and a far right one. In this case, respectability politics are not being questioned but rather confirmed for a prejudiced audience.

Fox News similarly avoided the case, opting for about-to-die and nondescript photos. However, Castile died in the midst of the days of fake news. As such, there appeared a rise of disinformational right-wing news sources to comment on such events. Yanez stated that he had originally pulled Castile over because he resembled an armed robbery suspect that they were seeking. This was good enough information for one of these many disinformation sources, a website so shoddily constructed that it appears to have two different names. The Conservative Treehouse or The Last Refuge advertises itself as the sort of website that is necessary when the mainstream news media insists on lying to their audience. This alleged news website was advertised in the comments of the few *Breitbart* articles about Castile, being taken as gospel. The story that was linked was illustrated by an image of security camera footage of a Black man

committing an armed robbery³⁰⁶—a Black man who is far too covered up in the facial region to resemble anyone—next to the about-to-die footage of Castile taken by his partner. This image is then labelled in the headline with words like “confirmed” and “proof,” despite the fact that nothing has been confirmed or proven. When originally more mainstream reactionary right-wing media sources were attempting to slander Castile because he was smoking cannabis in the car or because the officer felt unsafe, the smaller, less accountable sources realized that they could achieve so much more through simply lying. They recognize their audience and they recognize that their audience wants confirmation, not information. These sources have been following this playbook ever since and many among them have become rich and famous because of it.³⁰⁷

George Floyd: The Turning of the Tides

By 2020, the tides were beginning to change, at least on a mainstream level. While Black Lives Matter was still seen as a threat by reactionary right-wing media platforms, their beliefs were beginning to be seen as accurate by some unlikely people. When Ahmaud Arbery was shot and killed by Travis McMichael and his former police officer father, one would be forgiven for expecting more of the same rhetoric. However, what did happen was quite the opposite. Former republican politician Trey Gowdy appeared on Fox News shortly after the incident to discuss it, where he asked why it took the video to lead to an arrest and why the murderers were not arrested sooner. While there is one difference here—the murderers were not police officers at the time of the shooting—this line of questioning resembles the rhetoric of Black Lives Matter. Even Donald Trump called the incident “very disturbing.” The intolerable images were beginning to have an effect on Americans on a much larger scale. And then came George Floyd.

³⁰⁶ This photo can be seen at <https://theconservativetreehouse.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/suspect-mn-4.jpg>.

³⁰⁷ Right wing sources that incorporate this style of rhetoric include mainstream platforms like Fox News, but also similar, slightly less mainstream sources like Breitbart, Newsmax and One America News.

Floyd was murdered by Derek Chauvin with the aid of three other officers. While people were finally ready to admit that Black people were victims of a long history of systemic racism and violence, they were less than ready to admit that the police have a hand in it. Thus began perhaps the most virulent divide between American political camps in relation to a Black individual's death since Michael Brown. Floyd was venerated by one side, while being criminalized, practically demonized, by the other. This makes sense as, on one end, Floyd's death was perhaps the most graphically depicted of all of these, his last minutes of life and the moment he ceased to be alive both captured on a lengthy video of his face—when speaking of war death footage, Sontag points out that the domestic face is often avoided by photographers, images of dead faces being saved for the enemy, the foreigner.³⁰⁸ While it could be argued that the American Black body is hardly seen as a domestic peer, it was still the face and its slow descent into death that made this death so newsworthy. On the other end, there are plenty of images of Floyd that would not be seen as acceptable by a reactionary society. It is not surprising, then, that the established image of Floyd also happens to be so nondescript.

The media seems to have chosen an established image for the representation of Floyd. In a strange turn of events, CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS and even Fox News used the same image, a fairly nondescript selfie taken by Floyd in a black and grey hoodie, staring directly into the camera as a Black man.³⁰⁹ This photo has also become something of a martyr's memory, being used frequently as a source of inspiration for street art. This one image, without any additional commentary or symbolism, has singlehandedly become a martyr's icon, even if it is only because the person it represents died at a time where the world was ready to admit the truth about the disenfranchisement of Black people. Some sources use other photos, including a photo of Floyd

³⁰⁸ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 70.

³⁰⁹ This photo can be seen at https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/9/9c/George_Floyd.png.

wearing thick glasses and a black and gold shirt and other similar photos, mostly neutral images meant to suggest nothing, but this image seemed to suggest that the media had learned that the first racially biased imagery found was not fit for representation of victims, even if those victims were Black.

In fact, one theme crept up once again in representations of Floyd, where he was depicted in his work uniform, the same way that Castile was before him. However, even this image raised many questions. Where Castile was showing a sense of scholastic responsibility, Floyd's photo depicts him wearing a hoodie that reads "security" in big, capital letters.³¹⁰ This outfit also has the classic lanyard and a Houston Rockets cap, but the focus remains on the hoodie. Ignoring the racialization of the hoodie as an item of clothing, this hoodie depicts a contradiction. On one hand, Floyd at work, beyond showing him to be an employed and therefore respectable individual, is a signifier of law and order, an important cog in a machine to keep people safe, the same way that another cog in the machine murdered him in an alleged attempt to keep people safe from him. On the other hand, his very ability to signify law and order comes from his threatening demeanour; in order to work security, one must appear a certain way, a way that would stop others from becoming security risks. As such, the very thing that makes him useful as a security guard also makes him a threat in the general public: his demeanour, his aesthetic attributes and his racialized status. Floyd, in this image, exists on two diametrically opposing sides of society.

Before these images became available, these sources used about-to-die photos, as usual, which was the simplest course of action, as the footage of Floyd dying had gone viral. Later photos taken from bodycam footage of his arrest also came out, but none of it ever reached the

³¹⁰ This photo can be seen at https://s.abcnews.com/images/US/george-floyd-ap-jt-200529_hpMain_2_1x1_608.jpg.

same level of distribution. These images of Floyd clearly caused the media many ethical concerns which were obvious in their cropping and editing of photos. Some papers would show Floyd's face and Chauvin's knee, while others avoided his face, focusing instead on Chauvin, cropping at the knee. Still others preferred to use an image of several cops kneeling on his back, potentially as a way to avoid showing his face. Ultimately, most of these media platforms had finally come to the realization that this was a man in the process of dying rather than an object to be used for news illustration. Of course, this is not to say that everyone agreed that it was wrong for Black people to be murdered by police officers.

By this point, with the shift in the mainstream, the right wing had to shift the other way. New voices rose to create content for people who felt that Fox News was too "liberal," leading to a rise in bad faith politics in relation to race and ideology, people and groups who put party before facts. Breitbart continued to lead the way, insisting on continuing to use the about-to-die photo, including Floyd's head and Chauvin's whole body in the shot, as their default illustrative image. However, even this was not the lowest that reactionary sources went in relation to this story. As soon as Floyd's name was released to the media, there was a rush to find his misdeeds. Floyd did not have the cleanest past and these misdeeds were easy to find. Soon after, various sources released information on his past crimes, his mugshot and even a pornographic video in which Floyd had previously partaken. These leaks served one single purpose: to further the new right-wing rhetoric that went beyond "the police had the right to do what they did" towards "the victim deserved to die." This rhetoric existed in the earlier days of Black Lives Matter activism as well, but they truly came about as a standard response, even retroactively, in response to the liberal tendency to heroize the deceased. There is a fine line that American politics find difficult to comprehend: the deceased does not need to be valorized for the sake of the argument,

because the argument should be that no one deserves to be murdered by the police, no matter their past. As such, Floyd's past should not matter when he is the victim. Attempting to turn him into a hero is ineffective in two important ways: first, it allows and encourages further attacks on his character and second, it suggests that the next victim who cannot be considered a hero "deserves to die," essentially taking on the same position as the reactionary media. Again, this is rhetoric that exists retroactively and the belief that one must be a hero to matter goes against the very basic ideology of Black Lives Matter.

Representing the Person

Across a span of slightly over a decade, the United States proved that famous adage, "the more things change, the more they stay the same." Despite the evolution of the media's ideology in relation to the representation of victims of police violence, these deaths continue to happen and people continue to victim blame the deceased. In fact, with the widespread condemnation of such actions, the racist sentiments that are being condemned continue to grow, owing to the reactionary belief systems of the sort of individual who decides to dedicate their life to anti-civil rights ideologies. It is these reactionaries and sometimes the struggles against them that lead to certain thematic commonalities between these four individuals and the many others that came between them.

Perhaps the most important commonality and the saddest is the need for respectability and demand of perfect victims. This demand is ultimately only ever expected of certain groups. For example, video evidence of Kyle Rittenhouse punching a teenage girl in the face has done nothing to dampen his support and yet vague proof of wrongdoing even when erroneous—Castile never committed armed robbery and yet a photo of a Black man committing armed robbery was enough to sully his reputation—will often ruin that respectability and criminalize

the deceased. That respectability factor has even gone to some unusual places, taking into account physical characteristics or childish exploits. On the former, young children killed by police are often blamed for it owing to their sizes. When twelve-year-old Tamir Rice was murdered by a police officer, some excused this act because he did not look twelve,³¹¹ as if that is the main reason why his murder was wrong. Studies have shown that Black children's ages—along with assumption of guilt—are often overestimated,³¹² which goes a long way in pointing out the error of this judgment call. This size argument has thus been used to criminalize those who never lived long enough to risk having a criminal record. Similarly, young people are often further criminalized due to their youthful exploits. There is a massive difference made between a white teenager taking a picture while showing the middle finger or smoking cannabis and a Black teenager doing the same: the white teenager is excused as “boys being boys” while such images are often used as evidence against the victims of police violence. Finally, the moment of death is also frequently used to criminalize the victim. When a police officer enters the scene of an incident and escalates a situation, suddenly all of the responsibility falls on the person who has no authority in the situation. When John Crawford was shot at, he ran away and then ran back to the police who shot him dead. He had done nothing wrong and was simply reacting in a panic. Tamir Rice similarly held a toy gun in a way that anyone would and he was shot dead almost immediately. Despite that, he is criminalized for acting in a way that clearly had no thought put into it. It is these mindless acts that ultimately turn the deceased into a criminal, violent at worst, one who resists arrest at best.

³¹¹ Christopher Ingraham, “Why White People See Black Boys Like Tamir Rice as Older, Bigger and Guiltier than They Really Are,” *The Washington Post*, December 28, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/12/28/why-prosecutors-keep-talking-about-tamir-rices-size-36-pants/> (accessed August 1, 2021).

³¹² Phillip Atiba Goff et al., “The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children,” in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 106 (2014): 532.

Another commonality that also proved somewhat difficult in the research on this chapter has to do with image usage. Aside from the representations discussed in this chapter, many news outlets opted to represent the victims of these acts of violence not with personal photos, but rather with photos of the protests that occur in their honour. Some of these photos include images of protestors carrying images of the deceased. Perhaps this is just a further attempt at neutrality, but it could just as easily be that many news outlets consider the spectacle of the protest a more important news story than the actual death of a human being. This is similarly why the nondescript photos were so prevalent. Photos that make no blatant judgment call and tell no story can be used to send a message of non-biased journalism but can also similarly be used to tell any story. An image that neither shows the individual in a good nor bad light can be used to avoid criticism from both sides by allowing both to fill in the blanks for themselves and tell the story they want. Some may see this as a non-problem, as neutrality is a necessity for fair and balanced news stories, but what happens when that neutrality comes at the expense of a human life? On the other hand, many of these news stories have given the deceased the power to define themselves. A large number of the photos used to illustrate the victims' identities come from personal family photos and social media posts. Of course, a lot of these photos are attempts at self-representation and, therefore, may not be seen as a suitable epitaph. However, this is still an unusual amount of power given to deceased individuals in an age of narrative-based news, where the ideology meant to be evoked by a news story is more important than the story itself. Where individuals were once framed in any way that would best sell newspapers and Nielson numbers, these individuals are now given permission to appear in the ways that they wish to appear, on a national stage, from beyond the grave.

Finally, I would like to use the images used to represent the deceased and briefly place them into a historical context of brutality against Black bodies. The images of the victims, both of the personal and about-to-die variety, can be seen as a modern continuation of the lynching photos of late-19th century United States. These photos brought together spectacle and ritual to create a new form of public execution in a world where capital punishment had been driven into a privatized realm.³¹³ While the connection may seem obvious, it is an important connection to make because of the changing purpose of the photographic representations of the events. In her study of lynching photography, Amy Louise Wood points out that the meaning of lynching photos changed when they landed in Black hands. Where the photos were once a form of white supremacist propaganda, proof of the threat of brutal violence from the inferior other,³¹⁴ along with the celebration of white supremacy, they became a proof of disgrace and brutality in the hands of those being brutalized.³¹⁵ Michael Weaver further reiterates this suggestion by pointing to the fact that, with the photograph's ability to spread these images to far off locales, this evidence allows distant audiences to condemn such acts without fear of reprisal from the perpetrators.³¹⁶

This is where the connection comes from: these photos become humanized through their connections to the victims. Personal photos take on the role of the young, smiling portrait of Emmett Till, but it is the about-to-die photos that take on the role of the numerous, often nameless lynching victims that are of most importance. Furthermore, both sets of photos take on the role of evidence; the modern photos may take on a more immediate sense of evidence—they

³¹³ Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009): 24.

³¹⁴ Robert W. Thurston, *Lynching: American Mob Murder in Global Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2011): 3.

³¹⁵ Amy Louise Wood, "Lynching Photography and the Visual Reproduction of White Supremacy," in *American Nineteenth Century History* 6 (2005): 392.

³¹⁶ Michael Weaver, "'Judge Lynch' in the Court of Public Opinion: Publicity and the De-legitimation of Lynching," in *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 2 (2019): 307.

do not show evidence of the act, but rather of the process, often meant to take on an “objective” lens rather than to prove ideology—but they still provide proof of brutality. Finally, both sets of images are, at their state of conception, meant to signify justice in an attempt to further white supremacist notions: lynching photographs do this through the murder and dismemberment of individuals that the mob has deemed guilty, while the more modern photos do this through legal punitive methods that affect certain groups more frequently. While the method has changed, the ideology behind it remains the same. And, in both cases, those photos’ meanings change when they land in the hands of Black people. One difference is that the more modern evidence is occasionally captured by Black people and not pre-emptively allowed to be used as white supremacist propaganda, starting their existence as proof of brutality against the brutalized. This re-appropriation of these violent images has been useful for change in the past and it continues to be useful.

Part 2: Representation

Chapter 6: Images of Protest

A Different Variety of Bodies in the Streets

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown's body lay dead on a Ferguson street in the summer heat for approximately four hours before he was taken to the morgue. Soon after, a different kind of Black body began to step into the streets, demanding justice. Throughout its history, the Black Lives Matter movement has become one of the largest movement in history, with protests occurring worldwide for the rights of Black people to not suffer police violence. The fact that these protests happen in so many disparate locations illustrates how widespread a problem police violence against Black populations truly is. This brings up the question of why now? Black populations have faced police violence everywhere for decades, if not centuries. So, why is Black Lives Matter the first international movement to deal with this?

There are ultimately a few elements that make Black Lives Matter a wholly unique continuation of a decades long issue. The most obvious new element is the connection of new media. With the advancement of web 2.0 and the continuation of the personalization of the digital space, the extension of humanity into a digital realm is working just as efficiently the other way, frequently turning digital activism into physical activism. After all, it is always important to remember that Black Lives Matter began as a hashtag before it became a worldwide movement. Two important elements come as a result of this new media model: the new ease of citizen journalism and the ease of access to the objects necessary for creation and distribution of that new information.

According to Henry Jenkins, more than half of all teens have been personally involved in media creation and over a third have distributed it online.³¹⁷ These numbers continue to go up as technology advances. While Black Lives Matter is not necessarily a teen movement, it is a movement that attracts younger individuals, meaning more technology-savvy individuals. These individuals have created a brand-new form of protest, part of which is an aesthetic form. Their ability to spread these images is also an important one. Black Lives Matter is in contention with mainstream and reactionary media sources for the hearts and minds of the people. Thus, the correct method of self-advertisement would require a savvy media team and an ability to show their own side of the issue to enough people to counteract the (often false) narratives spread by outside sources. The images that are created by Black Lives Matter may well account for a large part of their appeal. In fact, Rima Vesely-Flad goes so far as to say that Black Lives Matter's countering of violent images from the mainstream media has led to "new images of Blackness."³¹⁸ This is far from coincidental; this is a direct result of a smart group of modern protestors.

Black Lives Matter protestors recognize the media landscape in which they live. The media is at once becoming overly conglomerated and narrowly targeted to specific audiences. As such, the news is often disseminated by competing platforms that are loyal to those who fund them, whether those are major corporations or political parties. This is why many have suggested that we live in a "post-truth age."³¹⁹ When truth is less important than content creation and content is necessary to fill in something beyond a twenty-four hour news cycle—the twenty-four

³¹⁷ Henry Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009): xi.

³¹⁸ Rima Vesely-Flad, *Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies: Moral Pollution, Black Lives and the Struggle for Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017): 171.

³¹⁹ Lucia Abbamonte, *'Black Lives Matter': Cross-Media Resonance and the Iconic Turn of Language* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018): 17.

hour news cycle was localized within a specific time and space, while this post-twenty-four hour news cycle is so segmented that it would be impossible to consume it all—the fight for fairness is no longer the necessary fight. It becomes necessary to fight misinformation on its own front, not through further misinformation but through popular culture and changes in one’s plan of attack.

Black Lives Matter has taken advantage of three important elements to further their cause: the removal of icons, a specification of issue and the general shifting of ideologies in the present world. First, the iconization of leaders has always been a major issue with Black rights movements. A leader will often stand in as a synecdoche of a full movement. As such, Martin Luther King might be seen as the civil rights movement, Medgar Evers might be seen as the NAACP, or Fred Hampton or Huey Newton might be seen as the Black Panthers. When an individual can stand in for a movement, the movement can also effectively die with that person, not definitively, but in the public eye. The loss of steam that comes from these incidents is often seen as a defeating blow by the opponents of the cause as well. How does one fight that? Through the removal of leaders and masters. While Black Lives Matter was founded by identifiable people and while many individuals associated with Black Lives Matter have died through suspicious means,³²⁰ the movement continues unabated because an inordinate amount of power is not afforded to anyone within its ranks.

Secondly, their issue is specific, allowing for a more specific protest model and, ostensibly, less pushback. Bad faith arguments are often made against Black rights advocacy groups about their lack of focus, which is also further used to create disinformation. When Black

³²⁰ E.J. Dickson, “Mysterious Deaths Leave Ferguson Activists on ‘Pins and Needles,’” *Rolling Stone*. March 18, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/ferguson-death-mystery-black-lives-matter-michael-brown-809407/> (accessed August 21, 2021).

athletes began taking a knee during the national anthem, their wealth and their lack of additional information was used to further ideas that they were fighting for Black supremacy or anti-American sentiments. Black Lives Matter has made their intentions clear: they are against police violence—most prevalently against Black people—they feel that people must be aware of this injustice and they believe that Black lives should matter. None of these ideas are controversial, but the final goal threatens white supremacy, making it controversial. This has of course not stopped disinformation sources from again pushing ideas of Black supremacy and anti-white/American sentiment, but the reaction is somewhat hopeful in that the opponents clearly recognize the movement's power. For one thing, they never refer to the group as Black Lives Matter, exclusively referring to them as BLM, in a bid at dehumanizing the movement. There is still a lengthy battle ahead, but having a specific vision is helpful.

Finally, they take advantage of natural advancements in attitudes and ideologies. In the 1960s, all that was needed to shut down a movement was to somehow connect them to communism. Meanwhile, Black Lives Matter has Marxist roots. The red scare no longer has the power it once had and beliefs about racism are naturally beginning to shift. This may well be the most helpful element at play here. These elements all work together to allow Black Lives Matter to more easily get their message out there. Of course, the most powerful tool of all is the visual form. Black Lives Matter's most effective tool is a counter-production of images to counteract the beliefs espoused by those who seek to marginalize or destroy the movement. This chapter will focus on these images from both sides. A thorough survey of images that have come out of this struggle, both pro- and anti-Black Lives Matter will be studied and analyzed, with a focus on finding common themes within them and attempting to better understand why these themes are

so common. Then, I can finally compare the sets of imagery and discover how modern, image-based warfare for the hearts and minds of a population is enacted.³²¹

Why Black Voices Need to Tell Their Own Stories

The central difference between Black Lives Matter and arguably the majority of the civil rights movement that precede it is the fact that Black Lives Matter has ready access to a form of widespread media—their usage of social media has been their greatest asset—which allows them to tell their own stories in their own words. Whereas the mass media and their masters often dictate the narrative, Black Lives Matter has been able to not just counteract their stories, but also the stories of the reactionaries that inherently result from such movements. This control over the narrative is important to get potential allies on one's side, which would further explain the success of the movement on a global scale.

Studies have shown that the mainstream media, specifically CNN, have always foregrounded violence and silenced protestors when it comes to movements like Black Lives Matter, movements that question the status quo.³²² This is why Black voices speaking through alternative media sources are so necessary. When a movement needs to be ended before it begins, every piece of media takes on an increased amount of importance. This is why CNN gave so much airtime to self-described experts and common individuals over protestors;³²³ because the message needed to be dictated by the hegemonic mainstream. Interestingly enough, sources not related to American interests, such as Russia's RT News and Qatar's Al Jazeera, were much

³²¹ While this chapter may appear to ignore more violent elements of protest, it is important to be aware that the next two chapters deal with that material. This chapter is simply focused on acts of protests that are as non-violent to other humans as possible in a protest setting. It is also important to be aware that some violence, in its many definitions, is necessary for a useful protest and that a large amount of the violence in violent protests occurs at the hands of reactionaries and authority figures.

³²² Alexa Robertson, *Screening Protest: Visual Narratives of Dissent Across Time, Space and Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2019): 50.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 61.

more willing to give the movement fair coverage. As Robertson points out, Al Jazeera's coverage compared the movement in reference to civil rights movements, while CNN referenced race riots.³²⁴

As such, we can differentiate between three types of coverage when it comes to protest events generally and Black Lives Matter events specifically: the mainstream/hegemonic representation, the group representation and the reactionary representation. This chapter will be mostly devoted to the group representation, occasionally referring back to mainstream and hegemonic representations in order to point out how the group representations differ. Furthermore, this chapter will focus mainly on a few repeated themes that appear in group representations of Black Lives Matter events. These thematic elements will focus both on the phrases and gestures used in these protests, as well as the very methods of protest incorporated into the movement. By the end of the chapter, you will have a well-developed understanding of what a Black Lives Matter protest entails and what representations are true and what representations are simply right-wing scare tactics.

Occupation or Invasion: The Place of Black Bodies in “White” Spaces

In September of 2011, the Occupy Wall Street movement took root in New York City. This movement brought the concept of occupation as a form of protest back into the public's imagination, leading to approximately two months of protestors occupying the space around New York's Wall Street area, picketing, demonstrating and just generally existing in the area as an act of civil disobedience, all in a struggle against the top one percent of financially powerful people in society. While the movement was not welcomed by all, its proximity to the recent global financial crisis and the general peacefulness of the protests led to them being fairly

³²⁴ Ibid., 62.

accepted by the general population. It would soon become apparent that that may well be a result of the coding of the Occupy movement as white. Black Lives Matter, appearing less than two years later, incorporated many of the Occupy movement's tactics, but their execution of these tactics was seen as problematic and threatening by the status quo.

Some of Black Lives Matter's first protests were acts of occupation. However, in tradition with Occupy Wall Street occupying a location which was inhabited by those responsible for what they were protesting, Black Lives Matter occupied spaces which have led to the issues of Black people being ignored, coded white spaces which are inhabited by people who have the privilege to pretend that these issues do not exist. They occupied universities and expensive restaurants, blocked roads and highways, and disrupted political events. However, once the occupation reached the public sphere of the white middle-class, it was no longer seen as non-threatening. Suddenly, Black individuals appearing in white spaces changed the protests from occupations to invasions. Furthermore, the fact that they demanded action not just from the Republicans but from the Democrats as well gave convenient reason for moderate democrats to turn on the movement as well.

Two major events that threatened to turn moderate, liberal Democrats against the movement were their invasion of Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders events during the lead up to the 2016 election. While Republican events often simply kicked protestors out, this could have been the correct time for Democrats to show their support for Black Americans. Instead, the occupation of a Clinton event and a Sanders speech served to anger some of their supporters in the ostensible American left. Where images of Sanders bowing his head in thought while several

Black women commandeered the microphone from him³²⁵ could have been used as an image to gather support both for Sanders, his party and the Black Lives Matter movement, it was instead spread as an icon of outrage, an image of arrogance, of anti-Democratic sentiment and of bad politics. Essentially, before embracing the group after the George Floyd protests, the Democrats decided that anyone showing less than total support was not necessary for their path into the White House.

Much of the early Black Lives Matter imagery came from these occupations-deemed-invasions, either from cell phone-captured video of the events in process or mainstream news footage of the events and their responses. While these protests were inherently non-violent, their confrontational nature mixed with the identity of the protestors led to them being described as violent or terroristic by reactionary sources. It does not quite help that the reactionary sources were also often the only ones reporting on these protests—this is both because of the common reasons and because the more mainstream sources were more concerned with the events that led to the protests at the time—misusing the original videos for their own causes. For example, a video of an admittedly heated protest in the Dartmouth University library in 2015 has been used by multiple sources to show the movement in a bad light.³²⁶ The video, which shows a large gathering of protestors marching through the library and disrupting people studying, is repeatedly muted and decontextualized by sources which use the word “news” in their names, downplaying the concerns of the group and placing extra emphasis on emotional terminology, such as the “tears” of the students or “harassment” at the hands of protestors. The lack of video evidence in these claims, despite the videos being about a video, serves to potentially falsify the

³²⁵ The photo referenced can be seen at <https://static.independent.co.uk/s3fs-public/thumbnails/image/2015/08/09/11/BernieSandersBlackLives.jpg>.

³²⁶ One such inflammatory video can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ts6bk6J5C20>.

claims, but the addition of reactionary voices as commentary on the videos further shows the bad faith arguments at play.

Similarly, a video of a protest at the University of Washington library, posted by the *New York Post*, forgoes the entirety of the reason for the protest, to serve a singular purpose: the video shows protestors yelling slogans before another student, an Asian student speaking in imperfect English, shuts them down by stating “this is library.”³²⁷ The message being displayed here is clear: Black people do not belong in these spaces. The Asian student, whose outsider status is solidified by the video’s subtitling of his speech with the imperfect English intact, is shown as not belonging to the society, but still belonging in that particular space more than these people who do not understand the rules of society like this model minority. This is to say that this individual, despite struggling on such a primary level, can be utilized as the result of hard work and a bootstraps mentality, in turn allowing for the dismissal of the protestors as lazy nihilists. Furthermore, these protests are positioned as unimportant in comparison to something more important, like education—something that is frequently villainized by that same side. This same disdain is prevalent in coverage videos of Black Lives Matter actions and is a great example of the malling influence that comes with constant surveillance, wherein outsiders and otherwise “undesirable” individuals are selected for removal.³²⁸ As Frantz Fanon once pointed out, the camera watches both the thief and the worker,³²⁹ ensuring that there is no differentiation made between the good minority and the bad minority, unless of course one can be used to denigrate another. This also accounts for why videos of Black Lives Matter occupying a McDonald’s location do not receive the same amount of coverage or criticism; those are the types of locations

³²⁷ This moment can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Wq54dK0aBs>.

³²⁸ Katherine S. Williams and Craig Johnstone, "The Politics of the Selective Gaze: Closed-Circuit Television and the Policing of Public Space," in *Crime, Law and Social Change* 34 (2000): 193.

³²⁹ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015): 6.

where these types of bodies should be. This is why their presence in locations that they are not welcome in is often treated like an invasion. This is also why these early protests were so effective in getting the name of the movement into the general psyche: even though the feelings about the movement were overly negative, this invasion of elite spaces made the protests newsworthy³³⁰ and in turn led to a notable novel movement.

Hands Up, Don't Shoot: The Controversial Slogan of Early Black Lives Matter

“Queen Angela done told y’all ‘grasp at the root,’ so what y’all talkin’ ‘bout, hands up, don’t shoot?” These lines are rapped by Daveed Diggs in the Clipping song, “Blood of the Fang.” These lines stood out for me quite a bit while I was working on my research, as they mirror a lot of the criticism for an early political slogan of Black Lives Matter. Outside of the occupation imagery, the “hands up, don’t shoot” style images were similarly a prevalent theme in early protests. The slogan comes from the alleged final actions and words of Michael Brown before he was shot and killed by police officer Darren Wilson. This statement has been placed under question, as the official statement suggests that Brown’s final actions differed from this statement,³³¹ but that is not the issue at hand. The real issue that has been ascribed to this statement time and again is the criticism being levelled by Diggs here: the idea that self-victimization is not and should not be necessary for systematic changes to be put into place. The statement suggests that Brown did not deserve to die because he was passive and that passivity is the way toward change, when in actuality, the reason that Brown did not deserve to die is because he is a human being who has the right to live. This leads back to the general sense of respectability politics that Black Lives Matter would later speak against. When Angela Davis,

³³⁰ Vesely-Flad, *Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies*, 172.

³³¹ Jonathan Capehart, “‘Hands Up, Don’t Shoot’ Was Built on a Lie,” *The Washington Post*, March 16, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2015/03/16/lesson-learned-from-the-shooting-of-michael-brown/> (accessed October 5, 2021).

herself paraphrasing Karl Marx, stated that radicalism, when spoken of in relation to civil rights issues, simply means “grasping things at the root,”³³² what she meant was that direct action was far more important than concessions towards the oppressor. “Hands up, don’t shoot” is a passive plea to the state. It would make sense that a plea would be made to the state, as the state is inherently built on a fear of punishment,³³³ but what is needed is an anti-state active revolution to create any real change.

Of course, Diggs is far from the only critic of this theme in the movement. Dora Apel has spoken out against this element in protests, being quoted as stating that this type of imagery appeals to liberal sympathies through suggestions of law-abiding respect.³³⁴ While there is certainly more to this motion’s contextual background, its lawfulness cannot be ignored. Hands up, don’t shoot goes a long way in suggesting that this hegemonic establishment of innocence is somehow correct, with anything less being grounds for execution, as Brown’s death becomes embroiled in his helplessness and lawful demeanour. As such, it makes the Brown of the official story a criminal who has no right to the protestors’ sympathies. Apel further points out that this style of lawful, liberal protest has been used since the 1960s to quell racial anxiety,³³⁵ which furthers this idea of its uselessness, both because it gives too much power to the opponents and because it has clearly not worked across the last several decades. This has also led to some left-leaning, Black rights-supporting individuals to turn on the group, particularly in the earlier days of the movement, due to an understanding of the group as self-defeatist, a position which seemed untenable and unusual when the protests were often taking the form of placing oneself in the path

³³² Angela Davis, *Women, Culture and Politics* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990): 14

³³³ Peter Weibel, *Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century* (Karlsruhe, Germany: ZKM, 2015): 44.

³³⁴ Juliet Hooker, “Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics: From Democratic Sacrifice to Democratic Repair,” in *Political Theory* 44 (2016), 461.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*

of real danger. Being willing to put one's own body in front of a car while taking on a victimized persona seems unusual.

Juliet Hooker sees this as an issue of problematic historical assumptions. She breaks this issue into three assumptions. She defines the first, overarching assumption as a reductive understanding of a sanitized version of the civil rights movement as legitimate Black politics.³³⁶ This understanding only sees legitimate Black political activity as acts committed by respectable middle-class protestors who act in the correct way, often forgetting that these respectable acts only exist in the past, as the most respectable protestor is always seen as wrong by the bourgeoisie of the time. Hooker's two other assumptions have to do with acquiescence, namely the white moral psychology that sees acquiescence as bringing about change for minorities,³³⁷ while concurrently reading the radical nonviolence of civil rights protestors as white-understood acquiescence.³³⁸ Essentially, nonviolent tactics can only work if they are done for radical purposes—as Frantz Fanon has stated, sometimes the only way to fight violence is with violence—because non-radical nonviolence is ultimately not much more than acquiescence. Thankfully, Black Lives Matter seemed to eventually abandon the hands up, don't shoot rhetoric, mainly because it became apparent that nonviolence would not stop the police from murdering Black individuals. Instead, they moved onto new radical fronts.

Iconoclasm and Iconopoieism: The Destruction and Creation of Icons as Protest

Returning to Fanon for a moment, in his statement on colonialism, he points out that it is ultimately ethical to fight colonialism with acts of violence, because colonialism is inherently

³³⁶ Ibid., 451.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Ibid.

violent.³³⁹ As such, it would absolutely be ethical to fight governmental murders of citizens with violence, but it would not be advisable from a public relations perspective. However, there is still an option, one that is only symbolic violence against symbols of colonialism, which will still lead to awareness and potential change: that is the destruction and replacement of icons of colonialism, specifically statues that commemorate racist figures of the past and celebrate racist institutions of the present. These statues fall under the category of public art and the placement of art in the public sphere is essentially consent towards its destruction. As W.J.T. Mitchell points out, a lot of public art references violence,³⁴⁰ which is antithetical to its inherently vulnerable state. While these statues could be moved to museums and other locations devoted to the preservation of such objects, the choice to keep them in a public setting means that they are ultimately at a consistent risk owing to changing political opinions, “even in the US.”³⁴¹ After all, nationalist exceptionalism is bolstered by explaining away one’s own hypocrisy. As such, these acts of iconoclasm are frequent and often necessary political acts that stand in for what is more often deemed violence.

The United States’ public art landscape has been fraught with racist ideology for decades. While confederate monuments were absolutely built in the years following the American Civil War, a large majority of these monuments only really began to be erected around the United States in the last few years of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, more specifically after the Plessy v Ferguson decision in 1896—the infamous separate but equal

³³⁹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963): 61.

³⁴⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): 378.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 371; Mitchell uses this phrase which was used by Chinese communist party members in defense of their own censorship of the Goddess of Democracy statue. While this reasoning is certainly immature, it is also true that, “even in the US,” public or even private art that has been deemed unacceptable has risked destruction at the hands of hegemonic forces.

ruling—and around the time of the founding of the NAACP in 1909.³⁴² In other words, these statues began to be created, often mass-created by confederate organizations,³⁴³ as a propaganda tool, a way to remind Black people of their place. In fact, two other bumps in monument creations coincided with a series of race riots and the civil rights movement.³⁴⁴ These statues have always existed as a form of white supremacy. Throughout history, rejections of ideologies have been shown through acts of iconoclasm, the destruction of representations of those ideologies. The Soviet Union’s founding coincided with the destruction of Czarist statues and its fall coincided with the destruction of Soviet statues. The Taliban destroyed the ancient Buddhas of Bamiyan and the Americans and Iraqis destroyed the modern statue of Saddam Hussein. Essentially, iconoclasm has always been an efficient way to voice a collective opinion. Iconopoieism, on the other hand, the creation of icons, shows the approval of an ideology. It is no surprise then that a country built on white supremacy would be so willing to create and so unwilling to destroy an icon of racism, even though a majority of people may be in favour of it. After all, a marker meant to commemorate the death of Emmett Till near the river where his body was found in Mississippi continues to get shot at by local and nearby white people to this day.

There are two paths towards iconopoieism within Black Lives Matter protests: the iconization of iconoclasm and the replacement of the destroyed icons. The first is much more obvious. The media has been proliferated with images of monuments to racist ideologies being symbolically destroyed in ways that were once saved for Black individuals. These statues are

³⁴² Miles Parks, “Confederate Statues were Built to Further a ‘White Supremacist Future,’” *NPR*, August 20, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544266880/confederate-statues-were-built-to-further-a-white-supremacist-future/> (accessed October 5, 2021).

³⁴³ Kate Wagner, “The Secret History of America’s Worthless Confederate Monuments,” *The New Republic*, August 6, 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/158715/secret-history-americas-worthless-confederate-monuments/> (accessed October 5, 2021).

³⁴⁴ Parks, “Confederate Statues.”

frequently spray-painted before being beheaded, dragged down, submerged in water or even just pulled off of the ground by their necks in a mock hanging on their way elsewhere. Some of these statues are removed civilly by the city, such as the infamous Robert E. Lee on horseback statue that was stationed in Richmond, Virginia, which was covered in protest graffiti but saved from a more “violent” end by the city’s reaction. The violence is mainly saved for the “defiant” statues, so to speak. Similarly, some statues end up needing protection by reactionaries, such as Christopher Columbus statues in several American cities and another Lee statue in Charlottesville, Virginia, which was later removed after it became associated with a white supremacist protest that led to Heather Heyer’s death.³⁴⁵ These actions bring a lot of attention to statues and alert people to their imminent destruction. That destruction then becomes something of an icon itself, an icon of righteous rage, captured in images and memories.

However, these icons are occasionally replaced with icons of opposing ideologies in an attempt to “counter-colonize” white imagination.³⁴⁶ After all, as Susan Sontag puts it, “events” are ultimately determined by ideology.³⁴⁷ Since visibility is inherently against revolutionary tactics,³⁴⁸ it is necessary to create events that do not adhere to hegemonic visibility, while still being visual. These are the restrictions under which the creation of counter-icons must occur. The most obvious case of such a form of iconopoieism occurred in the United Kingdom where a statue of slave trader Edward Colston was replaced by a statue of Black Lives Matter activist Jen Reid, which was later removed. In the United States, very few plans have been stated for

³⁴⁵ Joe Ruiz, “Ohio Man Charged With Murder In Fatal Car Attack On Anti-White Nationalist March,” *NPR*, August 13, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/08/13/543176250/charlottesville-attack-james-alex-fields-jr> (accessed July 14, 2022).

³⁴⁶ Christopher J. Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 135.

³⁴⁷ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1977): 19.

³⁴⁸ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visibility* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011): 197.

potential replacements to these statues. Instead, American icons continue to be created in pseudo-anonymous photographs because icons often die.

Black Lives Matter's lack of hierarchical leadership means that there is nobody to become a synecdoche for the group and, in turn, no one whose death threatens to dismantle the movement. While several individuals have died under unusual circumstances after becoming known as supporters of Black Lives Matter,³⁴⁹ the movement continues unabated. This is because Black Lives Matter aims for pseudo-anonymity in their icons, as their symbolic importance is necessary only within the moment. In fact, with a steady stream of iconopoieism, each icon's presence may only be necessary for a moment. This pseudo-anonymity is an importance point, since these individuals are only anonymous insofar as they are often unnamed in the media; otherwise, they do not try to hide themselves and they are often well-known in their own community, leading to their names often coming out. Ieshia Evans, for example, became one of the more well-known icons after being captured in the series of photos entitled *Taking a Stand in Baton Rouge*.³⁵⁰ The photo does not name her, but she also does not make an effort to hide herself, taking credit for her actions soon after. This pseudo-anonymity leads to two meanings: first, the photographer will not willingly participate in snitching on the subject and second, even if some of these photos look more aesthetically pleasing than others, the individuals ultimately represent everyone within the movement. This goes back to that sense of an ever-present threat of death. After Edward Crawford, the subject of another iconic photo from Ferguson, was found dead, it was a tragedy, but it also served no threat to the movement. These icons support the movement without fear of harm; they are the ultimate acts of iconopoieism.

³⁴⁹ Dickson, "Mysterious Deaths Leave Ferguson Activists on 'Pins and Needles.'"

³⁵⁰ The photos can be seen at <https://widerimage.reuters.com/story/taking-a-stand-in-baton-rouge>.

Tell the Racists That: Banality as Revolution

In our panoptical age, every act will be scrutinized, decontextualized and weaponized by reactionaries until the very basis of the act is lost to history. Unfortunately, this process is often much more important in the winning of hearts and minds than the protest acts themselves. This is why the banality of non-violence, as an act, can sometimes be extremely important for a movement, at least insofar as these images attract the attention of fickle liberal mindsets without betraying the mission statement of the act of protest. These images do not speak up in a celebration of acquiescence, but instead point out the lies that are told about the movement. They forgo the Barthesian concept of the *studium*, that which catches the viewer's attention,³⁵¹ leading to a new method of puncturing the viewer.³⁵² What is particularly interesting about these images is that they often do not really show anything. These images can take the form of empty spaces, a representation of non-violence through an image of everything that was *not* destroyed, or “non-political”—in a neoliberal sense—bodies not doing anything. This representation of negative—as in nonexistent as opposed to malicious—action attempts to disprove the lies of reactionary media sources, while also humanizing the protestors, changing them from the “terrorists” of the right-wing to perfectly normal individuals.

This banality is a direct result of the reactionary right-wing response to Black Lives Matter. Protests usually only need to show the act of protest. What happens before and after is inconsequential to the movement. However, with this movement, what happens after has been specifically weaponized: images of burning buildings and broken windows are practically addictive to the opposition. As such, these images have become their own counter-story to the narrative put forth by the protestors. These images do not state, they merely respond, ensuring a

³⁵¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010): 26.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 27.

lack of misinformation in moderate audiences who believe whatever they come across on social media first. While some may attribute a complacent element to these images, similar to those connected to the hands up, don't shoot motto, it is important to recognize their difference. These images are not meant as a tool for progress; instead, they are a concurrent weapon meant to hinder regress instead. While other symbols and slogans are used to attract supporters, these images are specifically used to keep liberal reactionaries from leaving.

Photographs are seen as truth.³⁵³ This is where the problem often lies. If a photograph can be found, any lie can become a truth. In the present, where Photoshop is essentially a verb, some are more wary of ascribing truth to just any photograph, but that sometimes makes things worse. As Sontag stated, decades after *On Photography*, if an image goes against one's own narrative, it is dismissed as a fabrication.³⁵⁴ This is what the protestor is up against: truth as established by personal bias, recency bias and just general sources of information. If someone sees a heavily liked image of a burning building on their Facebook feed, they will often see no reason to question it, especially if they already believe that the protestors are terrorists. This is why protestors need to work against these biases and attempt to get the counter information to their opponents—and hopefully eventual proponents—through the same sources. This is why these banal images are often posted to the same platforms as the spectacular images of fire and mayhem. After all, photos only shock when they are novel³⁵⁵ and, in the midst of violence, the only novel photo is one of peace, which cannot be refuted as a fabrication, due to its absolute banality, an effect no one would attempt to fabricate.

³⁵³ Sontag, *On Photography*, 7.

³⁵⁴ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2004): 11.

³⁵⁵ Sontag, *On Photography*, 19.

These photos, often appearing on social media, are very similar. One variety consists of a large number of people in one area. These people are often portrayed from the back. One obvious reason for this is that these photos are often taken by individuals within the crowd, moving forward. However, sometimes these photos are taken from overhead or a distance and this framing is also owed to the need to differentiate between a group of individuals and a crowd. Political crowds, especially Black Lives Matter crowds, are still seen as something to be feared, owing to their opposition to hegemonic norms and the generalized fear of Black people. As such, it is ultimately seen as beneficial to avoid capturing any racialized signifiers. Those signifiers are saved for images of iconopoieism. Instead, these images are homogenous with a larger focus on quantity. These individuals may be marching, taking a knee, throwing up the Black Power salute or just about any other activity, but the most important part is that they are numerous, they are peaceful and they are partaking in a political activity. If there are many of them, they may well represent a majority—whether a majority of thought, which would suggest that their cause may be right or a majority of the movement, which would suggest that any violence alleged to be in the name of the movement is unrelated—and if they are peaceful in political action, that may also suggest that that is a possibility on a wider scale. This banality in the imagery goes a long way in convincing fence-sitting, potentially reactionary liberals that there is no need to fear the movement.

The other variety of image focuses instead on empty spaces. These photos forgo all Barthesian understandings of photography by removing the noeme, the realization that that has been,³⁵⁶ in its entirety. This is a result of lazy right-wing discourse. When the opposition runs out of rhetoric, they take on two faulty beliefs as a singular approach: the belief that all “liberals”—

³⁵⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 77.

read: anyone left of centre—have a singular homogenous belief system and that any result is worthy of scorn as a way to discredit a movement. As such, when the opposition finds an image of a space where a Black Lives Matter protest occurred looking less than palatable, this is used to discredit the movement as hypocritical, because they must care about the cleanliness of a location, even if the opposition themselves do not. This is a similar reasoning that is used with fire in protest areas, but it is far more petty. It has also led to the appearance and prevalence of these images of empty space. These images are even more homogenous; they are either images of a wide-open, spotless space or an image of a full garbage can near a slightly less wide-open, spotless space. These spaces may be made up of grass or concrete, but the images are otherwise indistinguishable from each other, gaining their power from just how boring they are, as they are ultimately portraying what is not visible there rather than what is. This is to say that, once again, the banality of the image is the point: if the opposition's argument is a pointless one, then the response must also be equally pointless.

Images and Storytelling: Documenting Black Lives Matter

This chapter has shown the importance of personal storytelling for protest and civil rights movements. The fact that this storytelling has become increasingly simpler in the 21st century goes on to show just how valuable it is as a tool for progress. When people fight for change, the most important function that they can possess is control of the narrative. However, it is also patently obvious that that control cannot be taken by one group, even more so when it occurs in that same century that has given the movement a voice. This narrative creation needs to occur with pushback both from a mainstream media tasked with preserving the status quo and a more independent opposition that espouses anti-mainstream media rhetoric while aiming for the exact same thing. This narrative making often occurs in the form of photography and video, media that

can be comprehended and appreciated by everyone from the highly educated to the illiterate, as long as they are willing to listen and keep an open mind.

The themes discussed herein are just some of the more prevalent attempts at narrative making and information distribution. There have been other themes and there have been other methods, some of which are discussed in following chapters, and each attempt has had arguably equal amounts of acceptance and rejection among the general public. While the rejection is surely disheartening, when the topic is one that should be accepted by just about everyone, the acceptance has been steadily going up as Black Lives Matter movements have sprung up all around the world. While the movement started out as a protest of nation-specific treatment of Black people—with the specific historic context that comes with it—it became obvious that, not only are there a lot of nations that support Black Americans in their struggle, but that there are also a lot of Black individuals in other countries who have to deal with similar issues who are fed up. There is absolutely an argument to be made that it was ultimately a series of easy-to-digest images that led this movement to the great heights that it currently occupies.

In this way, the Black Lives Matter movement is very much like the civil rights movement of the 1960s, even though the earlier movement did need to rely on the mainstream media to spread their imagery. Perhaps the majority of the currently freely available images of civil rights protestors tend to either incorporate a corporeal mass of individuals and/or informative protest signs, very similar to the images of the modern movement. The large number of bodies in the streets, holding signs of protest, continues to be the most important genre of image for protest movements, because it cannot be misinterpreted. While the same criticisms directed towards Black Lives Matter were also directed towards the civil rights protestors, this simple image states the two most important points of any protest movement: there are many of us

and we have a common goal. These images also state the lack of violence through their banality, but ultimately, that is only a secondary concern, as the primary concern is and should continue to be that the reactionaries are outnumbered. The main difference between the images is that the civil rights movement was not concerned with the removal of icons, with many of their most iconic photos being ones of Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks and others who dared to stand up. These images became battle cries for the movement, but also risked turning the movements into too easily digestible stories for future generations. While the individuals iconized absolutely contributed a lot to their movements, Black Lives Matter's refusal to do so ensures that the movement can never be pinned down as the result of individual actions on the parts of the few, but rather collective actions on the parts of the many.

Chapter 7: The American Flag as Historical Weapon

The American Flag

There is perhaps no polysemous, nationalist symbol more venerated yet controversial than the American flag. An object of many contradictions, this flag is at once a symbol of unity and exclusion, of protest and unquestionability, of violence, of peace and of peace through acts of violence. The American flag has been used to justify just about anything, with the knowledge that questioning anything connected to the flag, even if there is no questioning to be done—Colin Kaepernick’s protests were questioned by the right based on the tacked-on belief that they were disrespectful to the flag and several other connected notions—will be seen as unamerican. As such, the flag can be used to celebrate American ideals that have become outdated or questionable in recent times: ideals like racism, white supremacy, and anti-left and anti-communist sentiments. This flag can also be altered in many ways to further display its aggressive motivations. The flag can be turned into a black and white flag with a single blue line to indicate a pro-policing and law enforcement sentiment, a flag that has been specifically adopted by racist right-wing groups.³⁵⁷ Or it can be worn on items of clothing and worn to places patronized by those that the wearer would consider unamerican as a way to intimidate them. Of course, this celebration and aggression is often metaphorical. However, the flag can sometimes become a physical weapon of attack.

In this chapter, I will be looking at several images of the American flag or items made from or resembling the American flag being used in protests meant for Black liberation causes. These images will come from different time frames and different sides of the struggle. What they

³⁵⁷ This is to say that, while you do not necessarily need to be a racist to be pro-policing and law enforcement, this flag has been very specifically adopted by racists who also happen to hold these views.

have in common, however, is an expression of the image of Americanness as viewed by differing political affiliations. Whether the flag is being used as a symbol of reactionary conservatism or progressive beliefs, there is an inevitable tinge of American exceptionalism to every such image. It just so happens that that exceptionalism is sometimes used as a way to celebrate what could be as opposed to what is. While American right-wing forces like to label anything that goes against their own beliefs as unamerican, the United States are an extremely patriotic nation and those who protest often espouse very pro-American beliefs. It just so happens that the United States are built on a racist framework and anti-racist beliefs are often seen as inseparable from anti-American ones.

The Images

The first image is a historically significant, Pulitzer prize-winning photograph that shows that right-wing sentiment remains unchanging throughout American history. This photo is entitled *The Soiling of Old Glory*³⁵⁸ and depicts an incident that took place during the desegregation of Boston public schools in 1976. In this photo, Black civil rights activist Ted Landsmark is seen, clearly hurt and in distress, about to be attacked by Joseph Rakes, a violent white man. The weapon of choice was a flagpole holding the American flag. While Rakes beat Landsmark with the swinging American flag and its pole, the image depicts him in a moment where it appears that he is about to impale his victim upon the flag. Landsmark is also seen being held by a second white man, who was allegedly helping him to his feet and protecting him from the attack. The image's depiction however suggests complicity. This image of pure violence between two individuals who both believe they are doing what is best for the American way of life would be repeated almost half a century later, in a colour video.

³⁵⁸ The photo can be seen at <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/soiling-old-glory-1976>.

This video, posted to Reddit under the title “Proud Boys Armed with Baseball Bats and Paintball Guns Attack a BLM Protestor”³⁵⁹ is somewhat unique in that there are no Black people present in the event. However, the many versus one element is still very much present. The video begins with a handful of right-wing individuals running in the same direction. Their political position is blatant from the way they are dressed. Some of these people are in street clothes and MAGA hats while others are in full tactical gear with helmets. The ones in tactical gear are also carrying weapons. One of them is carrying an American flag. At about six seconds into the video, it becomes apparent who they are targeting, as a lone figure is seen running away. A handful of people descend on this one individual holding a Black Lives Matter sign and begin physically and verbally attacking them,³⁶⁰ referring to them with homophobic language and generally threatening them, all while that earlier American flag waves in the background, joined by others. Soon after, the police jump in and arrest a few of the aggressors, before the video ends.

Finally, the third photo I would like to discuss is one that occupies the exact opposite end of this political spectrum. While American flags are often present in reactionary political conflict, this image equates the flag with progressive political thought. This image depicts a Black man as the bearer of the American flag.³⁶¹ This man’s hair is braided, long and flowing and he is wearing a pair of jeans along with his American flag t-shirt. Unlike the previous individuals who used the flag as an object to be used as a weapon, this man who has been identified as Edward Crawford, personifies the flag, holding a different weapon in his hand, as he

³⁵⁹ The video can be seen at https://www.reddit.com/r/PublicFreakout/comments/ioinpn/proud_boys_armed_with_baseball_bats_and_paintball.

³⁶⁰ I am using gender neutral language here, because the victim is referred to with homophobic terms at one point and feminine terms at another. As such, it is difficult to determine what their gender identity may be. The short amount of time that they appear on camera does not give any indication of this either.

³⁶¹ This photo can be seen at <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/ferguson-protester-edward-crawford-subject-iconic-photo-found-dead-n755401>.

is seen grabbing a sparking teargas canister during the unrest in Ferguson, moments before he throws it back to the police officers who shot it towards him in the first place. There are other protestors visible nearby who appear to be celebrating the act of returning the tool of violence to its original purveyor. These three images are vastly different images connected by one symbol. While most Americans believe the flag to be a symbol of American ideals, every individual seems to have different ideas of what those ideals are and should be. The following analysis will shed some light on what each side believes those ideals to be and what the American flag means in the long run.

The Flag as an Object

At the most basic vexillological level, the flag of the United States is a simplistic object: thirteen stripes signify the original thirteen colonies, the fifty stars signify the current fifty states and the colours red, white and blue signify valour, innocence and justice, respectively. Stars and stripes representing segmentation and the colours red, white and blue representing ideals like those represented in the American flag are far from unique and yet the American flag, the very specific positioning and choice of these elements in this order, at least domestically, has come to stand for a variety of principles that have been deemed explicitly and exclusively American, their positions bolstered by American exceptionalism.

Ideas like freedom are described not as elements that Americans possess or strive to, but rather as concepts that are exclusive to America and the people therein, ideas that are missing from all other nation states and which are badly imitated by others. To an American, there is only one nation that possesses freedom and that nation is inextricable from the American flag. This is where the connotations of the American flag come into play. In a struggle between Black and white Americans, there is a very real chance that both sides would agree on what the flag stands

for: ideals like freedom, democracy, the so-called “American way,” but the follow-up question would inevitably be “what does that mean?” When speaking about the attack upon him in 1976, Landsmark refers to the flag as “a symbol of what we aspire to be as a democracy.”³⁶² He goes on to point out that some truly heinous things have been done in the name of the flag, but that he ultimately believes that there should be an aspiration to be “a democracy that provides fairness and equal opportunity and equality to all of the people that believe in the best values of the flag.”³⁶³ There is something to be said about giving so much power to a segment of cloth, but I will avoid that to focus more on the notion of symbolic democratic values. Landsmark is correct that the flag stands for certain notions of democracy but only for himself. After all, Rakes used the flag to attack him because he also believed that the flag was a symbol of his own notions of democracy; it just so happens that his notions of democracy involved the segregation and subjugation of Landsmark. Therein lies the problem. As Sontag points out with photographs in general, the American flag is not a political image in and of itself.³⁶⁴ Or rather, while it does hold some unquestionable political meanings—a symbol of the United States and everything that comes with it—it lacks more in-depth political meaning beyond what the viewer or captioner gives to it.

As such, it is extremely difficult to decide whether the man who uses the flag as a regressive weapon or the man who takes it to the head in the name of progress has the true understanding of what the flag means, especially when they both insist on its goodness. However, it would be fair to suggest that a look at the polysemous understandings of the flag would help to better understand where these meanings could be accurate and where they lack any

³⁶² “Life After Iconic 1976 Photo: The American Flag’s Role in Racial Protest,” *NPR*, September 18, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/09/18/494442131/life-after-iconic-photo-todays-parallels-of-american-flags-role-in-racial-protes> (accessed June 29, 2021).

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1977): 109.

sense. With this small cross-section of protest images which incorporate the American flag, I would like to provide a small amount of understanding of what this flag ultimately means to a state in conflict.

The Flag in Protest

At first glance, the three images described above do share quite a bit in common. First of all, all three include an American flag being used for or in the vicinity of acts of violence. The locations of the acts of violence suggest that the violence is not used without reason, that the violence is used as a method of getting a point across, an act which either became the final possible plan of action or which was used to take action on something considered so heinous that no other plan of attack would reach the necessary result. In turn, the flags indicate everything that the flag is said to indicate: these images suggest that the act of violence being perpetrated is being done in the name of democracy, righteousness, valour, purity or whatever other reason the holder of the flag believes. Of course, outside of the holder's belief, the flag could also indicate other meanings, such as racism, American exceptionalism, nationalist chauvinism or even revolutionary fervour. It is this multiplicity of meaning that leads to the differences between the images.

Before getting into that, however, one small note should be made about the locations of these photographs. The racism behind the anti-Black Lives Matter crowd cannot be understated in every aspect of their rhetoric. The photos depict events that took place in Boston, Massachusetts, Salem, Oregon and Ferguson, Missouri, part of the greater St. Louis area, respectively. Boston's population has historically been overwhelmingly white, but that was much truer in the 1970s, with over seventy percent of the population being white and a sizable

percentage of the racialized individuals being Black.³⁶⁵ Salem has an even more skewed racial population with almost eighty percent of its residents being white, with the other twenty percent being spread among other ethnicities, none of whom crack three percent.³⁶⁶ This should not be shocking as Oregon was originally founded to be an exclusively white state that created laws to keep Black people out.³⁶⁷ What is even less shocking is the fact that Ferguson, the only Black majority location of one of these photos, is also the one with the most sense of urgency in relation to the prevention of violence, which is used as an excuse to attack Black people. While St. Louis is divided equally between the Black and white populations, Ferguson's population is sixty-seven percent Black,³⁶⁸ showing that the hegemonic forces are less concerned with violence and more concerned with race.

The most obvious difference between the images is the positioning of the individuals involved. There are three individuals or organizations whose positions are important objects of study in a photograph like this: the aggressor, the revolutionary—the aggressor will be defined as the individual who appears to hold anti-Black racist beliefs and, as such, the revolutionary will be the one taking on an anti-racist viewpoint—and the police officer. These individuals are not always visible in the photograph, but their presence is always felt. In some cases, one of these individuals may be completely absent but, in those cases, it is that absence which speaks volumes.

³⁶⁵ Lylee Rauch-Kacenski, "Change Through Time: A Visual History of Demographics in Boston," Tufts University, May 10, 2016.

³⁶⁶ U.S. Census Bureau.

³⁶⁷ Nina Storchlic, "Oregon Once Legally Banned Black People. Has the State Reconciled its Racist Past?" *National Geographic*, March 8, 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/oregon-once-legally-barred-black-people-has-the-state-reconciled-its-racist-past> (accessed July 4, 2021).

³⁶⁸ U.S. Census Bureau.

In the first photograph, *Soiling of Old Glory*, the aggressor is a young white man who attacks an uninvolved Black man with the flag. The background of this image is a protest against the court-ordered desegregation of Boston Public Schools, which would see Black students being brought into the better, white schools of the area. Landsmark had just arrived on the site and was therefore only attacked because his skin colour matched that of the enemy, so to speak, not because of any actions that he may have taken. The photo depicts him in a state of complete helplessness. He is held by one man while another is about to attack him. He is seen standing on one leg, as if he can no longer stand without aid. Due to his state, the revolutionary is practically absent in the photo, owing both to intent and power. The fact that he became an icon of the struggle is something else entirely. Both men are surrounded by a variety of white individuals, but no one appears to be helping. What is perhaps most telling is the complete absence of the police officer. Not only are they not helping, they do not even appear to be there at the site of a soon-to-be violent political protest. Such a thing does not happen in a post-Black Lives Matter environment, as evidenced in the Proud Boys video.

The video's revolutionary is a lone individual standing far away from the aggressors. The aggressors are shown chasing the revolutionary, showing a complete lack of danger to them. Once again, the aggressor is the helpless party in the incident. However, this time, the police do get involved. It just so happens that they get involved as a punitive measure, rather than as a preventative measure. In a way, the malling influence of security cameras has been adopted by police dealing with right-wing forces, watching the event and punishing the perpetrators, rather than stopping it before it occurs.³⁶⁹ This is in opposition to the more traditional method of crowd control when racialized protests occur, when the police are often on the scene ahead of time with

³⁶⁹ Katherine S. Williams and Craig Johnstone, "The Politics of the Selective Gaze: Closed-Circuit Television and the Policing of Public Space," in *Crime, Law and Social Change* 34 (2000): 192.

plans to be more combative. This is also why many Black Lives Matter protests are violently stomped out before they even have the opportunity to get violent. At that point, the protest can be described as violent and undermine the whole movement. The revolutionary figure in this video was beaten and intimidated for eleven seconds before the police stepped in to stop it. While that does not sound particularly bad, it should be noted that several strikes were thrown in those eleven seconds and, even worse, the chase that led to the beating also lasted for the first eleven seconds of the video. This is to say that the aggressors' actions were obvious from their demeanour and it should not have taken a total of twenty-two seconds to realize that they needed to be stopped. Such an incident would occur again on January 6, 2021, when armed insurrectionists attacked the United States Capitol. Once again, the police did not care to stop the attack from occurring, even when one of their own died, but instead waited—and in some cases, aided—until after the attack to punish some of those responsible.

The Edward Crawford photo is unique in several ways. First, the only party visible is the revolutionary. Second, the aggressor is the police officer. And third, the revolutionary takes on an aggressive role. Crawford seems almost like the antithesis to the individuals in the first two images: tired of being victimized, he fights back, and he does it with the aggressor's own weapon. And it is this fighting back that causes the absent or absent-minded police officer to begin taking his job seriously. This image brings to mind Frantz Fanon's understanding of the creation of non-violent resistance as a tool of the bourgeoisie when their violent acts are treated with similar violence.³⁷⁰ That annoyance with both the bourgeois notions and the police state in front of him is visible not just in his body language, but also in the burning of his weapon and the faces of the two individuals behind him. It is also important to note the numbers of people visible

³⁷⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963): 61.

in these photos. While Black Lives Matter is obviously a widespread idea, this photo depicts a singular struggle. Crawford is shown as one individual among many—even the other people in the photo are shown at a symbolic distance—fighting back. His bravery is a central suggestion in the photo. Meanwhile, the other two images depict aggression that is wholly dependent on numbers. *Old Glory* shows a single attacker, but the street full of people and a rudimentary understanding of American history suggests that Landmark was in a very tangible state of danger. He is attacked by one, held by another and even more stand around and witness the attack. The Proud Boys video is even more indicative of the cowardice on display, as the aggressors are numerous, dressed in attire that suggests that they fear for their lives even though they are attempting to cause trouble and completely unaware of the police presence, likely because they assumed that the police would be on their side. The individuals in the video move as a unit, while Crawford moves as an individual.

Another important element to make note of is the presence and meaning of the flag on display in the images. The first two images both depict the flag being used as a weapon, one being wielded by a white man who holds regressive views, one of them being an aversion to the idea that Black people should have rights afforded to white people. The third image depicts Crawford *wearing* the American flag, personifying it and becoming it. Many right-wing groups have attempted to designate Black Lives Matter as an anti-American group, pointing to a large number of their actions as being disrespectful to the American flag. And yet, this man wears the flag and essentially uses his own flag-draped body as a weapon against the hegemonic powers of a police state. This goes to show that the flag means vastly different things to different people, but that some see it more as a weapon than others. Those who see it as a weapon are those who believe that it belongs to them and not to the other. Of course, it should be noted that Crawford

was not necessarily planning to become a weapon; he just happened to leave his house wearing that.

That last point requires some explanation. While Crawford may well have worn that shirt believing it would display good intentions in a protest, he did not wear that shirt with the intentions of weaponizing it. The act of bringing a flag attached to a blunt object to a protest shows the intention to commit acts of violence, even more so in a post-January 6th, 2021 world. Rakes used the flag as a weapon the first opportunity he had and the individuals in the video did not get the opportunity to use their flags as weapons, but they appear ready to do so, based both on their positioning—they arrive at the scene of the conflict after other members of their groups—and the wooden plank that appears to be attached to one of the flags. These individuals were so convinced of their rights to be violent and to do so in a decidedly American way that they brought weaponized flags with them. Crawford's eventual transformation into a violent flag may not have necessarily been unexpected or unplanned at certain levels, but it was definitely the result of a series of wholly unexpected events.

This lack of planning is also visible in the Crawford photo in another interesting way. Crawford is clearly not dressed for a protest, especially one that has been escalated by the police. He is there in street clothes without any of the added items of clothing that people wear as varying levels of protection. For example, in the background, an individual is seen wearing a bandana across their face, but Crawford has no such preparations. What is even more striking is how the hand that is not holding the tear gas canister is holding a small, opened bag of potato chips. Small bags of chips are practically a signifier of an unplanned meal. Small chip bags suggest a fast-food combo or a vending machine purchase. In other words, they suggest an addition or a momentary replacement, either a follow-up to a last-minute meal when one is

unable to get home in short time or just something that is eaten on the way home to stave off hunger. That bag alone suggests that Crawford was on his way home or at least somewhere else when he ended up in the middle of an iconic conflict. He did not go out looking for something to throw; what he threw was first thrown at him. This is in direct opposition to the reactionary protestors in the other two images who went to protests hoping to bring about acts of unnecessary violence, which is signified by the fact that they took an object that could be used as a blunt force weapon at a moment's notice. After all, plenty of right-wing individuals attend conservative political events with flags that are not on poles. The presence of the pole will almost always suggest not just a willingness, but a desire for violence.

And it should be further pointed out that the methods of violence differ between the images. All three images may look at different sides of the issue, but the issue stays the same: the revolutionary wishes to practice their first amendment right to protest, but the aggressors do not believe that such an act should be allowed to occur without violent reprisal. The aggressor is always on the offense and the revolutionary always on the defense. This might be referred to as an issue of bias by reactionary critics, but it fits with the general established narrative. Black Lives Matter, as a movement, was the result of Black people on the defense and white people on the offense. The same can be said of the civil rights movement. The general interaction between Black protestors and white aggressors follows this classification. The events of the civil rights struggle almost necessitated this style of interaction, as non-violent resistance was the most palatable method of action to the white hegemonic powers. When even a hint of violence was present, the movement was given a bad look. Of course, the non-violent methods were not welcomed, but they were more palatable.

When it comes to Black Lives Matter era activism, the potential for violence by protestors is more accepted, but the protestor must also recognize that the authorities are still on the side of their opposition, that they will be chastised for the actions of those who are not among their ranks and that any act of violence will be magnified, edited out of context and spread on a wide-scale by reactionary conservative media sources. As such, even if the plan of violence is an option, it is not suggested. The only methods of violence that cannot be used against the protestor are blatantly obvious acts of self defence. This is why the Crawford photo is so valuable: it shows a necessary strike against the system, while also making it abundantly clear that the strike was an act of self defence against a combative figure. This is one case where the master's tools can be used to dismantle the master's house. The fact that this defensive act occurs near the sight of the American flag does even more to elevate its status as an image of a necessary struggle. American history frequently touts the necessity of rebellion, especially against the hegemonic powers of those who take power under suspicious or unfair methods. What is more suspicious or unfair than a group of faceless clones taking the streets and attacking citizens? WJT Mitchell refers to the war on terror as perhaps the first war against a "what" instead of a "who" pointing out that the balaclava-clad terrorist plays into a fear of clones, a mass of faceless copies of the same original.³⁷¹ This is the fear that is present in Black Lives Matter protests, as the police act as the clones, completely unknowable behind their masks, shields and riot gear. When these clones find their way into the streets and begin indiscriminately attacking anyone in their way, it becomes a necessity to immediately go on the defensive. And this defensive position against an unknown menace attempting to uphold antiquated beliefs seems to follow a traditional American narrative. This ultimately points out the absolute hypocrisy of the anti-Black Lives Matter, pro-

³⁷¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011): 1.

America groups, as they begin to speak ill of the notions that created the history they consistently appeal to in their racist rhetoric.

What Can Be Gathered from the Flag

The polysemeity of the American flag is perhaps its defining quality. At the most basic political level, the right wing of American politics has adopted it as an exclusive symbol of America first-style fascist politics. In Republican rhetoric, the flag stands for nothing more than exceptional Americanness, which stands for exclusionist policies. The flag stands for racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, anti-socialism and a wide variety of reactionary, regressive belief systems. Even when they fly the flags of enemies of the United States, whether Nazi Germany flags or Confederate flags, they still see themselves as the true holders of the American flag. Despite their support for historical oppositions, they convince themselves that they *also* stand for beliefs espoused by the American flag, because they see no differences between the beliefs between all of the contradictory symbols.

This is also why there is an online call among American leftist circles to reclaim the American flag as a leftist symbol. As a non-American, I do not see a necessary reason to reclaim a flag that is at worst a symbol of fascist politics and at best a symbol of an imperialist and colonialist history, but a recognition must be made of the affective politics behind a symbol of home. This reclamation seems simple on a basic level. The right-wing has shown that their allegiance to the flag is at about the same level as their allegiance to the flags of many anti-American nations, as long as the flag fits their politics. They have also shown that their words do not always fit their actions. They will suggest their love for the flag and its values, but use their powers to undermine the democracy and freedoms allegedly afforded by the flag. These left-wing individuals believe that the flag should be co-opted both as a legitimate symbolic motion

and as a trolling of sorts, giving the flag a new meaning as an attack on the American right-wing, the same way that they have, for example, co-opted Jesus Christ as a socialist figure.

With all of this political strife over a piece of fabric, it may be in everyone's best interest to agree that the flag has no final meaning, that the meaning that it has comes from the politics of the person holding it. The left-wing of the country is willing to concede this point, with the willingness to use it as a symbol of their own values and one of their opponents, but the right-wing still sees the idea as blasphemous. This is where the disagreement comes from, even though, as usual, the right's assessment of the situation is conflicted. The right-wing thinks that the flag has an unquestionable meaning and that that meaning agrees with them. Meanwhile, they believe that said meaning is not adequately expressed through the flag. Despite their adoption of the flag as an unquestionable symbol of right-wing American values, they are just as likely to abandon it in favour of another flag. In recent years, the Gadsden flag, the thin blue line flag and various Trump inspired flags have begun to join the American flag as symbols of the same values. What is often more telling is the appearance of Confederate and Nazi flags, showing the right's ease of supporting historical enemies of the state they claim as their own. Essentially, the right's understanding of the politics of the flag is pointed and yet completely arbitrary and that meaning is still seen as important enough that it occasionally necessitates violence. This is the root of the American flag as a historical weapon.

Chapter 8: Black Lives Matter and the Spirit of Terrorism

Black Liberation as Pseudo-Terrorism

One of the modern right wing's greatest fear tactics is the use of the term terrorism. Terrorism is a particularly loaded term, as it has always been used less in the correct way and more as a way of designating an "other," a differentiation between the moral majority and the destructive minority, with that minority almost always being one which dares to question the status quo by going after the state.³⁷² Terrorism, as a named concept, is a fairly recent phenomenon: Michael Burleigh names the Fenian dynamiting campaign of the 1880s as the first group of modern terrorists,³⁷³ while Walter Lauquer has discovered references to the terrorist in the final years of the 18th century.³⁷⁴ The term terrorism has several, often incorrect, official definitions in related fields, but they all share a few aspects in common: namely, terrorism is defined as an unlawful use of violence and intimidation—unlawful to ensure that wars and interventions started by the United States do not fall under the designation—for political gains. This definition is twisted by anti-Black Lives Matter groups to suggest that what Black Lives Matter does is considered violence and intimidation.³⁷⁵ This style of thinking comes from the decidedly left-wing bent of terrorist organizations before the First World War³⁷⁶ and the separatist movements that came after, completely ignoring the massive increase in right-wing terrorism after the war.³⁷⁷ While there are many who attempt to suggest that the very basics of early Black Lives Matter activism—namely forcing their way into public spaces to ensure that

³⁷² Michael Burleigh, *Blood and Rage: A Cultural History of Terrorism* (London: HarperPress, 2009): 79.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁷⁴ Walter Lauquer, *A History of Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2017): 6.

³⁷⁵ It is worth mentioning that the terrorist label has been similarly given to far-right forces in the modern day and could be seen as a recent reappropriation of right-wing rhetoric.

³⁷⁶ Lauquer, *A History of Terrorism*, 16.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

they are seen—constitutes violence and intimidation, those characterizations are few and far between in more modern times.

What is often used instead is the characterization of Black Lives Matter protests as riots, owing to both the urban characterization of terrorism—in comparison to the rural guerrilla³⁷⁸—and the otherized image of the terrorist, evolving from the bearded anarchist to the dark-skinned Islamist.³⁷⁹ When in doubt, the right wing will point out protestors “burning cities down to the ground” as proof of terrorism. Of course, this characterization is incorrect, as the riots are often unrelated to the protests, in an organizational sense, meaning that there is no political gain involved. These acts of violence are frequently mischaracterized acts of self-defence or symbolic acts of violence against objects, which the right characterizes as worse than violence against bodies. Furthermore, in right-wing terminology, terrorism is defined as something more akin to violent acts when committed by the racialized other; if the same act is committed by a white individual, the act is often characterized as a simple, unpoliticizable act of violence, committed by someone who is unaffiliated with any racial or political group, even when the aggressor admits their own association. Despite this, I would like to use this chapter to partially characterize Black Lives Matter, specifically acts of violence that are attributed to them by the right-wing media, with terrorism. More specifically, I would like to use Jean Baudrillard’s notorious post-9/11 essay *The Spirit of Terrorism* both as a comparative text to examine why riotous acts of violence are sometimes necessary on a mass emotional level and to understand why these claims of terrorism are so often levelled against the American other.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 18.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 6.

Jean Baudrillard and *The Spirit of Terrorism*

Just a little under two months after the events of September 11, 2001, Baudrillard published *The Spirit of Terrorism*. In this essay, Baudrillard points out the obvious thing that many had been unwilling to admit: that the events of that day were the direct result of the actions of the United States themselves. While the country was taking the role of the victim and gathering worldwide sympathy, no one else was willing to admit that this was an inevitable conclusion to the country's century of foreign policy. This history of atrocity had been intentionally forgotten, both because of the timing of tragedy and because of the general nationalist aura that comes with a first-world western imperialist nation.

Baudrillard gets directly to the point by stating that the destruction that was witnessed on that day may have been mourned in public, but in private, we have dreamed of this destruction, because the destruction of the towers and the Pentagon is a symbolic destruction of hegemonic power.³⁸⁰ As Baudrillard puts it, even though it is “unacceptable to the Western moral conscience...it is a fact...that everyone without exception has dreamed of it”³⁸¹ and that “even though they did it...we wished for it.”³⁸² What Baudrillard uses as proof of this fact is the spectacle of Hollywood disaster films,³⁸³ which constantly imagine the destruction of America, often with a tacked-on happy ending to ensure that they do not get mistaken for transgressors against the American dream, which is also disproven by this desire to see the destruction of America.

³⁸⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (London: Verso, 2003): 5.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Ibid., 7.

This symbolic destruction of America is also seen as an attempted terrorism against those who benefit from hegemonic social systems. Baudrillard suggests that this war is just as much against the hegemonic power as it is against globalization,³⁸⁴ the rich³⁸⁵ and even American banality.³⁸⁶ In other words, the events of September 11, 2001 allowed working class people to imagine a world where they could be free of persecution from those who see themselves as having power over them; they could see a future without a status quo that demands that they match up to it. They could see a world without American exceptionalism—even if only for a moment. They could imagine a better world, even though it was through a broken view wherein they were playing the same game as their oppressors.³⁸⁷ Of course, even with this interplay, the hegemonic power was only lost symbolically. Even the terrorist act itself was symbolic.³⁸⁸ Baudrillard further states that the collapse being unimaginable does not make it “real,”³⁸⁹ as it is just the frisson that makes those events real.³⁹⁰

And yet, even if the events are not necessarily “real,” their images are exceedingly valuable. In particular, Baudrillard suggests that the terrorists who committed the acts of that day “exploited the ‘real time’ of images, their instantaneous worldwide transmission.”³⁹¹ While that is certainly true—the most important tool for 21st century terrorism continues to be imagery that can be used for propaganda; even if those images are of violence, the images serve a larger importance—it can be made truer with a wider definition of terrorist. Where Baudrillard is using terrorist in a common parlance, he seems to be forgetting the importance of images for the

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 11.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 23.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 19.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 54.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 29.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 28.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 29.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 27.

terrorized side, especially when the terrorized side is the biggest terrorist nation operating today. The United States' crimes were immediately erased when they found a way to victimize themselves; this is not to say that they would have faced any reprimand for their crimes, but it is also always important to have a tragedy available to hide one's own crimes if necessary.

While he does forget this, Baudrillard does make an interesting point when he suggests that such a terrorist attack will always have further violence attributed to it.³⁹² In the years—perhaps even decade—after 9/11, every act of violence and, by association, every act of resistance or transgression was attributed, in one way or another, to Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda or the other figures and organizations that resulted from them, conveniently forgetting the fact that these sources were themselves created by the United States and their closest allies. That is not the point at hand here, however. This deep dive into *The Spirit of Terrorism* is simply meant as a way to show that the more things change, the more they stay the same. In other words, this is meant to show that, even though Black Lives Matter is definitively not a terrorist organization, it has taken on the form of a terrorist organization in an America that has lost its immediate foreign menace and must look inward for a domestic enemy in order to whip up its regressive right-wing population into a fervour. Baudrillard's contemporary study of how the events of 9/11 were necessitated and exploited thus becomes a valuable framework for studying the rhetoric of Black Lives Matter as a terrorist organization.

Black Terrorism

Black people have been a source of “terror” for American white populations since the days of slavery. *Birth of a Nation* used scenes of freed Black slaves terrorizing white women, some into suicide rather than indignity, so effectively that the KKK had a resurgence in several

³⁹² Ibid., 33.

states. This was happening at a time when Black people could be murdered by large white crowds without fear of punishment, when Black youths were killed for breaking the most nonsensical aspects of the status quo, when white towns went into prosperous Black areas, destroying and killing Black people with impunity. In other words, at a time where American white people were taking the role of terrorist in the lives of American Black people, many were also developing entertainment that projected this role onto their other, convincing themselves that they were in fact the victims.³⁹³

This self-victimization never went away, but it did change in the 1960s, with the arrival of the civil rights movement, bringing with it different forms of self-victimization. Reverend Martin Luther King, along with the likes of the NAACP and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, continued to feed into the false narrative by pushing ideas of non-violence on the road to change, which could easily be twisted into the usual rhetoric of violence disguised as non-violence and pro-Black sentiment as anti-white. Then, there were the likes of Malcolm X and groups such as the Black Panthers—those who made no pretense of non-violence and supported self-preservation, even if by violence—those who convinced a large group of white Americans that they were not just victims, but they were actually actively in danger. Black Americans were beginning to refuse to be losers who acquiesce to those losses in a civil manner.³⁹⁴ They were beginning to realize that the state had no protection to offer them and they needed to protect themselves. The white Americans found that terrifying. After all, if harmless and nonconfrontational Black individuals are a source of terror for these easily frightened folks, what can be said about people who believe that violent self-defence is an

³⁹³ It is important to note that *Birth of a Nation* was not universally celebrated in its time, being considered racist by many even in its time. However, American president Woodrow Wilson was one of the many proponents of the film, whose open and unabashed celebration of the film should be taken into account in relation to the time.

³⁹⁴ Juliet Hooker, “Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics: From Democratic Sacrifice to Democratic Repair,” in *Political Theory* 44 (2016), 450.

option? At this point, the terror evolves. Originally, it was always about the Black body, an object for white people to demonize as criminal and dirty.³⁹⁵ However, with the arrival of self-defensive, second amendment touting Black rights groups, the terror moves in the direction of a fear of violence. White people realize that they can use legislation to quell what scares them, whether that is Black Panthers being armed in public or Black Lives Matter protesting in full view, somehow not realizing that this is proof of their power over those they believe are victimizing them.³⁹⁶

This fear of Black people has come to something of a logical—or illogical—conclusion in the age of Black Lives Matter. Everything from the fear of terminology—the issues with Black Lives Matter mirror the similar issues with terms like Black Power³⁹⁷—to the mass media’s obsession with violence over peace comes back to bring about a fear of Black people for a white audience. What differs between the current struggle and the civil rights struggle of the 1960s and its preceding struggles is that there is now a negative spin on being a racist. While white people could easily murder Black people and get away with it in decades past, people are opening their eyes today and no longer standing for it. Even some of the police are being held accountable to some degree. Racist rhetoric is no longer just another acceptable part of life in the grander scheme of things. While racist rhetoric survives in many communities, especially in hushed tones among individuals with similar mindsets, a majority of white people have realized that “racist” is a negative label to have and many of them have, as such, decided to use dog-whistles to escape it, one of the most powerful of these being terrorist.

³⁹⁵ Rima Vesely-Flad, *Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies: Moral Pollution, Black Lives and the Struggle for Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017): xvi.

³⁹⁶ Alexander H. Updegrove, Maisha N. Cooper, Erin A. Orrick and Alex R. Piquero, “Red States and Black Lives: Applying the Racial Threat Hypothesis to the Black Lives Matter Movement,” in *Justice Quarterly* 37 (2020), 86.

³⁹⁷ Gene Seymour, “Power Outages: The Old-New Politics of Black Protest,” in *The Baffler* 33 (Winter 2016): 111.

Black Power as Social Dream

Returning to Baudrillard, the Black Lives Matter movement could easily be seen as yet another case of society dreaming of the end of yet another hegemonic power. In this case, the hegemonic power is the United States, but it is more specifically white supremacy in the United States. People around the world have wished for it and, while many had no hand in it, they are happy about it. It should also be noted that this is about white supremacy *in the United States*. While white supremacy continues to run unabated in Canada, Europe and Australia, this American struggle allows everyone else to forget about their complicity and enjoy the *schadenfreude* of the racist American ideological apparatuses losing power and the general racist society fall.³⁹⁸

What differentiates Black Lives Matter from Baudrillard's understanding of the Islamist terrorists of Al-Qaeda is that there is still a very clear divide between supporters and opponents of the Black rights movement. While states with higher rates of police shooting and individuals who perceive police in their local area as being unfair to Black people are more likely to support Black Lives Matter,³⁹⁹ there are an assortment of groups who are more likely to oppose the movement on purely ideological reasonings. For example, people who are older, conservative or male are more likely to oppose the movement,⁴⁰⁰ as are people from republican states⁴⁰¹ and people from states which have higher white unemployment than Black unemployment.⁴⁰² Essentially, the fear of white inferiority will make white supremacists question the very rights of

³⁹⁸ A similar thing is happening in Canada as of this writing with Indigenous rights coming to the forefront. There is also a similar response with other nations coming out in hollow support of Canadian Indigenous peoples while ignoring their own histories with Indigenous genocides.

³⁹⁹ Updegrave, Cooper, Orrick and Piquero, "Red States and Black Lives," 100.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 99.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 98.

life and liberty for American Black people. These people will give many reasons for their disapproval of Black Lives Matter, but just like the opponents of the movements before them, their disapproval often leads back to racist beliefs, which others strive to dismantle, whether actively or passively.

Of course, the passive support is not always a helpful style of support either. While many do wish to see the dismantling of white supremacy, many of those wish to see it without giving up their own privileges. Juliet Hooker points out that these people—she refers to them from a liberal-democrat perspective, but they could just as easily be referred to as centrists, libertarians or even apathetic leftists—believe that Black Americans have the right to protest and fight for their rights, but that they must do it through a hegemonic lens, which incorporates existing legal and political order.⁴⁰³ These individuals fall into a trap of believing that the current system needs to be merely reformed or updated instead of torn down and reconstructed. To these individuals, the system already contains perfection with their vague notions of rights, even though rights mean nothing to the oppressed in an abusive society.⁴⁰⁴ It is also with these people that inclusion starts to become an increasingly important point. These individuals *know* that they are not part of the problem, since they too wish to see the current system fixed, so the rhetoric that questions their way of life atop the ways of life of the hegemonic powers stands to offend them. As such, they begin to question a system that has no prepared place for them. This all leads back to an important point made by Hooker: liberal-democratic theory still does not see Black anger as a legitimate response to police violence.⁴⁰⁵ It is owing to this state of mind that these individuals

⁴⁰³ Hooker, “Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics,” 458.

⁴⁰⁴ Christopher J. Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 103.

⁴⁰⁵ Hooker, “Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics,” 451.

must also be excluded from the struggle. It is with the activists, protestors and true supporters that we can begin to look at those that would push protest as terrorism.

Visuality of Protest/Terrorism

There are two important forces that work together to convince the easily convinced and the highly suggestible that Black Lives Matter is a terrorist organization. One is right-wing rhetoric. The other is the mass media's coverage and representation of the protests. As Alexa Robertson has pointed out in direct relation to protest, American news foregrounds violence.⁴⁰⁶ Following the general *ethos* of "if it bleeds, it leads," the violence of protests is just another reiteration of the American media's obsession with violence. This also accounts for why the majority of the peaceful protesting is ignored in favour of one shot of a building burning. Peaceful protesting does not make for an entertaining news story nor does it further the narrative that the news producers are meant to instill about Black people. In Noam Chomsky's propaganda model, he points out the five filters that a story has to go through in order to be palatable for the hegemonic power and thus allowed to air: ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak and "anti-communism."⁴⁰⁷ Black Lives Matter as an organization and Black rights as a concept are diluted through every step. Black Lives Matter is run on anti-capitalist sentiments, meaning that they are already held back by the ownership and advertising filters. They dare to question the basic building blocks of American society, meaning their opponents will inevitably be given extra airtime. They are frequently discredited by various sources, accounting for flak. As for the anti-communist filter, there is still a very tangible red scare in the United States. While it may not always be directly referenced, much of what white Americans fear about Black Lives Matter are

⁴⁰⁶ Alexa Robertson, *Screening Protest: Visual Narratives of Dissent Across Time, Space and Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2019): 60.

⁴⁰⁷ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002): 2.

the aspects that they have gotten used to referring to as communism. It might even be better to refer to it as anti-dissent under any of its various names. Thus, when their control is questioned by an organization that goes against all of their basest beliefs while also daring to bring about dissent against the base of their ideology, it makes perfect sense that the mass media would attempt to push a Black violence angle as their neutral narrative of the Black Lives Matter movement.

It is also important to remember that the media's phrasing of the news is also extremely important. For example, let us look at the very idea of violent protest. A lot of news stories are devoted to protests "turning violent." Despite the fact that the majority of these protests have been peaceful, a lot of attention is given to the turn toward violence, but that turn is not frequent enough to sate a violence-hungry network and their audience. As such, it is sometimes important to give into more literal definitions. A large number of the violent turns have been a result of police officers escalating non-violent protests.⁴⁰⁸ However, when it comes to the terminology, there is no difference between a violent protest started by violent protestors and one started by violent police officers or even *agent provocateurs*.⁴⁰⁹ As long as violence can be connected to the movement, the protests can be discredited and the media can continue to downplay their importance.⁴¹⁰ This is how a June 25, 2020 incident where a Black man is stabbed by a white racist who mentions his adoration for Trump and his hatred of Black Lives Matter as a motive leads to an NBC-affiliate news headline that reads "'Black Lives Matter' may have led to stabbing."

⁴⁰⁸ Danielle K. Kilgo, Rachel R. Muraou and George Sylvie, "Martin to Brown: How Time and Platform Impact Coverage of the Black Lives Matter Movement," in *Journalism Practice* 13 (2019): 416.

⁴⁰⁹ "Umbrella Man: Minneapolis Police Link Suspect to White Supremacists," *BBC News*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53579099> (accessed July 3, 2021).

⁴¹⁰ Kilgo, Muraou and Sylvie, "Martin to Brown," 416.

What makes less logical sense is the right-wing insinuation of left-wing bias in the mainstream media. While there may well be a liberal bias in the voices that are allowed on some national news sources, this is American liberalism, which is to say slightly left of centre in the best of times, but often moderately to the right. However, that has not stopped the right-wing “news” sources from creating their own reality of Black Lives Matter protests. These sources attempt to counteract the “left’s” assertion that the country is on fire by insisting that it is more on fire than CNN will tell you. This move has shifted the Overton window so much that some on the right no longer accept Fox News as one of their own. The reason that I have placed “news” in quotation marks is because the modern right-wing news sphere has no issue with manufacturing stories when they see fit. The same people who caused the firing of Shirley Sherrod by removing context from a video to make her appear to be racist have now simply moved on to removing context from videos to make Black people appear to be violent.

To use just one particularly egregious example, Andy Ngo is a conservative social media personality with alleged journalistic work in both the United States and Canada. He is one of the many racialized right-wing grifters whose existence allows other right-wingers to insist that they are not racist. He has become particularly well-known for associating with violent right-wing groups who start conflicts with protestors for the purpose of obtaining footage, editing out the instigation and publishing the edited footage in order to push a narrative of unprovoked protestor and activist violence.⁴¹¹ His methods are well established but the right-wing has not cared about truth for quite some time. As such, when Ngo publishes a video on Twitter of a “mob” “assault[ing]” and “detain[ing]” a man during a conflict in Portland, that video unquestionably

⁴¹¹ E.J. Dickson, “How a Right-Wing Troll Managed to Manipulate the Mainstream Media,” *Rolling Stone*, September 3, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/andy-ngo-right-wing-troll-antifa-877914/> (accessed September 22, 2020).

gets posted to Reddit under the title “BLM terrorist KO’s innocent man with a kick to the head,” despite the fact that the man had moments earlier attempted to run over protestors in his car.⁴¹² The preceding event was documented by other media sources, but those sources do not reach right-wing ears with the same kind of urgency and are often dismissed as biased, even though they are from sources that have shown themselves to take aggressors at their word, even if it is seemingly due to a lack of journalistic integrity rather than outright malice. However, whether it is absent-mindedness or malevolence, it makes no difference, as that disinformation will change the viewing audience’s minds. In fact, owing to a mixture of misinformation, disinformation and pure apathy, Black Lives Matter has become a threat for some and has seen its support steadily drop among white Americans.⁴¹³

Another part of this decline in support has to do with what is often pointed at when accusations of terrorism are brought forth, the “fact” that every reactionary uses to disavow Black Lives Matter and their protests, the day where they saw one of the numerous cities they use as an example “burn down to the ground.” This is by far the biggest evidence provided by those making accusations of terrorism against Black Lives Matter. When others suggest that the protests were mostly peaceful, the reactionary opponents will always point to orange-tinted images of cities on fire. Of course, these cities are not actually burnt out of existence, but that does not matter when the image says otherwise. This is the greatest media weapon against social progress: the spectacle. The spectacle has been a part of historical representation since the very beginning of recorded history but has gotten to be a more powerful concept since the latter half

⁴¹² Shane Dixon Kavanaugh, “Portland Protesters Beat Driver Unconscious After Crashing Truck near Black Lives Matter Rally,” *Oregon Live*, August 21, 2020, <https://www.oregonlive.com/portland/2020/08/driver-of-crashed-car-is-beaten-blocks-from-downtown-portland-protests.html> (accessed September 22, 2020).

⁴¹³ Palash Ghosh, “A Year after George Floyd Killing, Fewer Americans Support Black Lives Matter Movement, Poll Finds,” *Forbes*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/palashghosh/2021/05/25/a-year-after-george-floyd-killing-fewer-americans-support-black-lives-matter-movement-poll-finds/> (accessed June 5, 2021).

of the 20th century.⁴¹⁴ This spectacle has taken over the media landscape, even finding its way into the news and political spheres.⁴¹⁵ It becomes an issue when what Douglas Kellner refers to as the megaspectacle becomes a common and acceptable part of our day-to-day lives, when a singular news story takes over the entirety of the media landscape for a span of time.⁴¹⁶ With the expansion of media alternatives to the mainstream news platforms, many media outlets have become more concerned with being relevant and have remedied this concern with a move toward infotainment and have, in turn, created entertainment journalism that cannot be distinguished from real journalism by large parts of the audience.⁴¹⁷ This further led to a need for photojournalism and the need to turn every serious event into a spectacle—after all, as Sontag states, atrocity in the modern day necessitates photographic evidence.⁴¹⁸ It is also owing to this that modern day politics have become a form of spectacle wherein media culture determines the form of presidential politics.⁴¹⁹ Thus, the spectacle of the first Black president Barack Obama, followed by the spectacle of four years of Trump, led to a political landscape that was dictated wholly by megaspectacles and not by actual policies, wherein politics went beyond the shallow understanding of “someone you want to have a beer with” into an identity created around a myth based on the person in charge.

Guy Debord’s introduction of the concept of the spectacle in *The Society of the Spectacle*, defined it as a “materialized...worldview⁴²⁰ [dictated through] a social relation between people

⁴¹⁴ Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle* (New York: Routledge, 2003): 1.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁴¹⁷ Amy Lyford and Carol Payne, “Photojournalism, Mass Media and the Politics of Spectacle,” in *Visual Resources* 21, no. 2 (2005): 120.

⁴¹⁸ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 83.

⁴¹⁹ Kellner, *Media Spectacle*, 160.

⁴²⁰ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 1970): 5.

that is mediated by images.”⁴²¹ This society is dictated through images that are easily digestible and can be sold to an audience. In Debord’s own words, “the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images.”⁴²² Debord saw life as being presented as a series of spectacles.⁴²³ While the spectacle contains subjective reality,⁴²⁴ its end goal is to become the dominant mode of production⁴²⁵ and eventually lead to alienation.⁴²⁶ This can all be seen in the news media’s representations of Black Lives Matter, steadily degrading them from being to appearing.⁴²⁷ Where a society should be concerned with aiding all of their neighbours, the media has created a new spectacle reminiscent of a race war. While peaceful protests and marches are occurring around them, the media is far more concerned with the spectacle of violence, reporting from fires and rubble to further the ideology that your neighbour wishes you dead and that you should wish the same.

It should also be noted that spectacles are self-reproducing. This is to say that the excitement of a spectacle will in turn lead to copycats of that spectacle. Emulation of a spectacle is a very important part of the concept,⁴²⁸ which could be used in a variety of ways. Seeing protests may lead to more protests and seeing violence may lead to more violence. This violence does not even have to result from those who are protesting an issue. This violence could simply result from those who watch the violence at home and decide to partake. In other words, the hegemonic power’s media sources serve only to dig their own graves when they make an effort to show an excessive amount of violence to a mass audience. They are aware of this, which is

⁴²¹ Ibid., 4.

⁴²² Ibid., 34.

⁴²³ Ibid., 1.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 32.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁴²⁸ Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle and Insurrection, 2011: From the Arab Uprisings to Occupy Everywhere* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012): 197.

why they will occasionally attempt to show the other side of the issue, so to speak. They will occasionally allow a contradiction of their policies to appear in the name of impartiality—giving a platform to those who disagree with the dominant ideology, placed between experts who in turn disagree with them—but these voices still merely serve to prove the original point. The point is the spectacle and the spectacle is a representation of terrorism. So, when one realizes that terrorism as a signifier will not be easily removed, would it be worthwhile to simply lean in?

Let's return to Baudrillard's understanding of terrorism again. Baudrillard sees terrorism as something of a symbolic notion,⁴²⁹ a simulation of itself. After all, with the media representing it, Black Lives Matter frequently appears as a hyperreal form of terrorism, very similar to Baudrillard's bank robber who creates an exact simulation of a robbery without intending any criminal gain or harm to others.⁴³⁰ In a situation like this, where others have declared your intention for you, perhaps it is necessary to give in. The previous attempts have not worked. Peaceful protest is ignored, violent protests are demonized; all demands are disregarded by those who can be of any help. Then, Black Lives Matter becomes something to be feared and suddenly, the number of deaths of Black people at the hands of police officers begin to go down⁴³¹ and police departments begin to create new policies to make sure that their officers follow the rules. It almost seems like the fires become a positive. Kimberly Jones went viral during the protests with a speech that puts this necessity of "terrorism" into perspective when she states two related facts: the Black members of any community do not own any of that community—after all, they are often renters and at the mercy of the giant corporations that employ them and own their property—and that they are merely responding to the police and their

⁴²⁹ Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, 29.

⁴³⁰ Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Media and Cultural Studies Key Works* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001): 534.

⁴³¹ Travis Campbell, "Black Lives Matter's Effect on Police Lethal Use-of-Force," in *SSRN*, May 13, 2021, 1.

supporters' breaking of the social contract.⁴³² She ends this speech with some very pertinent words when she states that their opponents "are lucky that what black people are looking for is equality and not revenge."⁴³³ The spectacle at play is what the revenge of Black people would look like and perhaps it is necessary for it to be aired in order to ensure better faith attempts at fixing what is wrong.

After all, the fall of white supremacy is yet another thing that many of us have frequently dreamed of and wished for. Using violence to dismantle white supremacy is often necessary because it is a fight of violence against violence. Just as 9/11 was a response to imperialist violence by way of futilely simulating imperialist violence, this fight is fighting police violence by way of futilely simulating broken window theory. Broken window theory refers to a theoretical system wherein a broken window in a neighbourhood is seen as a sign of trouble, meaning that police need to furiously fight small crime in order to stop larger crimes.⁴³⁴ The terrorism on view in these protests can be seen as an appropriation of this system, wherein one (admittedly major) issue in a police department—for example, the high-profile killing of one individual—should be seen as a sign of trouble, which should then lead to a total dismantling of that department, by way of protesting, advocacy and, more important to the discussion at hand, even destroying the department's headquarters. Just as the falling of the World Trade Center was seen as symbolic of a dismantling of American imperialism by Baudrillard, there is a very real case for the burning down of a police department or the destruction of a statue dedicated to proponents of slavery and imperialism being seen as a necessary dismantling of American white supremacy. At this point, it should be noted that the futile nature of this act—in a practical as

⁴³² *Last Night Tonight*, "Police," Season 7, Episode 14, Directed by Christopher Werner, HBO, aired June 7, 2020.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁴ Alex S. Vitale, *The End of Policing* (London: Verso, 2017): 10.

opposed to symbolic way—has been seen again and again. Aside from Baudrillard’s own critiques of this way of thinking, others have shown the ineffectiveness of terrorist actions in leading to any particular change, with Lauquer showing it effective only in very specific circumstances⁴³⁵ and Johan Grimonprez showing it to be a mere steppingstone to spectacle and reactionary violence.⁴³⁶

A statue in Salt Lake City, Utah, entitled “Serve and Protect” depicts two outstretched hands to further the idea of the police as public servants. During one of the many 2020 protests, this statue was slathered in red paint.⁴³⁷ This is not nearly as dramatic as a fire, but it gets the same message across. The statue’s surrounding area shows no other signs of destruction and it may well make its point more accurately than a burning police department, but unfortunately, it will receive far less media attention than a fire. So, perhaps it truly is necessary to give into the terrorism signs in order to ensure that an audience who wishes to see the end of white supremacy will be able to access those images and their connected ideas.

Terror Acceptance

A young, Black American woman is out at a protest when a reporter asks her a question. Joe Biden has just been elected president of the United States and the reporter wants to know if she thinks things will finally go back to normal. She points out that the normal that Biden would bring about would not be the best-case scenario for Black people that anti-Trump rhetoric would have one believe. She points out that this normal would simply mean being a bigot in hiding instead of out in the open and she points to Biden’s rhetoric about Trump supporters having the right to protest, which is a right that has never been verbalized or afforded to Black Lives Matter

⁴³⁵ Lauquer, *A History of Terrorism*, 16.

⁴³⁶ *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, directed by Johan Grimonprez (1997, Other Cinema, 2004), DVD.

⁴³⁷ A photo of this reappropriation can be seen at <https://i.imgur.com/sA4UUMw.jpg>.

protestors⁴³⁸ or, more historically, Black rights supporters in general. A democratic normal would still be an imperialist, white supremacist normal. While the two parties unquestionably differ on a variety of topics, the roots of both parties still exist in American exceptionalism and aid to rich people, who are heavily white. This is to say that they both ultimately recognize that their stance exists on this narrow platform of American white affluence. In other words, both parties exist under the same dominant ideology of white supremacy, but one is fighting for white nationalism while the other is just apathetic about stopping that from happening. The two parties are divided on ideological lines, but both serve the same dominant ideology: capitalism!

This is why the lies of terrorism that are attached to Black Lives Matter may be ones that should not be refuted. The right-wing ideological use of the term “terrorist” has always been and will always be a racially motivated designation and one which cannot be escaped in a capitalist system’s media. As such, images and videos are created and disseminated through deceitful editing or the removal of context and used to turn neutral or positive acts of Black Lives Matter or even unrelated acts into harmful reactionary stories. An incident where a group of Black people defend themselves against a white man with a sword will then be edited to designate Black Lives Matter into not just a terrorist movement, but perhaps a racist movement or an apolitical movement. What comes out as a bit problematic about this is that these frauds get results that they were not expecting. Right-wing politicians may end up disavowing the movement again, but others will either respond to the fear or to the response to the fear and take actions that will push the Black Lives Matter agenda forward. These may be things as minor as removing statues or forcing police departments to wear cameras or as major as removing qualified immunity or firing offending officers. Thus, the question becomes is it worth giving

⁴³⁸ Chuck Modi, Twitter Post, November 7, 2020, 10:33 PM, <https://twitter.com/ChuckModi1/status/1325280309873696768>.

into the lies of institutional terrorism and allowing them to become a signifier of the true signified of protest if it will get results? In a right-wing media landscape, the answer may be yes.

Part 3: Retaliation

Chapter 9: Where is Black Lives Matter and Other Attempts at Re-appropriation

Black People as Monolith

A video began making the rounds on social media in 2017.⁴³⁹ This video came from a Facebook livestream that depicted the torture of a mentally disabled white man by four Black individuals, two women and two men. While the livestream, uploaded by Brittany Covington, lasted half an hour, the video that was spread consisted of a short excerpt of the full stream.⁴⁴⁰ The white man is seen, crudely bound and gagged with duct tape, which does little to silence him. The camerawork is characteristically erratic, moving around and ultimately not providing much context. The victim is kicked, punched and has his clothes cut off. The video was immediately taken up as a *cause celebre* by the American right-wing media, as it gave them something to pull the focus away from the conversation at hand—the murders of Black men by police officers—towards a more white-centric topic. Until this point, the right had to find a way to vilify the victims but now they had their own victim. Suddenly, the conversation moved toward Black-on-white crime, but in a whole new way: specifically, why Black Lives Matter would stand back and *allow* such a thing to happen.

In a time where the topic of conversation is Black lives and when white supremacy is seen as a part of the issues affecting Black lives, it is the main imperative of the right wing to change the context back to a white supremacist standard. As such, it is this reappropriation of

⁴³⁹ While the video has disappeared from any reputable website, an “analysis” of it can be found at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0Cn3YT6jW4>. Interestingly, the video is entitled “BLM Kidnapping Chicago Video.” Furthermore, keeping with the style of reporting coming from the far right, despite the title and the connections made to Black Lives Matter in the description, the video itself ends with the uploader stating “currently, there is no evidence to suggest this was associated with the Black Lives Matter movement.”

⁴⁴⁰ Holly Yan, Sheena Jones and Steve Almasy, “Chicago Torture Video: Four Charged with Hate Crimes, Kidnapping,” *CNN*, January 5, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/01/05/us/chicago-facebook-live-beating/index.html> (accessed July 12, 2022).

Black Lives Matter and the Black community in general that allows the right-wing to regain their stronghold on the zeitgeist. This event led to the admonishment of Black Lives Matter—a group whose only connection to these four individuals was the colour of their skin—and various calls, from people who clearly misunderstand the point behind Black Lives Matter—of “where is Black Lives Matter now?” Of course, this call is not limited to cases of Black-on-white crime, because deflection is a powerful tool for the racist right-wing crowd. Similarly, these calls come as a response to “Black-on-Black” crime, the murders of white people by the police—murders which are often actually protested by Black Lives Matter and only mentioned by their opposers for propaganda purposes—the murder of cops or even deaths wholly unrelated to the argument that they feel can be used as fodder.

This is just one of the ways that the opponents of Black Lives Matter see fit to reappropriate and misappropriate Black Lives Matter imagery and recontextualize existing, unrelated imagery, as a plan of attack against the Black Lives Matter movement. Another way is the responses that result from imitating Black Lives Matter as a slogan. These includes such similar slogans as All Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter—a slogan to humanize the police uniform and clearly meant as a celebration of the other side of the Black Lives Matter battle—and the rarer No Lives Matter.

These slogans are a direct response to what is seen as an offensive slogan by a white supremacist mindset, suggesting that Black lives mattering diminishes white (and other) lives, that police lives are under attack by such beliefs and that there is no inherent mattering to lives and that people need to make their own lives matter—an appropriation of a nihilistic mindset for racial purposes—respectively. The fact that all of these slogans came as a result of Black Lives Matter suggests a reactionary approach to their creations. These are just some of many other

reactionary methods to respond to Black Lives Matter. This chapter will analyze and discuss some of these methods: beyond this “where is Black Lives Matter” phenomenon and responses to the statement “Black Lives Matter,” this chapter will also discuss the use of established images in memes and other bad-faith methods to downplay or refute the actions of Black Lives Matter and their allies.

Where is BLM: A Narrative of Non-Response

Returning to 2017’s Facebook Live video, streamed by Brittany Covington and depicting the torture of an un-named individual by her and three other individuals, the identity politics therein and the perpetrators saying things like “fuck white people” and “fuck Trump” led to the video immediately becoming an object of a culture war, whiteness and conservatism and everything that goes with both becoming conflated as one side of the argument and Blackness becoming the opposing side.⁴⁴¹ Many right-wing pundits even began to refer to this incident as the “BLM kidnapping,”⁴⁴² attempting to connect it to a more easily digestible and easily hateable form of Blackness. Frantz Fanon spoke of a concept of epidermalization, where the Blackness of a Black individual becomes an indisputable source of inferiority in a white society.⁴⁴³ This BLMization is a modern version of that phenomenon. In a “colour-blind” society, it is wrong to be racist, so the racist’s refuge exists solely in dog whistles and dishonesty. As such, the Black person must be BLMized in order for that racism to move away from a racial viewpoint and into

⁴⁴¹ It is also important to contextualize the arrival of this video occurring at a time of both celebration of white supremacy and shame of white supremacy. More specifically, the video arrived around the time that Dylan Roof, a mass murderer who unrepentantly killed nine Black churchgoers in a Black church, was about to be sentenced for his crimes and a few short weeks before Donald Trump was to be sworn in as the president of the United States.

⁴⁴² Tasneem Nashrulla, “People Are Blaming the Chicago Kidnapping On Black Lives Matter With Zero Evidence,” *Buzzfeed News*, January 5, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/tasneemnashrulla/people-are-blaming-the-chicago-kidnapping-on-black-lives-mat> (accessed July 18, 2022).

⁴⁴³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986): 109.

a political one. Black Lives Matter have simply had that position thrust upon them, like the Black Panthers, “war on drugs” and “forced busing” before them.

While the incident was, unquestionably a despicable incident, the response immediately showed itself to not be about the people involved and to be wholly about what meaning could be attached to it in a time of struggle. This video immediately showed itself to be one of many “icons of outrage”⁴⁴⁴ designed specifically to be utilized against the other side, an object meant solely as reactionary fodder, with no view towards change. The only change that was ever visualized was a conservative change, moving backwards to a social era where the status quo remained even further untouched. After all, the only actions taken by the right with regard to this incident were symbolic—often online—rhetoric. While Black Lives Matter immediately disavowed the incident and the individuals involved therein, the BLMization of the actions of the perpetrators had already been attached to Black political causes. Meanwhile, the victim was no longer seen as someone to support by those who were “supporting” him earlier. All four perpetrators have, in the meantime, been arrested and found guilty, with three of them receiving prison sentences ranging from three to eight years.

This sudden drive to find these types of incidents and BLMize them for the sake of reactionary politics is pervasive enough that it cannot be seen as anything but an intentional rhetorical attack against the very idea of Black liberation. Just as Kwame Ture’s calls of Black Power were seen as threatening,⁴⁴⁵ there is a constant need to turn calls of Black Lives Matter into an illegitimate threat. This turn comes as a result of three interrelated plans of attack: the

⁴⁴⁴ David Campbell, “Horrible Blindness: Images of Death in Contemporary Media,” in *Journal for Cultural Research* 8 (2004), 68.

⁴⁴⁵ Gene Seymour, “Power Outages: The Old-New Politics of Black Protest,” in *The Baffler* 33 (2016), 111.

illegitimization of Black protest—through both calls to decency on behalf of the status quo⁴⁴⁶ and by redefinition of civil disobedience into the realm of violence⁴⁴⁷—the epidermalization of Black bodies into an inherently violent and threatening medium, and the self-victimization of the white body, defined as anything that is not the Black body, incorporating some elements such as political conservatism, neo-conservative Christianity and other identity-based political realms that can be used as dog whistles. In fact, in his study on white victimhood, J. Kolber specifically discovered a connection between feelings of white victimhood—the concept of “reverse racism” specifically—and conservative political and religious viewpoints.⁴⁴⁸ Within this triangle of political confusion, the Black Lives Matter protestor is ultimately turned into a two-fold villain, firstly by supporting the violent Black body—each and every Black body becoming an object of scorn, especially since Black Lives Matter attempts to ensure that even the most socially abject Black life matters—and secondly, by not doing enough for the body that their opposition believes to be innocent and therefore worthy of support. This is where the call of “where is BLM” and this non-responsive narrative begins.

First, it is necessary to note that the exclusive usage of BLM is an intentional part of this campaign. Black Lives Matter cannot be spun; in a “colour-blind” post-racial society, a racist cannot simply disparage a group that speaks such a truism, unless they are also ready to support their position. However, BLM is much easier to disparage, as an attack on a series of letters looks less racist. A similar thought process is used to attack “BLM, the organization,”⁴⁴⁹ a

⁴⁴⁶ Alexa Robertson, *Screening Protest: Visual Narratives of Dissent Across Time, Space and Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2019): 50.

⁴⁴⁷ Peter Weibel, *Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century* (Karlsruhe, Germany: ZKM, 2015): 67.

⁴⁴⁸ Jess Kolber, “Having it Both Ways: White Denial of Racial Salience while Claiming Oppression,” in *Sociology Compass* 11 (2017): 6.

⁴⁴⁹ This type of argument can be seen across a variety of usually less mainstream platforms. For example, this argument appears in a more analytic way on Religion Unplugged (available at <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2020/7/8/why-the-black-lives-matter-movement-is-so-controversial-to-many->

differentiation that is often made by the opponents of Black Lives Matter, who differentiate between a group of individuals who do something to uphold the statement and the statement itself, a statement that they often claim to agree with while doing less than the bare minimum to support it. Similar to their support of the victim of the video above, the support offered by some towards Black people, often individuals who agree with them, is less than useless.

Why is it then that Black Lives Matter is seen as responsible for stopping these incidents, if not for the incidents themselves? These accusations come from two related sources: the first is the mission of Black Lives Matter and the second is the timing of their protests. Some opponents of Black Lives Matter may be ignorant, but the majority of the vocally combative opponents—the pundits, the trolls, etc.—are aware of what they are saying. Black Lives Matter has made their mission statement known repeatedly since 2013. Black Lives Matter is a non-hierarchical social advocacy group that advocates for the rights of Black individuals against police violence.⁴⁵⁰ The reason that Black people are seen as the main group for whom they advocate is because Black people are statistically the most likely people to be affected by police violence.⁴⁵¹ However, this has also not stopped Black Lives Matter from advocating for the rights of non-Black victims of police violence. This is to say that, while Black Lives Matter is an advocacy group for Black people, it is first and foremost an anti-police violence organization. This is why they do not protest when four Black civilians torture one white disabled civilian with no connection to any relevant political situation.

christians) where an interviewee refers to it as a disgusting organization and in a much less analytical series of answers on crowd-sourced website Quora (available at <https://www.quora.com/Why-are-some-people-against-the-BLM-movement>).

⁴⁵⁰ Chloe Banks, “Disciplining Black Activism: Post-Racial Rhetoric, Public Memory and Decorum in News Media Framing of the Black Lives Matter Movement,” in *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 32 (2018): 710.

⁴⁵¹ Frank Edwards, Hedwig Lee and Michael Esposito, “Risk of Being Killed by Police Use of Force in the United States by Age, Race-Ethnicity and Sex,” in *PNAS* 116 (2019): 16794.

Furthermore, a major issue that Black Lives Matter bring to light is the lack of accountability and responsibility on behalf of the police departments or individual police officers who partake in this violence. Even police officers who have been recorded murdering civilians often face no punishment, with those that do face punishment frequently receiving insufficient prison sentences.⁴⁵² When Black Lives Matter protest, they have a goal in mind: accountability on the part of criminal police officers. As such, it is not necessary for them to protest when a civilian commits a criminal act. In August 2020, Black man Darius Sessoms shot and killed white five-year-old Cannon Hinnant in North Carolina.⁴⁵³ This incident took place during a time of social upheaval and, just as with the Chicago torture incident, was immediately taken up as a *cause celebre* by the right wing with their usual cries, either accusing the murderer of being “BLM” or wondering where they were. Ignoring the fact that Black Lives Matter were already in the streets and, if this murder matched their cause, there would be no need to *start* protesting, this is a great example of the intentional disinformation on the causes of Black Lives Matter.

First of all, neither Sessoms nor Hinnant were a police officer, so immediately, this falls outside of the Black Lives Matter mission statement. However, even outside of that, Sessoms was arrested and charged within twenty-four hours. A second individual was arrested over a month later as an accessory to the crime after the fact. The police department of this North Carolina town was obviously intent on arresting the perpetrators of this case. For the sake of comparison, George Floyd’s murderer, Derek Chauvin, was not arrested until four days after the murder. If civilian murderers are getting arrested, charged and imprisoned for lengthy sentences, what reason is there for anyone, let alone Black Lives Matter, to protest? Who would the protest

⁴⁵² See previous chapter “Death of the Black Body and Birth of a Revolution.”

⁴⁵³ Shammas, Brittany, “What we know about the killing of 5-year-old Cannon Hinnant,” The Washington Post. August 14, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/08/14/cannon-hinnant-killing/> (accessed July 1, 2022).

even be against? It becomes obvious at this point that what these opponents want Black Lives Matter to protest is themselves, specifically the very idea of Blackness and the belief that they should matter. Or rather, they want them to just shut up and go away.

It is at this point that timing becomes a matter of particular importance. Cases of Black-on-white crime are likely fairly common in a multiracial society; when people commit crimes against other people, there will inevitably be many inter-racial crimes involved. This is to say that there is nothing particularly unusual about a Black-on-white violent crime, but no one really seems to care about these issues of “anti-white” violence at the hands of Black people when the other Black people are quiet. While these stories are a commonly used scare tactic to sow racial discord at all times, the smallest such cases also have a habit of becoming major stories and rallying cries at times of Black political strife, as if there is a group of individuals researching crimes during Black Lives Matter protests. This sense of timing, insisting importance into horrible yet miniscule incidents during times of Black revolutionary action further reinforces the proof that the opponents of Black Lives Matter are inherently politically passive, their non-existent convictions being wholly reactionary, with nothing more than the need to be against something that is not immediately catered towards their identities and beliefs. This reaction is owing to their feeling that something that is not primarily aimed towards them must be worthless.

It is further important to continue to recognize that this is not simplistic ignorance on the part of these opponents. Their question of Black Lives Matter and their position within a white supremacist societal space is a result of willful and malicious pretense of ignorance and is simply the most recent version of an ages long game; those with privilege can indeed play games with the lives of the others. The status quo, insisting on white supremacy among other things, places

the racialized majority above all else, leading to their need to stay there by any means necessary, even the subjugation of the racialized minorities. After all, as Frantz Fanon so presciently stated, “it is the racist who creates his inferior.”⁴⁵⁴ This inferiorization is a direct result of the fear of loss of power, a fear that perhaps comes from the knowledge that that power was unearned. This cognitive dissonance, between the knowledge that one’s power is unearned and the insistence that everything that one has was earned, can only lead to anger at its questioning.

This is why the usually invisible Black masses become hypervisible during times of refusal to conform:⁴⁵⁵ when Black people protest, harm others or dispel myths—myths of the righteous police officer when they get beaten on camera, for example—their hypervisibility leads to not just stereotypes of their entire populace, but also white rage and indignation. Black rage is seen as inherently illegitimate by the white status quo, which is what leads to this indignation,⁴⁵⁶ leading to the false arguments being discussed here, which in turn leads to the use of the state for purposes of social control and criminalization of both their activities and their bodies.⁴⁵⁷ When the white powers that be finalize this criminalization, they in turn consider this proof that they are right and their opponents are wrong, as judicial justice is the only form of justice that is recognized under this hegemonic system. This criminalization is then fed into the ideological state apparatuses such as the media, wherein those who dare to question the status quo are “objectively” deemed to be in the wrong.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 93.

⁴⁵⁵ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015): 57.

⁴⁵⁶ Juliet Hooker, “Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics: From Democratic Sacrifice to Democratic Repair,” in *Political Theory* 44 (2016): 451.

⁴⁵⁷ Alexander H. Updegrove, Maisha N. Cooper, Erin A. Orrick and Alex R. Piquero, “Red States and Black Lives: Applying the Racial Threat Hypothesis to the Black Lives Matter Movement,” in *Justice Quarterly* 37 (2020), 86.

⁴⁵⁸ Danielle K. Kilgo, Rachel R. Muraou and George Sylvie, “Martin to Brown: How Time and Platform Impact Coverage of the Black Lives Matter Movement,” in *Journalism Practice* 13 (2019), 416.

Finally, when all else fails, the opposing forces must go into self-victimization mode. When speaking of anti-colonial struggles, which necessitated violence, Fanon mentioned that the heretofore inactive bourgeoisie, seeing no need to get involved in the state's violent suppression until their own power over the state and the other began to slip, find it necessary to introduce the concept of non-violence.⁴⁵⁹ Colonialism and racism, two intertwined ideas within any racial struggle, are inherently violent phenomena. Thus, Fanon would suggest the only legitimate way to respond to violence, especially state violence from a state intent on upholding the status quo, is with retaliatory violence.⁴⁶⁰ This is why the white majority finds it necessary to partake in this two-prong attack, turning the racialized minority into aggressors and themselves into victims. They complete the first act in the ways already mentioned, by redefining the non-violent acts of the other as violence and using the state to not just violently suppress those acts, but to also cause the need for more violence—even self-defence is violent if committed by someone other than an affluent white person, after all⁴⁶¹—which can be used to further justify state violence against the racialized minority.

The self-victimization is a bit more nefarious. As Ruha Benjamin suggested, “the most dangerous place for Black people is in white people’s imagination.”⁴⁶² Ultimately, this must be read in two concurrent ways: both that Black people are unsafe in the imaginations of white

⁴⁵⁹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963): 61.

⁴⁶⁰ This statement necessitates a footnote about Martin Luther King Jr. King, inspired by the work of Mahatma Gandhi, advocated for radical non-violence, a form of non-violent protest informed by his socialist beliefs and something that was particularly revolutionary for the time and place. This form of non-violence was further advocated for by many other revolutionary Black thinkers of the time, a practice that was also criticized by many, Fanon among them. I do not necessarily disagree with King’s practices. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, King’s practices become anti-revolutionary in the modern day. As mentioned later in this dissertation, reactionary forces whose ancestors slandered King in his day now hold him up as the only correct way to protest, with that correct way being further neutered to change them from non-violently fight for change to stay out of the way and wait for change to occur. While this is obviously not a fault of King or radical non-violence advocates, it does complicate matters.

⁴⁶¹ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2015): 59.

⁴⁶² Armond R. Towns, “Toward a Black Media Philosophy,” in *Cultural Studies* (2020): 3.

people and that they are seen as a danger. This leads back to the invisible/hypervisible dichotomy in a way, with their suffering becoming the invisible side of the dilemma—the suffering that comes as a result of state intervention, including everything from police brutality to further poverty as a result of new laws and regulations that further harm racialized and poor people—while their acts of violence, whether real or imagined, become hypervisible, in turn leading to further invisible violence, due to the fear-based acceptance of further punishment under the guise of law and order. This dichotomy of unblinking acceptance of the status quo and fear of the other will always lead to further and further harm coming upon, among other people, the Black community. Furthermore, every attempt at fighting for new rights, every step forward, will inevitably be met with a step back by the opposers, leading to the type of rhetoric seen here. Of course, this is not the only rhetoric at play.

Why Aren't They in Chicago and Other Anti-Black Lives Matter Narratives

It is with this understanding of right-wing rhetoric on Black Lives Matter as being wholly based in bad faith arguments that the other narratives will be introduced, making sense within this context. These narratives are exceedingly similar to the earlier “why is BLM not protesting this” narrative—a narrative which was separated due to its excessive visualization throughout the 21st century—but each has its own extra touch, a touch which points to one of many white American concerns and fears. Each one points to a different fear, but they are all ultimately pointed right back to a unifying theme of anti-Black racism. And, where the arguments are knowingly in bad faith, it would be much more difficult to suggest that the fear is anything less than real; whether that fear is of the Black body or loss of privilege, however, is a completely different question.

The most common response, one which even predates cries of Black Lives Matter, one which is brought up any time a Black person speaks about any societal issues that Black people face, is the calls back to “Black-on-Black violence.” This argument, often referred to as a part of the umbrella term concern trolling—an argument which is meant to derail a conversation by a “troll” who attempts to do so by acting like they care about something that they clearly do not—sees someone claiming that, if Black Lives Matter truly believed what they claim to believe they would be in Chicago or Detroit or another city synonymous with a right wing fear of violent Black individuals—the sort of white terror that leads to such locations as “the bad part of town”—trying to stop that violence instead of fighting to stop the comparatively miniscule number of violent incidents at the hands of police officers. After all, if Black Lives Matter, then why do the lives of these people dying in news stories and online videos not matter? This is also why any online image or video of conflict between two Black people is likely to include a sarcastic response about Black lives mattering, as if all Black people are inherently activists in nature and as if conflict between two or more members of the same race invalidates the suggestion that people of that race deserve the right to feel safe.

This argument is also often accompanied by faulty, often memed statistics, meaning statistics that are so frequently spammed that the numbers themselves can often act as dog-whistles. For example, a common example of this type of statistic has to do with the statistics that show that fifty percent of violent crimes in the United States are committed by Black people, who make up thirteen percent of the national population. These statistics are already suspect, both because they do not take into account outside factors such as poverty and, more importantly, because these numbers are intentionally misleading and without context, taking into

account only volunteered statistics as they relate to arrests.⁴⁶³ However, the two numbers have become so synonymous with anti-Black rhetoric that the mere presence of the numbers is enough to repeat the message. Just as neo-Nazis have weaponized the numbers 14 and 88, so too have the anti-Black right wing done the same with 13 and 50, often uploading images or text comments that consist of nothing but these numbers, making the viewer look them up and potentially indoctrinating them in the process.

The lack of nuance also aids in the indoctrination, as many use these numbers to paint all Black individuals as violent criminals, as they see the thirteen percent as all being complicit in the activities. This further allows them to invalidate the Black Lives Matter movement, in their own heads at least, as a criminal association, both because they are seen as part of that thirteen percent and because they support the people that the right wing consistently deems as criminal, no matter what the circumstances of their struggles with the police. If that thirteen percent are criminals, then everyone must be held accountable—a rule that seems to apply mainly to racialized populations and not to white populations in relation to things such as white supremacy—even though the type of person who would get involved in activism is more likely to be well-educated and more affluent, keeping them away from the need to commit crimes to survive. Of course, that person is still much more likely to be arrested for a crime than their white counterpart, but, again, nuance and reason are not always at the forefront of such bad faith arguments.

These Black-on-Black violence responses also further show the most obvious fear, the blatant fear of Black people, as a monolith of violence. This argument has nothing to do with

⁴⁶³ The statistic that is most often used is this one, available on the FBI website (<https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2018/crime-in-the-u.s.-2018/tables/table-43>) which openly states that it is the rate of arrest for murder and arrests for murder do not translate into committing murder.

concern for the welfare of Black people—which becomes even more obvious when a Black victim is interrogated—but is rather a reference back to the idea of the Black body as a dangerous medium⁴⁶⁴ and as a threatening weapon.⁴⁶⁵ The suggestion put forth with this characterization is that Black individuals are so inherently dangerous that they would kill each other, other members of this same monolith. If this is what they would do to each other, what is stopping them from harming white people? In other words, this argument, beyond being in bad faith, is ultimately a very selfish argument on an ethical level. This argument is also particularly faulty because it does not take much research to realize that members of a group will commit more harm against each other than outside groups because of the fact that they are closer together.⁴⁶⁶ In other words, of course Black people are more likely to harm other Black people, for the same reason that white people are more likely to harm other white people. It does however allow for a simple bit of mythmaking. This is why when David Dorn was shot and killed close to a Black Lives Matter protest in 2020, he became an instant speaking point for the opponents of Black Lives Matter, with the photo of his lifeless body becoming an icon of outrage.

A Black man and a former police officer, Dorn was someone existing somewhere between the two sides of the argument. This is why it did not matter that his death occurred outside of both the time and space of a protest—he was murdered several miles away from and several hours after the end of the protests—his death could not be anything but exploited by the opponents of Black Lives Matter. Nor did it matter that the murderer, along with several others, have been arrested and charged. In a case like this, nothing will make up for the murder of a

⁴⁶⁴ Towns, “Toward a Black Media Philosophy,” 6.

⁴⁶⁵ George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017): 5.

⁴⁶⁶ Federal Bureau of Investigation, *2018 Crime in the United States* (2018), <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2018/crime-in-the-u.s.-2018/tables/expanded-homicide-data-table-6.xls>

police officer, while, concurrently, the death of a Black man does not actually matter beyond as a political tool.

This divide between Black individual and police officer is not the only dilemma that exists in these oppositional arguments. Returning to the original idea of Black people as a monolith, Blackness is far too often seen as a singular characteristic. To be Black is to be Black; not to be a woman, queer, trans or any other intersectional individual. While other intersections of Blackness do come with their own stereotypes—the overly sexualized Black woman, the overly masculine Black transwoman, etc.—the right-wing definition of Blackness is the Black man, sexual, straight and cisgender, dangerous and criminal, that can intimidate just about any one of their numbers with his muscular physique. This accounts for why all of these anti-Black Lives Matter sentiments are inherently focused on a violent and sexual masculinity, that is the wrong type of masculinity in comparison to the opposer’s masculinity. This is also why, whenever Black Lives Matter calls for support around queer or trans issues, their opposers will question the legitimacy of such issues, as they are not seen as Black issues. Despite the fact that the founders of Black Lives Matter were queer Black women,⁴⁶⁷ the arguments hinge on the necessity of straight masculinity.

These are all narratives that exist within the movement, however. There are also plenty of narratives that exist outside. The most common is the inverse of the Black-on-Black narrative, that of Black-on-white violence. This chapter started with several such examples and that is because it is such a prevalent narrative, incorporating fear of Black violence present in the Black-on-Black violence narrative and the necessary serving of self-victimization that is found in a lot of these oppositional narratives. This is a result of a two-pronged understanding of whiteness, as

⁴⁶⁷ Barbara Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018): 30.

at once a neutral racial state, with white people seeing themselves as existing outside of a role as a racial actor,⁴⁶⁸ and as people who must somehow be placed into the racial conversation. This removal and concurrent feeling of being left out of the conversation cause frequent feelings of being attacked, with the language being one of violence.⁴⁶⁹ This feeling of victimhood, whether its being taken upon is intentional or not, inevitably leads to white fragility, which lays at the centre of this argument.

Mike King points to the inherent white fragility in this discussion in his study of yet another one of these moral panics, the early 2010s phenomenon of the knockout game. This phenomenon saw the bringing together of several unrelated random attacks and brought them together to create a coherent narrative, one of (often) Black people more or less hunting white people for sport. Where these attacks were once just recognized as criminal activities, the ability to racialize the events—the panic around this game predated the Black Lives Matter movement, but if it had not, it would have surely become BLMized as well—turned them into a “real” concern. King points out that white people, despite having societal power and privilege, need to feel discriminated against in order to reach some sort of cultural relevance. When phenomena such as the knockout game find their way into the social vernacular and news cycles, they stay there longer, because they are consistent with the beliefs of the people who need to hear them and who have the power.⁴⁷⁰ Just like the current obsession with “cancel culture,” the need to feel victimized is more important than the facts. This then leads to every random assault being deemed an act of the knockout game. Random videos of contextless assaults become organized within a societal mindset and turned into cases of the knockout game, allowing for unrelated

⁴⁶⁸ Kolber, “Having it Both Ways,” 1.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁷⁰ Mike King, “The ‘Knockout Game’: Moral Panic and the Politics of White Victimhood,” in *Race & Class* 56 (2015): 89.

situations to become part of a larger culture war. This is aided by the fact that the media must inherently be against those who dare question the status quo, “the native” as Fanon puts it.⁴⁷¹

King goes on to point out that the difference between a panic like the knockout game and actual oppression is, again, the power imbalance therein. When white people see something as threatening their well-being, whether physically or socially, they have access to the power structures.⁴⁷² As they concern themselves with the discrimination against them, pointing to other panics, such as welfare queens and affirmative action and a Black president, they can then turn around and advocate for and celebrate vigilantism, acts which go unpunished because of these exact power imbalances.⁴⁷³ Finally, as has been pointed out before, the social capital that is afforded to white people can be put into place to control the “other” by instating legislation. Several states created new laws to more aggressively punish people playing the knockout game, despite the fact that, as King points out, punching people in the face is already illegal.⁴⁷⁴

Despite this showing of power, however, it is still very necessary for white people to provide more evidence for their fear of Black people. This is why every attack of a Black person upon a white person, even if in self-defence, is stripped of context and presented with the necessary comment to cause more strife. In the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, videos of Black-on-white violence saturated the news, whether through traditional media or online. What almost all of these videos had in common was just how easily their narratives could be changed with a bit of creative storytelling and just how likely white people were to give the benefit of the doubt to aggressors. While the destruction of property will always be the right-wing go-to with

⁴⁷¹ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 53.

⁴⁷² King, “The ‘Knockout Game’,” 90.

⁴⁷³ George Zimmerman was a vigilante, as were the likes of Kyle Rittenhouse and Bernhard Goetz. The right-wing of the United States has celebrated vigilantism if it is used to further the status quo frequently.

⁴⁷⁴ King, “The ‘Knockout Game’,” 91.

situations like these—because a window is ultimately seen as more valuable to them than a Black person—many of their cause celebres were shown to be the aggressors. Whether it was the Dallas man who was filmed as he attacked rioters with a machete⁴⁷⁵ or the Salt Lake City man who was filmed as he tried to shoot peaceful protestors with a bow and arrow,⁴⁷⁶ both men were ultimately given a sense of martyrdom by the right-wing and even the moderates, the former becoming the subject of a frequently memed photograph—often incorrectly labelled as a deceased victim of BLM, which is wrong on several counts—and the latter getting interviewed, with a bloody face, as he lied about the incident on a Fox affiliate network.⁴⁷⁷ While the truths about both incidents were ultimately reported, it is often the first telling of a story that becomes the widespread and accepted story. It is these narratives that necessitate self-victimization. If the other is no longer willing to be submissive and accept the status quo, that is a threat that must be dealt with: if violence is not an option, then disinformation will do just as well.

This is not where the white self-victimization ends, either. There is another fertile area for complaint from the oppositional crowd, which is the racialization of the support that goes to victims of police violence. A common cry against Black Lives Matter is the assumption that they do not support white victims of police violence. The fact that the people arguing this often do so from a pro-police position—the argument being that, since white people are also victims of police violence, the protests should end instead of the brutality ending—is just another bit of proof of the repeated bad faith arguments coming from that position. There are several reasons

⁴⁷⁵ Reuters Staff, “Fact Check: Dallas Man Attacked During Protests Did Not Die From His Injuries,” *Reuters*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-dallas-man-attacked-idUSKBN23B2EZ> (accessed July 14, 2022).

⁴⁷⁶ Gerren Keith Gaynor, “Utah Man Yelling ‘All Lives Matter’ Aims Bow and Arrow at Protestors,” *The Grio*, May 31, 2020, <https://thegrio.com/2020/05/31/utah-man-bow-arrow-protesters/> (accessed July 12, 2022).

⁴⁷⁷ While the Fox affiliate, Fox 13 Utah, has attempted to remove that particular bit of news footage from their online platform, it survives, along with footage of the shooting, at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8o1DqnQR4GQ>.

why this argument is faulty, chief among them the fact that Black Lives Matter does in fact protest on behalf of white victims of police violence. It just so happens that a vast majority of white victims of police violence are individuals that these reactionary forces do not particularly care about. When Black Lives Matter advocates for white victims of police violence, there is often an added class or disability element involved that makes the victim unpalatable for the critics. The roots of modern policing, in the US and elsewhere, are based wholly in the status quo with a focus against the other, leading to policies of misogyny, queer- and transphobia, anti-poor and working class sentiments and, of course, white supremacy.⁴⁷⁸ The main job of the police, or at least acts of policing, is to keep the populace from demanding too many rights or asking too many questions, whether by burning witches or squashing protest movements. As such, the modern police force is in part a continuation of the slave catchers of the 19th century.⁴⁷⁹ Black people were some of the original victims and that continues to this day, but they are not the only victims. As such, when someone who is not Black is shot or harmed by the police, that does not discount the white supremacist leanings of the police; it simply finds its way into another aspect of the anti-other sentiment that leads to white supremacy. To reiterate, when I mention white supremacy in this case, I am not talking about *just* white supremacy; it includes various sociopolitical and even religious elements, which are in turn influenced by various anti-other ideologies. Even when the victim is white, these political aspects are encompassed because of just how flexible they are.

There is also the narcissistic suggestion that protests should be *started* for white victims. Black Lives Matter protests are, almost unfortunately, an ongoing series of protests. This is

⁴⁷⁸ Michael A. Robinson, "Black Bodies on the Ground: Policing Disparities in the African American Community—An Analysis of Newsprint from January 1, 2015, Through December 31, 2015," in *Journal of Black Studies* 48 (2017), 553.

⁴⁷⁹ Alex S. Vitale, *The End of Policing* (London: Verso, 2017): 47.

because there seems to be no peace between instances of police officers murdering unarmed Black men and women. The reason that Black Lives Matter protests seem to be such lengthy affairs is because, in the last few years, there has been a new high-profile case every time the last case begins to wane. This is not to suggest that these cases are happening more frequently now, but rather that the cases are getting more attention, that the police officers committing these murders are becoming more brazen and that people are more likely to advocate for those who would previously be swept under the rug, so to speak. Previously, Black rights advocates would be more likely to support someone like Amadou Diallo—an unarmed Black man with no criminal past shot by police while returning home from work and attempting to show the police his identification—than someone like Rodney King—a similarly unarmed Black man, but with a criminal past, savagely beaten by police as he attempted to escape them with alcohol in his system.

In other words, Black rights advocacy previously bent in the direction of respectability. Even if it was out of necessity, those who could not be portrayed in white-friendly ways have always been hidden by advocates. This goes back to the civil rights era, when a 15-year-old pregnant girl by the name of Claudette Colvin was passed over as an icon for the movement because she was unmarried.⁴⁸⁰ Black Lives Matter is a revolutionary movement for many reasons, but one of them is the fact that they have no inclination towards respectability politics. *All* Black Lives Matter. It is with this in mind that it becomes obvious that these calls for Black Lives Matter to protest for white victims show themselves to be in bad faith. Because these calls would require Black Lives Matter to essentially leave and then come back! These protests are

⁴⁸⁰ Oliver Laughland, “Claudette Colvin: The Woman who Refused to Give Up Her Bus Seat – Nine Months Before Rosa Parks,” *The Guardian*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/feb/25/claudette-colvin-the-woman-who-refused-to-give-up-her-bus-seat-nine-months-before-rosa-parks> (accessed April 24, 2021).

practically constant and those calling for them to take place are either seeking out the absurd or (potentially intentionally) unaware that these protests are out there and can be joined in support of whoever one wishes to support. Of course, this would, in turn, suggest that the opposition actually cares about white victims.

Ultimately, white victims of police violence are yet another example of right-wing icons of outrage. Whereas Black victims are frequently criminalized—if they cannot be criminalized, they are still given the blame in a tragic accident,⁴⁸¹ such as in the case of Tamir White, whose death was blamed on the realistic aesthetics of his toy gun instead of the actions of his murderer—white victims tend to escape that, especially ones used by the opposition. However, they are also not necessarily victimized. They are instead used as proof of a paradoxical logic: there is no pandemic of police violence and, if there was, it would be against white people. This logic is owed to two elements: a misunderstanding of statistics and a willingness to accept white deaths in order to protect the police, in order to ensure that the status quo remains exactly where it is. This is also why reactionary forces tend to vilify the police when they stand in the way of their advancement toward fascism, both in theory with the rhetoric behind the second amendment being necessary for protection against the state and in practice with their violence against the Capitol police on January 6, 2021, to the point of creating the rallying cry of “defund the FBI,” in spite of their disapproval of “defund the police.”

⁴⁸¹ There are rare exceptions to this rule that do not necessitate much additional analysis, but a footnote is necessary for one specific case. David Dorn was a Black retired police officer who was shot while attempting to stop a robbery taking place concurrently with a Black Lives Matter protest in St. Louis in 2020. Despite not being shot by police and his killers being arrested soon thereafter, Dorn is yet another figure held up by reactionary opponents of Black Lives Matter as the correct way to be a victim of violence. Treated similarly to white victims of police violence, his name is abused as proof of Black Lives Matter’s hypocrisy, despite the absolute nonsensical nature of this argument. As such, it is important to point out that, while this opposition is definitely racist, they can make exceptions for ideological similarities, making a Black police officer’s life more valuable than a white ally of Black people (i.e. Heather Heyer).

The former is a simple to understand inaccuracy. White people are shot and killed by police officers in large numbers. There is no denial of this fact. They are killed at almost double the rate of Black people, in raw numbers.⁴⁸² This is where the oppositional reactionary mindset ends. They suggest that the fact that more white people than Black people are being shot by the police suggests that the central tenet of Black Lives Matter is faulty. However, it should also be recognized that white people make up over three-quarters of the American population.⁴⁸³ Despite their constant reference to the fact that Black people make up thirteen percent of the American population for their racist memes, the opposition is less than willing to realize that, when you make up a majority of a nation, you will also make up a majority of the victims of police violence. When these statistics are analyzed accurately, they show that Black Americans are three times more likely to die as a result of police violence than white Americans.⁴⁸⁴ Furthermore, Black children are six times more likely to die as a result of police violence than their white peers,⁴⁸⁵ which should absolutely be a point of concern.

Of course, that has never been the point. This idea that white people also die at the hands of police officers is just one of the many modern disinformational memes of the right-wing. Even former president Donald Trump, who referred to himself as the president of law and order, had this same response to the issue: when a reporter attempted to ask him a question about why Black people are so disproportionately killed by police officers, Trump flippantly responded “so are white people.”⁴⁸⁶ In this interview with Catherine Herridge, Trump, with the condescending

⁴⁸² Robinson, “Black Bodies on the Ground,” 561.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Gia M. Badolato et al., “Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Firearm-Related Pediatric Deaths Related to Legal Intervention,” in *Pediatrics* 146 (2020): 2.

⁴⁸⁶ Jeremy W. Peters, “Asked About Black Americans Killed by Police, Trump Says, ‘So Are White People,’” *New York Times*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/14/us/politics/trump-white-people-killed-by-police.html> (accessed April 23, 2021).

look that made him so popular with his supporters, repeats this same phrase three times, along with a remark that it is in fact *more* white people. Therein lies what should be a contradiction. The opposition to Black Lives Matter seemingly realize that there is a problem that must be dealt with. Police officers *are* killing people, but it is less important to focus governmental attention on the officers to stop them from killing people than it is to focus that attention on Black Lives Matter to stop them from talking about it. What should be a moment of cohesion against a common cause becomes a moment of further division, because, even under white supremacy, some white people are a necessary cost to ensure that that hegemonic ideal never changes, that Black people continue to live under fear. This is to say that white victims are never actually victims, in the eyes of the opposition, but rather mere weapons.

One of the most useful of these weapons has been Daniel Shaver. Shaver was shot and killed in Arizona by police officer Philip Brailsford in 2016.⁴⁸⁷ The police were called because Shaver was seen pointing a gun out of the window of his hotel room, a gun which later turned out to be a pellet gun. When the police arrived, Shaver was told to get on his stomach and crawl toward the officer. After being given some contradictory commands, a small, seemingly unintentional movement led to Shaver being shot five times, killing him almost instantly. This murder was also captured on video, recorded by Brailsford's body-mounted camera. Brailsford's reasoning for shooting was later questioned because his rifle was engraved with the phrase "you're fucked," suggesting that he may have been more interested in the violence of policing than in any altruistic aspect. The video was only released in its entirety after Brailsford was found not guilty of murdering Shaver.

⁴⁸⁷ Wesley Lowery, "Graphic Video Shows Daniel Shaver Sobbing and Begging Officer for His Life Before 2016 Shooting," *The Washington Post*, December 8, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/12/08/graphic-video-shows-daniel-shaver-sobbing-and-begging-officer-for-his-life-before-2016-shooting/> (accessed July 13, 2022).

At its root, this story reads exactly like most of the murders of Black people by police officers. Shaver was placed in the position he was in by faulty information, he was effectively unarmed, he was brought face to face with a violent officer without the necessary empathy required for such an incident, he was murdered for not following instructions that were impossible to follow and his death was captured on video that was hidden until it could no longer harm his murderer's appeal, leading to him getting away with murder. And yet, despite the analogous situations and white sympathy for Shaver, this incident did not lead to a greater understanding of Black Lives Matter. Instead, Shaver became a weaponized tool to further dismiss Black Lives Matter. The normal oppositional crowd gave into their usual cognitive dissonance, supporting Shaver and the police at the same time, giving into the Trumpian rhetoric of "white people are shot by the police too," when questioned about their opposition to the beliefs of Black Lives Matter.

What is more problematic is actually Shaver's weaponization toward the moderate white crowds. This is where a differentiation needs to be made between non-racist and anti-racist. As many prominent race theorists point out, it is no longer enough to be merely non-racist; anti-racism should now be the default position, not just a willingness to not have reactionary politics, but to also be willing to speak out against others with those politics. The white moderate in this situation, who perhaps believes that Black lives matter, but refuses to support Black Lives Matter—note the capitalization—is of no use to this struggle and is, in cases like this, even somewhat dangerous. The Shaver video did not do much to reinforce the dangers of police violence—those who were aware stayed aware and those who were willfully unaware remained the same as well—but it did do a great deal of damage to the cause of Black Lives Matter by re-racializing the issue at hand. It may well have been unintentional, but as soon as the video

reached the public consciousness, it became synonymous with police violence, pushing the Black victims to the edge of the discussion on online forums of discussion, such as Reddit. What was strangely insidious about this shift was the moderate nature of the group that caused it. It was not the infamous racists of Reddit screaming into the ether, but rather empathetic people who genuinely felt bad for Shaver. This led to him becoming the topic of discussion whenever police violence was approached, questions of police violence being responded to with allusions to Shaver or his video. Obviously, there are many other individuals who became victims of very similar scenarios. These people, whose unfair deaths were recorded, were mostly Black people, but there have also been cases of similar incidents involving Latinos and even white people, although they were frequently homeless or neurodivergent. This is to say that Shaver was one of the first, if not the first, recorded victims who was a neurotypical, lower-middle class white man, someone that the average user of a forum like Reddit could relate to.

This may ultimately be the reason, whether advertent or not, why Shaver became such an icon of outrage in a digital space. Things become a bit more dangerous when one considers the reasoning behind martyring Shaver instead of a Black victim. Often, Shaver is pointed to as an innocent victim. Even people who do not intentionally criminalize Black victims of police violence will look for a reason to justify, if not their deaths, then at least the response of the police to their presence. These responses may take the form of “the police had reason to fear for their safety” (Michael Brown was a menacing figure), “the police had no way to know there was no danger” (Tamir Rice’s gun looked real), “the police were misinformed” (John Crawford was killed because of an inaccurate 911 call), or “they made a sudden movement” (Philando Castile made a move for his gun). These responses will always be used to attempt to explain why a Black person had to die; victim-blaming will be the first response. As for Shaver, his death was

similarly a result of all four of these factors: someone called 911 and said that he had been waving a gun out of the window, leading to police arriving to find an inebriated man. When he was being arrested, he reached towards his waistband to pull up his falling pants, when he was shot and killed. However, none of that becomes a necessary part of the discussion. For the white moderate, the only thing that is important in that scenario *is* that scenario, what can be seen without any added context, a benefit not afforded to the Black victim.

Furthermore, the Black victim's criminal record becomes a necessary topic of discussion as well. The white supremacist hegemony of American society has led to Black Americans having criminal records at an alarming rate, allowing for their further criminalization, but the fact that this seems to be the first question that gets asked every time is certainly alarming. Even when the individual is too young to be institutionally criminalized, evidence of teenage rebellion can be used against them if need be. In this sense, the social media profile has replaced the criminal record. For teenagers who have not yet been criminalized, the next best thing is the image of a teenager being a teenager: looking like hoodlums and making obscene gestures, a part of coming-of-age, becomes proof that the dead, non-criminal child still had it coming and that the only thing that kept them from becoming criminals was the cessation of their lives. Meanwhile, nothing is known about Shaver's personal life. This is not to say that that is inappropriate or wrong; in fact, that is exactly how it should be. It is just strange that this needs to be said.

One final note needs to be made here on the idea of oppositional concern trolling. When all else fails, these people will go into the territory of the absurd: they will point to any issue, no matter how irrelevant, and ask why Black Lives Matter does not help with that or stop that or otherwise interact with that. This is the death rattle of a lack of further arguments. The reason

that the opposition reaches this level is because their purpose has never been to argue, but to shut down. The point is not that this position is wrong or faulty or in need of correction, but rather that they do not like that position and wish for Black Lives Matter to stop questioning the status quo because it makes them uncomfortable. They do not appreciate their racism being exposed and questioned. Of course, these arguments are just one line of attack. There is another, much more sinister line of attack, which involves reappropriating Black Lives Matter talking points to use them against the movement in a mocking manner. Where the arguments had a notion of (false) intellectualism to them, these reappropriations are often bald-faced hateful rhetoric, meant to not just shut down the conversation, but dehumanize the racial side in the process.

Which Lives Truly Matter: Reappropriation of Talking Points

When changing the conversation does not quite work out, the last refuge of the reactionary becomes mockery. This mockery can be blatant or latent—in the sense that it can appear as mockery or as a real heartfelt sentiment—but what ultimately matters is that it has to be obvious that the position of Black Lives Matter is being referenced. This is, more often than not, expressed by referencing an idea put forth by those one is mocking. This can take the form of mocking their slogans, their phrasing or even the catalyst for the formation of their group. However, it is not often enough to simply mock them in an insulting way; for the mockery to have any real effect, it must appear to be a genuine counter-cause. This is a common tactic for the digital far right, making frequent less-than-successful attempts to disguise their bigotry as social justice. For example, the want and struggle to create a white ethno-state is not about white supremacy, but rather an attempt to stop white genocide! While these sentiments are not particularly nuanced, it is the response that gets them their support. After all, white genocide, a completely fabricated concept, does sound like a bad thing. As such, if someone speaks out

against those attempting to stop white genocide, that person would appear to support white genocide. This is a borderline nonsensical argument, but the online fight for hearts and minds has little space for nuance.

The most obvious tools of mockery from the Black Lives Matter opposition are reactionary hashtags, the most used one of them being All Lives Matter. All Lives Matter is the original reactionary hashtag, appearing almost as soon as Black Lives Matter did. All Lives Matter is a perfect example of a disingenuous statement that was created solely to combat Black Lives Matter, while also appearing genuine. The statement All Lives Matter had never been a common statement, only ever reaching any real prominence after Black Lives Matter became a common statement. Furthermore, there is no real activist element to All Lives Matter: they are not a group, they do not protest—only counterprotest—and they have no mission statement other than contesting the statement Black Lives Matter. In fact, a recent study has shown that the All Lives Matter hashtag on Twitter does not seem to appear in discussions of “all lives,” appearing almost exclusively during discussions of Black lives.⁴⁸⁸ The study shows that, outside of a 2015 mass shooting that left three Muslim individuals dead, the majority of All Lives Matter hashtags are associated with events where Black individuals were killed. This just goes to show that All Lives Matter is meant as a way to shut discussion down, serving no positive purpose.⁴⁸⁹

All Lives Matter is also used as a method of erasure. This phrasing was brought about as a disingenuous response to the suggestion that Black Lives Matter means that other lives do not. This has been addressed and debunked repeatedly within the last decade, but, of course, there is no misunderstanding, just manufactured ignorance to allow for further arguments. This has even

⁴⁸⁸ Ryan J. Gallagher et al., “Divergent Discourse Between Protests and Counter-protests: #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter,” in *PLoS ONE* 13 (2018), 18.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

led to Black Lives Matter supporters to use new phrasing, such as “not all lives can matter until Black Lives Matter.” This phrasing points out that those who claim that Black lives are covered by all lives should in turn understand that Black lives should be allowed a spotlight; after all, the concern that brought about the phrase was about Black lives. However, that self-victimization rears its head once again, refusing to allow the discussion to be about an other, insisting on their place within the discussion⁴⁹⁰. Interestingly enough, visually speaking, All Lives Matter works the opposite way of how its proponents claim it does—and, arguably, exactly the way they want it to work.

Black Lives Matter was made to be exploitable, which it to say it was always meant to be visual, something that could be copied and proliferated around both the physical and digital worlds. As such, there is an ever-present graffiti element to the hashtag. What is interesting about this graffiti is just how they are presented. In a tagging war between rival graffiti artists, one would paint over the work of the other to show dominance, so to speak. However, this is not a graffiti war between two competitors, but rather portrayed as a disagreement on a base level between two activist groups. Yet, the most common type of All Lives Matter graffiti sees the word Black in Black Lives Matter graffiti crossed out to be replaced with All. I have personally seen this several times, but it is also a fairly well-documented phenomenon.⁴⁹¹ Just like with the hashtag use before it, All Lives Matter cannot get its point across independently, because there is no real point, just a reactionary point. In order for All Lives Matter to speak, Black Lives Matter

⁴⁹⁰ I would like to take a moment and point out that this is not an issue in all replacements of the word Black in the statement Black Lives Matter, but rather only when the replacement is meant as a reactionary form of erasure. As such, I personally see nothing wrong with the additional form of usage of the lives matter statement, when it is used for indigenous people or trans people or any people whose lives are actually in systemic danger. As such, alterations of the phrase are not black and white and must often be looked at on a case-by-case basis.

⁴⁹¹ Victor Luckerson, “The Defacement and Destruction of Black Lives Matter Murals,” *The New Yorker*, November 19, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/us-journal/the-defacement-and-destruction-of-black-lives-matter-murals> (accessed May 3, 2021).

needs to speak first. And their speech must be erased, redacted or otherwise bowdlerized in order for All Lives Matter to get their point across. However, since All Lives Matter covers more ground, in theory, it is seen as beyond reproach, instead of what it really is, a tool for racists. And sometimes, the racists get even bolder with it.

The intention behind All Lives Matter has always been fairly obvious; it is a dog-whistle for reactionary, white supremacist ideology. The fact that it is the most common response to Black Lives Matter is enough to confirm that. It has always been a dog-whistle for the sorts of things that self-aware racists know they cannot get away with. As such, they will say All Lives Matter instead of something like White Lives Matter, because they recognize the optics of the situation. They try to portray Black Lives Matter as racist. If Black Lives Matter is racist, then any race-based colour in that position would be racist. They correct this by saying All Lives Matter, but it is pretty obvious what that means. It becomes more obvious when it is seen in action, outside of a realm of protest or activism.

A video went viral on the social media app TikTok in mid-2020; this video was later uploaded to YouTube by user ICantBreathe under the title “Church Members Call Police on Black Woman Sitting on Grass! “All Lives Matter” (California).” This video was recorded by a Black woman sitting and quietly reading in front of a church: it should be noted that there was no apparent ulterior motive to her actions. As she sat, several white members of this church walked out and demanded that she leave. The video shows one of the men nailing a no trespassing sign to a nearby tree to try to force her to leave. As they argue about whether she has the right to sit outside a church, the man nailing the sign responds, without provocation, “All Lives Matter.” While it could be argued that something was edited out before this point, the woman responds that she said nothing about lives and the man does not contradict her. As such, the term takes on

a blatantly racist bent, as the man inadvertently confirms that she was being asked to leave because she is Black. Of course, the argument from the opposition always hinges on semantics. They will suggest that there is nothing racist about the phrase, but its usage and lingual value suggest otherwise. Of course, this may well be the least offensive of the response statements.

Blue Lives Matter gets to the heart of the argument. Where All Lives Matter took on a position of neutrality, Blue Lives Matter takes on a direct oppositional position, specifically supporting the enemy, so to speak, of the movement. Similarly, references to Blue Lives Matter started soon after Black Lives Matter, but not as a general response. The first references began to appear in 2014, after two (racialized) NYPD police officers were shot and killed by a Black man, who later killed himself.⁴⁹² The shooter, Ismaaiyl Brinsley, had stated that these killings were meant as a retaliation for the deaths of Black men at the hands of police officers.⁴⁹³ What started as a reactionary hashtag used by the police soon became yet another general response to Black people and the Black Lives Matter movement, despite the fact that police officers have shown themselves to be a much bigger threat to Black people than the other way around. It should also be noted that, just as King mentioned earlier in regards to the knockout game, this shooting and movement led to the creation of new legislation in Louisiana that made it a hate crime to target police officers,⁴⁹⁴ because, again, those in power can make legislation to protect themselves against the powerless.

⁴⁹² Benjamin Mueller and Al Baker, “2 N.Y.P.D. Officers Killed in Brooklyn Ambush; Suspect Commits Suicide,” *New York Times*, December 20, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/21/nyregion/two-police-officers-shot-in-their-patrol-car-in-brooklyn.html> (accessed April 24, 2021).

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁴ Dana Farrington, “In Louisiana, It’s Now a Hate Crime to Target Police Officers,” *NPR*, May 26, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/05/26/479634098/in-louisiana-its-now-a-hate-crime-to-target-police-officers> (accessed April 24, 2021).

Whereas All Lives Matter had some plausible deniability, Blue Lives Matter does not attempt to hide its racist appeal. Moving away from a call for equality and into a cheer for those who are oppressing your cause, Blue Lives Matter is something of a celebration of those who have brought about the protests. Blue Lives Matter's insertion into the conversation happened quite naturally, with the introduction of two recognizable symbols: the thin blue line flag—a black and white American flag with a blue stripe replacing one of the white stripes⁴⁹⁵—and the reappropriation of the logo for Marvel's Punisher character.⁴⁹⁶ The latter is an egregious example of violent intent, as the Punisher is a vigilante character who takes the law into his own hands—although the current creators of the Punisher comics have disavowed this connection.⁴⁹⁷ The former is a much more innocuous, yet harmful symbol, as it is imbued with plausible deniability. While the flag's usage surged after the Ferguson protests in 2014, many still insist that it is not part of a racist campaign and merely solidarity with one occupation; Andrew Jacob, the president of Thin Blue Line USA and the seller of many of these flags and similarly emblazoned products, goes so far as to say that the flag is not a response to Black Lives Matter, while also stating that he first saw the image after the Ferguson protests led to an increase in pro-police imagery online.⁴⁹⁸ This juxtaposition makes the connection blatantly clear and yet those who partake in this rhetoric refuse to admit it. It becomes even more blatant once it becomes apparent that this phrasing was created after just one incident of violence and that, despite the statistical lack of further incidents—incidents of violence against police officers have occurred since, but not at the

⁴⁹⁵ This flag can be seen at

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c0/Thin_Blue_Line_Flag_%28United_States%29.svg.

⁴⁹⁶ One such reappropriation of the symbol can be seen at <https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/1512288/punisher.jpg>.

⁴⁹⁷ Daniel Avery, "Marvel's the Punisher Lays the Beatdown on Cops Who Use His Skull Symbol for 'Blue Lives Matter' Movement," *Newsweek*, July 15, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/punisher-police-blue-lives-matter-skull-logo-1449272> (accessed August 19, 2022).

⁴⁹⁸ Maurice Chamamah and Cary Aspinwall, "The Short, Fraught History of the 'Thin Blue Line' American Flag," *The Marshall Project*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/06/08/the-short-fraught-history-of-the-thin-blue-line-american-flag> (accessed August 4, 2022).

high rate of incidents of violence against Black people by police officers—the phrase is still a part of the social vernacular. Furthermore, Google searches of the phrase always increase during times of Black Lives Matter protest, spiking in searches after the protests that followed the deaths of Philando Castile and George Floyd.⁴⁹⁹ This is because Black people and the threatening feeling that comes from the Black body are still seen as dangerous, even to the armed police force. In other words, even without any evidence, those who use the phrase believe that it feels true, that the “Blue” are in danger at the hands of Black individuals.

Of course, then one must ask why there is no concern about the colour blue prefacing the idea of lives mattering, when Black led to so many arguments and the answer is obvious: because it was never about a colour or a group of people or anything like that; it has always been about Black people and the struggle against agreeing with their concerns. Blue people do not exist, nor is being a police officer an oppressed class. A police officer can take off their uniform, but a Black person cannot take off their skin colour. However, without introducing needless categorizations and arguing over the usage of certain words or phrases, the opposition to Black Lives Matter would have to admit that their issue is with the phrase, that they do not truly believe that Black people’s lives matter. Instead, they will simply pick a new path to walk down, suggesting that they are there to speak for the voiceless or the *real* victims or whatever else allows them to be racist without the label.

While All and Blue are the main opposition phrases, others have attempted to bring about similar phrasing. There are two that I wish to focus on quickly, due to their unique purposes, despite their lack of widespread usage: these would be No Lives Matter and Cannon’s Life Matters. First, No Lives Matter is a failed attempt at edgy commentary, an attempt to bring

⁴⁹⁹ The spikes can be seen here: <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2013-08-01%202022-08-21&geo=US&q=blue%20lives%20matter>.

misanthropic nihilism into an argument that does not require it, as there is already a sense of helplessness in the discussion. The idea behind No Lives Matter, an exclusively online phrase, is that no one truly matters in the grand scheme of things, but it uses this nihilistic idea purely as a means to call for the end of the conversation, attempting in equal parts to hide its racist intentions in an “I hate everybody equally” style rhetoric—rhetoric which seems to be almost exclusive to racists—and not hide its racist intentions, often due to the sorts of spaces it is posted in, being frequently seen in online spaces which have a young, white and male audience and which house plenty of white supremacist rhetoric. It also fails to hide its racist intentions in the same way the others do, by being in response to Black Lives Matter instead of, say, All Lives Matter. This rhetoric similarly seems to only find its way into conversations about Black lives, showing that its speaker is more willing to include Black people in none than in all.

Cannon (Hinnant)’s Life Matters is not a particularly widespread phenomenon, but it is a fascinating one as a study of intention. After the death of Hinnant, a local painted the phrase Cannon’s Life Matters in the middle of a street, refusing to indicate where to protect it.⁵⁰⁰ At its core, this statement is a true, sincere statement. In fact, most of the preceding statements are true: no one would suggest that some lives do not matter. In fact, the point of Black Lives Matter has always been that *all* Black lives should be seen as important, including the poor and destitute, the types of people whose lives are not seen as particularly valuable within the current understanding of the status quo. However, with the political state of the zeitgeist, any statement of lives mattering includes a political bent. Would Cannon’s life have mattered to the creator of the painting if Cannon’s murderer was not Black? What could have been a heartfelt response to a

⁵⁰⁰ “Cannon’s Life Matters: Lee County Mural Honors 5-year-old Wilson Boy Shot and Killed While Riding Bike,” *ABC11*, August 16, 2020, <https://abc11.com/cannon-hinnant-cannons-life-matters-cannons-lee-county/6373372/> (accessed April 22, 2021).

senseless crime ultimately becomes a reactionary political statement, owing to the appropriation of a civil rights statement and the conflation of each and every Black criminal with Black Lives Matter. Furthermore, the appropriation of Black Lives Matter would suggest a similarity to their cause, but, again, the individual who murdered Hinnant and an accomplice were arrested soon after the crime. In turn, this child's memorial, just like the child's death before it, becomes exploited as yet another icon of outrage, meant solely to get a racist point across, under the guise of empathy. This is not the bottom of the barrel, however, because this appropriation goes beyond the slogans and into mockery of facts and, even more deplorably, of victims.

This is ultimately very similar to a more recent reappropriation that occurred not to (directly) mock Black people, but to mourn a right-wing individual. Ashli Babbitt was a white woman who was shot and killed by a Capitol police officer during the capitol insurrection in early 2021. Her treatment after her death became a fascinating example of the double standard of police shooting victims, as her actions before being shot and her criminal history were completely ignored by reactionaries, because of her political beliefs.⁵⁰¹ Upon her death, Trump supporters began to use the hashtag Say Her Name. This hashtag was designed to remember Black women killed at the hands of police officers, such as Sandra Bland and Breonna Taylor.⁵⁰² It is ultimately quite telling that this hashtag began being coopted before anyone even knew the name of the deceased.⁵⁰³ However, despite not being fully sincere—why else would they use a well-known hashtag with a well-known origin—it could be argued that it was used for genuine

⁵⁰¹ Michael Biesecker, "Ashli Babbitt a Martyr? Her Past Tells a More Complex Story," *AP News*, January 3, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/ashli-babbitt-capitol-siege-a15c7e52a04d932972b7a284c7a8f7df> (accessed August 14, 2022).

⁵⁰² Meghan Roos, "'Say Her Name' Used to Memorialize Ashli Babbitt Draws Backlash Online over Phrase's Origin," *Newsweek*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/say-her-name-used-memorialize-ashli-babbitt-draws-backlash-online-over-phrases-origin-1559867> (accessed August 14, 2022).

⁵⁰³ Anne Branigin, "MAGA is Trying to Co-opt #SayHerName. It's a 'Slap in the Face,' Black Women Say," *The Lily*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.thelily.com/maga-is-trying-to-co-opt-sayhername-its-a-slap-in-the-face-black-women-say/> (accessed August 14, 2022).

mourning. The hashtag was frequently accompanied with characterizations of Babbitt's death as murder "in cold blood,"⁵⁰⁴ completely ignoring her own culpability in her death, a culpability that reactionaries always attribute to the victim of police shootings when the victim is Black—this is further complicated by the fact that the officer who killed Babbitt, Michael Byrd, is a Black man. As such, there are two possible scenarios: either these individuals are intentionally using this hashtag to mock the murdered Black women and in turn confirming their side's criminality or they are suggesting Babbitt's innocence and in turn suggesting that, as white individuals, there is no situation wherein they would be criminal. Answering this question would shed light on what the opposition truly believes.

The opposition's mockery up until this point has been at least partially argumentative. Even as the trolling tactics are increased with the competing hashtag campaigns, there is still a visible sense of political discussion. All of that goes out the window with the following mockery, mockery meant solely to insult. These appropriated phrases are not meant to stoke conversation, but to harm the characters of the protestors, of the victims and of anyone who sees them. However, they are also meant to change the narrative for their own side. Online, if a lie is repeated frequently enough, it becomes true and the digital right-wing have absolutely mastered this trick.

Some of their attacks come at the expense of the protestors and the mainstream media coverage of their activities. The opposition does not disbelieve everything they see in the mainstream media, but they do disbelieve everything that disagrees with them. For example, CNN spent much of the protests covering riots and destruction, but they also reported that the protests were "mostly peaceful." This phrase, mostly peaceful, became an object of mockery

⁵⁰⁴ Roos, "'Say Her Name' Used to Memorialize Ashli Babbitt Draws Backlash Online over Phrase's Origin."

because CNN is often seen by the right-wing as an untrustworthy “fake news” source. However, the videos of destruction recorded by CNN are taken unquestioningly. As such, it becomes apparent that there is no consistency to their beliefs, further proving the trolling tendencies therein. So, as they continue to speak about Black Lives Matter “burning down entire cities” without repercussion, the mostly peaceful protests become an object of further mockery, despite the fact that there is evidence that the vast majority of the Black Lives Matter protests in the US have been peaceful. How these falsehoods are confirmed is the same way other falsehoods are confirmed: lies and conflation. In order to provide proof of the violence of Black Lives Matter, every Black person needs to become Black Lives Matter. If someone nearby commits a crime or a Black person anywhere hurts someone, that is used as indisputable proof that Black Lives Matter is a violent group. These conflations have even turned Black Lives Matter and Antifa—an unrelated group of individuals who believe in anti-fascism who may gather independently of one another to protest right-wing gatherings—into one major “terrorist” group, because consolidating all of one’s enemies into one major enemy makes the indoctrination even simpler.

Then there are the anti-victim phrases. In 2020, Ahmaud Arbery, an unarmed Black man, was out jogging when he was accosted by three white men in a pickup truck. They had been pursuing him for a while and when he confronted them, one of them, Gregory McMichael, murdered him with a shotgun.⁵⁰⁵ Arbery had done nothing wrong and his death was recorded by his murderers. The video only depicts the final moments of the confrontation when Arbery, after becoming frustrated by the stalking and harassment from his pursuers, approached them and was shot after a short struggle. Despite this, it took the police over two months to arrest the three men; it was later revealed that the shooter was a former police officer who had previously

⁵⁰⁵ “Ahmaud Arbery: What Do We Know About the Case?” *BBC News*, June 5, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52623151> (accessed June 1, 2021).

investigated Arbery on a shoplifting case.⁵⁰⁶ This should be an obvious case: a Black man who was out jogging was murdered by a white man who had been harassing him and with whom he had previous interactions. However, since Arbery was Black, this case fit into the usual Black Lives Matter rhetoric for the opposition. Surely, Arbery had to be guilty. Thus began the process of looking for evidence to prove preconceived notions. After attempting to blame Arbery for “attacking” his eventual murderer,⁵⁰⁷ the opposition received two bits of evidence that they could use: first, Arbery had a previous criminal record and second, he had stopped to look at a building site.⁵⁰⁸

This immediately turned the story into a lie that could be repeated until it became true, that Arbery was looking to steal from a building site and that McMichael had shot him to stop that theft. In this twisted notion, the act of robbery is more immoral than murder. Once this story became gospel, conversations on Arbery began to be sidelined until the next murder victim replaced him. However, Arbery’s case did leave one reference for the right-wing vernacular, that of the jogger. Just as mostly peaceful protests were used to mock the protestors, the term jogger was used to mock the victims. It was not the only term—a common term is “dindu nuffin,” a term that mocks the idea that these victims are innocent while also mocking the speech of Black people—but it is very telling. Similar to the protestors, this is a result of taking the term used by the mainstream media and using it as a mockery, but it almost feels like a public domain phrase. There is nothing particularly racial about the jogger terminology, but when the word comes up in discussion, it is extremely obvious what is meant. It suggests both a lie coming from a truth (he was not jogging, he was committing a crime) and a truth coming from a lie (the criminality of the

⁵⁰⁶ “Ahmaud Arbery: What Do We Know About the Case?” *BBC News*.

⁵⁰⁷ A common right-wing tactic in these scenarios is blaming the victim for being the aggressor by completely ignoring the context. As such, when the eventual victim fights back, it is not seen as self-defense, but rather unwarranted aggression, harkening back to the image of an ultraviolent Black man.

⁵⁰⁸ “Ahmaud Arbery: What Do We Know About the Case?” *BBC News*.

Black body). There are other phrases that suggest similar ideas, such as aspiring rapper, but what is interesting about the term jogger is how stripped of any racial stereotyping it is. While aspiring rapper suggests a certain racial understanding, with rap being a part of an overwhelmingly Black hip-hop culture, the jogger refers back to a single individual. This is how pervasive this terminology can be. Of course, when one is determined to criminalize Blackness, that epidermalization or BLMization will inevitably lead to whatever conclusion that person requires. This mockery can work the other way as well.

However, it is not just random right-wing voices that are reappropriating these terms and mocking these victims. The perpetrators themselves, American police officers, are getting into the act, their identity not leaving any pretense that they are not intentionally mocking victims. Soon after the choking death of Eric Garner in New York, NYPD supporters were photographed wearing shirts inscribed with the phrase “I can breathe,”⁵⁰⁹ mocking the last words of Garner and one of the cries of Black Lives Matter. After the death of George Floyd, a corrections officer in New Jersey was fired for mockingly imitating the act that killed Floyd, kneeling on a friend’s neck.⁵¹⁰ In Colorado, three police officers were fired after a smiling photo of them imitating a chokehold surfaced after a chokehold killed Elijah McClain.⁵¹¹ There are three immediate takeaways from this: 1. despite the firings, this is a police culture issue, 2. policing encourages officers to act this way and, in a society such as this, 3. might is right, meaning that those with

⁵⁰⁹ Kellan Howell, “I Can Breathe – Thanks to the NYPD’ Shirts Flood Pro-Police NYC Rally,” *The Washington Times*, December 20, 2014, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/dec/20/i-can-breathe-thanks-to-the-nypd-shirts-flood-pro/> (accessed June 2, 2021).

⁵¹⁰ Janelle Griffith, “White N.J. Corrections Officer Caught on Camera Mocking George Floyd’s Death Could Lose Job,” *NBC News*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/white-n-j-corrections-officer-caught-camera-mocking-george-floyd-n1232241> (accessed June 2, 2021).

⁵¹¹ “Colorado Officers, Fired Over Photos Re-enacting Chokehold Used on Elijah McClain, Not Reinstated,” *CBC News*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/colorado-officers-photos-elijah-mcclain-not-reinstated-1.5907708> (accessed June 2, 2021).

the power will continue to lack empathy for these victims, because it is the hegemonic position of this society.

When the victims are so effectively criminalized that their murderers can mock them without issue, something is very wrong in the policing system. Photo and video evidence was once upheld as the ultimate equalizer, but years of nothingness has shown that that is simply not true.⁵¹² Not only does recorded evidence not bring any accountability for the police, even evidence that they themselves created can only get them fired at the worst. Furthermore, the rules against speaking ill of the dead simply do not seem to apply when the dead are Black bodies. Is it any wonder then that the opposition to Black Lives Matter has such a great amount of ammo? They can claim to be victimized, while showing that, to them, Black lives really do not matter. They can mock the dead and still demand respect for their own martyrs. And worst of all, they can lie so frequently that their lies become national news. So, despite what the grifters of the right-wing may suggest, their lies are verifiable lies and what is even worse is that they know that their lies are lies. So, what is the truth?

Where BLM is: Activism and Countering Lies

Black Lives Matter may have a purpose and activist roots, but as far as the opposition is concerned, it is just another in a long line of civil rights organizations against which they must speak. Each new civil rights struggle is disparaged in a two-pronged attack, first questioning its motives and methods and then comparing it unfavourably with a movement that came before it. As such, Black Lives Matter is disparaged by suggesting that they do not actually support what they claim. Their intentions are suggested to be violent and destructive and their purposes are

⁵¹² Ethan Zuckerman, "Why Filming Police Violence Has Done Nothing to Stop It," *MIT Technology Review*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/06/03/1002587/sousveillance-george-floyd-police-body-cams/> (accessed May 12, 2021).

painted as divisive and bigoted. They will further these characterizations by incorporating unrelated events into the conversation. They will then point out how these methods would not be appreciated by, for example, Martin Luther King Jr, which they will do by mischaracterizing his beliefs, which similarly made him a hated figure in his time, repeating the cycle. Despite the fact that these characterizations are false, those who are looking for evidence to support their own false positions will in turn spread these falsehoods and further bolster their position.

Once these positions are created and backed, they can be used as a base for further propaganda and trolling, such as questioning the mission and purpose of Black Lives Matter, questioning their slogan or even questioning the very facts put forth by the news in relation to the organization. As such, the truth must struggle against intentional falsehoods in the zeitgeist. This is why it becomes necessary to reiterate the truth of what Black Lives Matter does and what it does not purport to do. First of all, Black Lives Matter's core message is one against police violence and for holding those who commit acts of police violence against Black people responsible. They will support any Black person who is murdered by a police officer, unfazed by their criminal history or poverty. There is no hypocrisy to this statement and them not protesting for a police officer or someone who was hurt by a Black person or protesting for a Black person who once hurt a Black person does not in any way go against their mission statement.

Furthermore, they are not a group dedicated to ending all interpersonal conflict, oppression or any other vague, far-reaching concept that their opposition has decided they should be against. One of the biggest issues that the opposition claims to have with Black Lives Matter is that they are a charity that collects money, but that they do not help their community with this money. This argument has come up a lot lately in the mainstream media with the discovery of

the organization's recent purchases of million dollar properties⁵¹³ and other assets,⁵¹⁴ an argument that has even managed to turn some centrist and liberal sympathizers against them,⁵¹⁵ further bolstering right-wing critiques, with some of their most fervent critics hanging on to the characterization of the donated money as “white guilt money”⁵¹⁶ and the admittance that the properties have been used for “parties.”⁵¹⁷ While there are valid criticisms to be made of these purchases, the mainstream and reactionary media are not interested in such things, instead using these cases to attack the entirety of the organization's charitable activities—or charitable activities in general⁵¹⁸—either intentionally or less-than-intentionally equating these purchases wholly as their charity. Once again, this is a case of intentionally ill-informed people creating information that sounds like it could be accurate—again, Black Lives Matter is an anti-police violence organization and them not helping some unrelated cause would be as normal as a heart health charity not helping in asthma research—which they can then spread until it becomes a fact. However, even this argument is easily debunked. Black Lives Matter's mission is to ensure a world where Black people do not have to fear police violence. This is not a single issue: this involves a total systemic rehaul that would create a new world whose by-products would include Black people no longer fearing police violence.

⁵¹³ Randi Richardson and Claretta Bellamy, “‘Great Sign’ or ‘Very Unfortunate’? Black Lives Matter Supporters Split over \$6M Purchase,” *NBC News*, April 26, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/great-sign-unfortunate-black-lives-matter-supporters-split-6m-purchase-rcna25650> (accessed August 12, 2022).

⁵¹⁴ Aaron Morrison, “AP Exclusive: Black Lives Matter Has \$42 Million in Assets,” *AP News*, May 17, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/government-and-politics-race-ethnicity-philanthropy-black-lives-matter-5bc4772e029da522036f8ad2a02990aa> (accessed August 14, 2022).

⁵¹⁵ Ailsa Chang, Jason Fuller and Kathryn Fox, “Secret \$6 Million Home has Allies and Critics Skeptical of BLM Foundation's Finances,” *NPR*, April 7, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/07/1091487910/blm-leaders-face-questions-after-allegedly-buying-a-mansion-with-donation-money> (accessed August 14, 2022).

⁵¹⁶ This statement is from the headline of a piece that appears in the British tabloid the *Daily Mail*, which can be found here: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10831013/BLM-founder-claims-mistakes-90M-white-guilt-money-weaponized-against-her.html>.

⁵¹⁷ This statement is from the headline of a piece that appears in the American tabloid the *New York Post*, which can be found here: <https://nypost.com/2022/05/09/blms-patrisse-cullors-admits-using-6m-mansion-for-parties>.

⁵¹⁸ A *New York Post* op-ed on these findings, very blatant in its examination of this topic, is entitled “Let the Apparent Insider Payouts of BLM be a Warning about *Any Cause*” (emphasis mine).

This is why Black Lives Matter, beyond funding their own organization, donates millions of dollars to charitable and political causes. According to their 2020 impact statement, Black Lives Matter raised ninety million dollars in donations in 2020.⁵¹⁹ Almost twenty-two million dollars of this money went to thirty different charities, placing further funding into organizations dealing with education, housing, aid for new immigrants, aid for trans and queer individuals within the community, prison abolition, justice system reform and even pan-African and Caribbean issues.⁵²⁰ All of these causes are obviously connected to the mission statement of Black Lives Matter, they will all aid the cause in massive ways and none of them are particularly controversial. What should also be noted here is the transparency of their spending, as even the purchases they were criticized for were from an IRS report and thus open information.

So, why are they downplayed? Because acknowledging them would be recognizing that one's oppositional position to Black Lives Matter has nothing to do with any ethical position and everything to do with racism. This is also why they will immediately lean back on one of the positions described in this chapter to change the topic and bring themselves back to a position that they can argue from. After all, even those who recognize that they hold a racist position—the trolls, for example—recognize that racism is an incorrect position. In other words, they recognize that they live in a society that will, at least openly, disavow any racism. This is why the dog-whistles are so important. Lee Atwater, the Republican political advisor of the likes of Ronald Reagan and George Bush, once pointed out this importance, talking about how important it is to get abstract with one's racism in a society that claims to be anti-racist.⁵²¹ Where racial

⁵¹⁹ Black Lives Matter. (2020). *2020 Impact Report*.

⁵²⁰ Ibid.

⁵²¹ The full quote (with racial slurs censored) is “You start out in 1954 by saying, ‘[n-word], [n-word], [n-word].’ By 1968, you can't say ‘[n-word]’—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states' rights and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract now, you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a by-product of them is Blacks get hurt worse than whites. And subconsciously

slurs were once perfectly fine, they began to backfire and hurt the cause in an age where Black liberation was becoming more socially accepted. In the 1960s, the slurs were replaced by terms like forced busing and states' rights. Eventually, you get to a point where the terminology is so abstract that it cannot be connected to bigotry because it hurts everyone, but it hurts Black people most. “‘We want to cut this’ is much more abstract than even the busing thing.”⁵²² Even if they are unaware, this is the exact same mission statement the reactionary opposition is working with today. They recognize that being openly racist will backfire on them in an argument, but “‘their cities are burning” and “Colton’s life matters” become important stand-ins for their racist thoughts.

Black Lives Matter is the latest in a long line of Black civil rights organizations and the opposition to it is more of the same. It just so happens that “slaves who do not want to be slaves are mentally ill” and “Martin Luther King is a communist” have now been replaced with “BLM is a terrorist organization” and “why don’t Black lives matter in Chicago.” When racism becomes a wrong, the racists have to get cleverer and create socially conscious, empathetic dog-whistles. This leads to more pretenses of responsiveness to, among other things, (counterintuitively) Black rights issues, law and order, anti-violence and the latest cause celebre. While some could call it callous that I would suggest that the concern with these issues is entirely performative, the American right-wing ensured that this pretense would be extremely visible in January 2021, when Trump supporters went to the Capitol and did everything that they have accused Black Lives Matter of doing, including making terroristic threats, killing police

maybe that is part of it. I'm not saying that. But I'm saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me—because obviously sitting around saying, ‘We want to cut this,’ is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than ‘[n-word], [n-word].’ So, any way you look at it, race is coming on the back-burner.”

⁵²² Rick Perlstein, “Exclusive: Lee Atwater’s Infamous 1981 Interview on the Southern Strategy,” *The Nation*, November 13, 2012, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/exclusive-lee-atwaters-infamous-1981-interview-southern-strategy/> (accessed January 14, 2022).

officers, destroying property and generally supporting violence. And it just so happened that the same people who had spent years criticizing Black Lives Matter, using many of the statements available in this chapter, changed their opinions when it was mostly people with their skin colour—and political and religious bent—who were the ones committing the acts they rejected earlier. In short, it becomes clear that the only thing that these people had a problem with was the first word of the slogan.

Chapter 10: The Discourse of Memes: Regressive Politics and Internet Culture

The Roots of a New Weapon

The meme is a comparatively new social medium, its modern usage going back a few decades at the most, and yet its appeal and political power should not be understated. The meme as a concept is an often ill-defined one. Fortunately, there are enough studies on memes that one can use to attempt to reach a consensus on what a meme is and what its purpose is. The term meme goes back to evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who first coined it as a shortening of the ancient Greek word, *mimema*, or “imitated thing.”⁵²³ Dawkins took the term meme, shortened similarly to the term gene, to be defined as an idea or behaviour or something similar that spreads within a culture from person to person.⁵²⁴ While originally meant for a genetic purpose, the idea of the meme began to become more common with the concurrent rise of market consciousness and internet culture, eventually becoming enveloped in what Bill Wasik refers to as viral culture, a culture based on new phenomena becoming relevant through a sudden culture, that is speedy, shameless, ephemeral and, perhaps most importantly, interactive.⁵²⁵ It needs to be pointed out that this analysis is being done around the meme as a phenomenon of internet culture. Even then, there are many different kinds of memes in internet culture, whether we consider viral videos or webcomics or even questions of what constitutes a meme as memes—after all, meme is autological, as the idea of a meme can be a meme itself. This study will be mainly focused on a specific object which has in turn come to be referred to as a meme without clarification. This is the object that was once known as an image macro, which went on to colloquially stand in for memes in general. An image macro version of a meme is fairly simple,

⁵²³ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989): 192.

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ Bill Wasik, *And Then There's This: How Stories Live and Die in Viral Culture* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009): 8.

often taking the form of an image with words written on it. They are designed to be easy to create and easy to spread.

This chapter will focus on the unusual phenomenon of the meme's transformation from underground internet esoterica to an important ephemeral political tool. This will be done by looking at the different varieties of memes that are employed by the right-wing in their opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement. These varieties can be differentiated as humorous memes, informative memes and appropriative memes.⁵²⁶ While these varieties of memes have many things in common, each of them has a series of identifiers and styles that can be used for vastly different reasons. With each covering a particular area, all of them together become an extremely effective weapon in the right's self-created attempt at a race war.

The meme introduces an oversimplified version of a topic, verifies said topic through nothing more than its visuality⁵²⁷ and disappears before anyone can fact check its claims. Of course, by the time it disappears, its "fact" begins to spread, as a meme does, gaining further veracity the more that it is repeated. While the meme has been weaponized by the right, the left has also begun to use it to its full potential, discovering its power. This is the central tenet of this chapter: the meme's format is an extremely important tool for reactionary politics, owing both to its simplicity, so as to be able to appeal to anyone regardless of education or sociopolitical class, and to its inability to be held accountable. Reactionary politics requires something that is ultimately the opposite of the imagery used for revolutionary means.

⁵²⁶ It is important to note that the first two designations, the humorous and informative, should be read firmly in quotation marks. The humour in the humorous memes is the extremely outdated, punching-down style of humour one would find in a 1950s joke book, while the informative memes are often full of intentional disinformation, used solely as a weapon to spread fake news.

⁵²⁷ Eryn J. Newman et al., "Nonprobative Photographs (or Words) Inflate Truthiness," in *Psychon Bull Rev* 19 (2012): 973.

The two most important questions from this point on are how is a meme used in a sociopolitical context and why are they so successful? First off, memes have all the abilities of images, with all of the trust that comes with them. As WJT Mitchell has insisted, the 21st century's main concern is that of imagery, as our communicative style and rhetoric have moved away from Richard Rorty's linguistic turn into the new pictorial turn,⁵²⁸ an idea also mentioned by Barbie Zelizer as a visual turn.⁵²⁹ It is with this turn that images become so much more important, not only to possess but also to understand. Nicholas Mirzoeff's study of the human right to look discusses the history of visibility, wherein both the objects of looking and the ability to look have been heavily controlled in one way or another.⁵³⁰ Visibility, as defined by Mirzoeff, refers to the authority behind the ability to look.⁵³¹ It is important to remember that this visibility has consistently been a part of the state ideology. It is under this visibility that the pictorial turn must operate: when there are a group of people in charge of visuals, the pictorial turn will benefit those people, just as the literate turn benefitted those who could afford higher education.

So, within this pictorial turn with everything that it entails, the image macro-style meme must empower the hegemonic status quo. This is done through a powerful two-pronged system of populism and trustworthiness. These are the two running themes through the majority of analysts working on memes as their objects of study. Carl Chen points to the power of memes coming from their inexpensive⁵³² and contagious⁵³³ nature, pointing to their lack of value, allowing them to be more easily exploited, replicated and shared and to their relatability as a

⁵²⁸ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): 11.

⁵²⁹ Barbie Zelizer, *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime* (London: Routledge, 2004): 115.

⁵³⁰ There is a difference between looking and seeing, in this case.

⁵³¹ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visibility* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011): 2.

⁵³² Carl Chen, "The Creation and Meaning of Internet Memes in 4chan: Popular Internet Culture in the Age of Online Digital Reproduction," in *Habitus* 3 (2012): 15.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, 7.

strong point.⁵³⁴ Patrick Davison is more interested in their speed of transmission and fidelity of form, leading to something that is honest despite being so easy to spread.⁵³⁵ He also notes the medium's constant evolution and yet anonymous nature.⁵³⁶ And Ryan Milner notes the meme's reliance on pop culture, remixing the works of others in a multimodal way.⁵³⁷ This can all be used to define the meme as a valueless—or perhaps even post-value—object whose purpose is to mutate and spread, while still holding a certain fidelity to the original, dependent on a reliable sense of understanding, gained through inside jokes and pop culture.

So, the next question becomes why are memes such popular and successful forms of discourse? There is plenty of evidence to suggest that memes are successful simply because they place images with words. After all, decades before the internet, Susan Sontag stated that “photos furnish evidence.”⁵³⁸ Despite the fact that photos can lie or misinform, viewers are more likely to assume that images are trustworthy and less likely to question them as inaccurate. In fact, a psychological study by Eryn Newman et al. found that, when individuals were shown statements with nonprobative images, they were ultimately more likely to believe them than when shown statements by themselves.⁵³⁹ This is because the very placement of an image, no matter its relation to the statement, rapidly inflates the sense of perceived truth.⁵⁴⁰ This also goes a long way in explaining why a statement with a vaguely related image would be more likely to be believed as truth than questioned, because an image suggests evidence and evidence suggests truth. Another related reason why memes work is because, in the words of Andreu Casas and

⁵³⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁵³⁵ Patrick Davison, “The Language of Internet Memes,” in *The Social Media Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 122.

⁵³⁶ Ibid., 127.

⁵³⁷ Ryan M. Milner, “Pop Polyvocality: Internet Memes, Public Participation and the Occupy Wall Street Movement,” in *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 2357.

⁵³⁸ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1977): 5.

⁵³⁹ Newman et al., “Nonprobative Photographs (or Words) Inflate Truthiness,” 973.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid.

Nora Williams, images mobilize because they trigger emotions.⁵⁴¹ Their study of tweeted images of Black Lives Matter protests found that tweets with imagery tended to be retweeted and interacted with far more frequently than those that were text only, especially when those images evoked feelings of anger, enthusiasm and fear.⁵⁴²

Heidi Huntington points out that memes are a perfect tool for the spread of subversive ideas, allowing an individual to make their thoughts known to a mass audience without fear of governmental or social retribution, owing to the meme's inherent anonymity.⁵⁴³ And, if enough of these anonymous subversive memes are released at one time, it becomes difficult to stop the rhetoric from being spread. This also allows for a populist notion behind the memes,⁵⁴⁴ as they will be spread by the people. Unfortunately, a lot of this populist subversive rhetoric, especially in a post-Trump era, is regressive and right-wing in nature, with the position of the powers that be moving away from just the government and into a failed notion of the "politically correct" or "woke" elites. This leads to far more aggressively bigoted and anti-social justice ideas being spread on public platforms. Owing both to their speed of production and their facetious presentation, memes are often introduced as objects to not be taken seriously, with any question of their political meaning being dismissed with a simple "it's just a joke." As Helen Lewis suggests, it is this dichotomy between real and joke that causes great societal harm and furthers the political indoctrination of the new alt-right, where racist signs and symbols continue to be

⁵⁴¹ Andreu Casas and Nora Webb Williams, "Images that Matter: Online Protests and the Mobilizing Role of Pictures," in *Political Research Quarterly* 72 (2019): 372.

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ Heidi E. Huntington, "Subversive Memes: Internet Memes as a Form of Visual Rhetoric," in *Selected Papers of Internet Research* 14 (2013), 1.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.

dismissed as jokes even though they have been adopted by racists.⁵⁴⁵ This is where the importance of the meme to the political right begins, at the corner of joking and completely serious.⁵⁴⁶

Usage of Memes in Anti-Black Lives Matter Rhetoric

Humorous Memes

Arguably the most common form of anti-Black Lives Matter meme, the humorous meme is what most people think of when they think of memes. These memes place text on an image, that text often taking the form of a joke or a reference. These jokes can be harmless or offensive, but the general idea behind them is to make the viewer laugh without necessarily causing harm. This may seem anti-intuitive with more offensive memes, but that is explained away by the location-specificity of these images, with certain memes having their own communities, separated from others. The reasoning is often portrayed as an attempt to keep people deemed unworthy out, as opposed to keeping the memes in, but there is a certain form of gatekeeping at play. Other offensive memes will often operate under a similar style of gatekeeping. While racist, misogynistic or otherwise bigoted memes exist, as do the communities that share them, these communities often exist within a bubble of sorts. Whether on mainstream websites like Reddit or separate forums like 4chan, these memes are essentially contained, their separation acting as a warning for those who do not wish to view them to leave.

⁵⁴⁵ Helen Lewis, “The Joke’s on Us,” *The Atlantic*, September 30, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/09/how-memes-lulz-and-ironic-bigotry-won-internet/616427/> (accessed April 3, 2021).

⁵⁴⁶ On September 22, 2021, American congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene made a statement against the Green New Deal with the aid of several enlarged copies of memes. While this choice was rightfully lambasted by many, the act itself and the subsequent right-wing response went a long way to show the importance of the meme as a political medium.

The way that the anti-Black Lives Matter humorous memes operate is the exact opposite. Instead of existing within a space where their racist views would be appreciated, they are meant to be uploaded into spaces where Black people and their allies would be more likely to see them, often on very mainstream platforms like Facebook or Twitter, frequently in the comment sections, as responses to people who dare to speak against the murder of Black people. Certain trolls will even forgo any pretense of attempting to have a good faith argument and simply spam dozens of these images in a row, in an attempt to hide the supportive comments and fill up the page with offensive memes.

These memes are not particularly creative either. A general perusal of anti-Black Lives Matter memes shows that the vast majority of the humour in these memes consists of outdated racist jokes, such as jokes about Black people not knowing their fathers, Black people enjoying stereotypical foods, like fried chicken and watermelon, and Black people resembling gorillas or other apes. Often, the alleged humour is simply a thinly veiled attempt to say exactly what they mean without outright saying it—a dog-whistle—like a meme comparing Harambe, a gorilla shot by a zookeeper in 2016, to George Floyd.⁵⁴⁷ This example confirms that there is no real purpose to this variety of meme. The meme is not meant to convey emotion or logic; the cruelty of it is the sole point.

Similarly, there are other memes of this variety which at least make an attempt at appealing to emotion or a twisted sense of logic to get their point across. However, again, without a humorous veneer, these points would be rightfully called out as racist. As such, these memes will take very blatant positions, stating their racist opinion outright, with some sort of

⁵⁴⁷ I think it is important to point out that, owing to their inherent anonymity and ephemerality, it is near impossible to cite these memes, as their origins are often unclear and they may disappear without a moment's notice. As such, I will do my best to convey the images in words.

meme-based formal decision. For example, these memes may write their statement in a way that references a meme: an image of a Black man holding a white woman at gunpoint is captioned “These the kindsa dudes that be like ‘I can’t breath!’ When police come” [sic], quickly—sloppily, in fact, as if the point was less to make a coherent point and more to be racist—stating their position, their racist beliefs and their denial of the established narrative but doing so with a fake vernacular similar to that of memes created by Black netizens.

Similarly, they may simply replace humour with a reference to something humorous. These memes will simply take on the disguise of joking by using the image of a character who viewers will recognize as humorous. One example of such a meme incorporates an image of Squirrely Dan, a character from the Canadian sitcom *Letterkenny*. This image is captioned “have you ever noticed the police leave you alone if you aren’t doing anything illegal?” Nothing about Squirrely Dan suggests any right-wing leanings. In fact, the character is often shown as an unusually progressive man when juxtaposed with his working-class, small town upbringing. This meme did not even bother to incorporate his distinctive style of speech. One might even assume that the creator of this meme has never watched the show. The only point at hand is to make a reference to a pop culture icon as a way to suggest humour where none exists, in order to create a pretense of racial humour, as opposed to humourless racism. Squirrely Dan is an unusual object for this, but he is not the only pop culture character to fall victim to this phenomenon. He is joined by the likes of the Minions from that eponymous franchise, Sam Elliot, the Dos Equis guy and a variety of other, disparate characters.

A lot of this style of humour is also heavily dependent on juxtapositions between strawman arguments, often taking the form of “us” versus “them” images, us, of course, being whatever right-wing cause is being supported at the time. These memes run the gamut of the

varieties, often taking on informative or appropriative guises. The most important part of the creation of these memes is a total stripping away of context. For example, a meme was posted onto Facebook with the title “notice the difference,” in that classic all-caps, impact font. The top image depicts “how Republicans protest” while the bottom image depicts “how Democrats protest.” The top image depicts a series of cars driving down a road, in single file, surrounded by people waving American flags. Not many of the people in the photo are overly visible, but the few that are visible are white. The bottom photo depicts a Black man standing atop a burning car, holding a police shield that has been spray-painted with the letter ACAB—a rallying cry that stands for “All Cops Are Bastards,” as a reminder that all police officers are complicit in police violence when they are unwilling to turn against the bad police officers—while surrounded by a large number of other, mainly Black, individuals.

There are several things going on in these photos. For one thing, dog whistles are employed heavily, conflating whiteness with patriotism and Blackness with violence and a proposed sense of criminality. There is also a political game being played, signaling back to the conspiratorial implication that Black Lives Matter are a Democratic organization used by the party for political gain. Even though the group has clearly stated Marxist leanings, the American right wing’s belief in the Marxist leanings of the centre-right Democratic party sees this as enough reason to conflate the two. Finally, the rest of the context that is stripped from these images paints a different picture. The bottom photo depicts an event that took place on the 29th of May 2020, in Atlanta, Georgia. The image, distributed by Getty Images, is one of a limited number of images depicting violence by Black individuals—it may even be unfair to characterize it as violence, as that violence is towards an object and not an individual—among a larger collection of images of peaceful protest and police violence, so the choice of image is extremely

telling. What is even more telling is the cropping and text placement on the image. The way that this meme is composed hides the fact that the car on fire is a police car. With the clear political placement of the meme's creator, I am unsure why they attempted to hide that, but an image of an unmarked car being destroyed would surely lead to the type of result being sought.

Meanwhile, what is missing from the top image is the fact that it depicts the right-wing protests of anti-lockdown protests, likely those that took place in Lansing, Michigan on the 15th of April 2020. Despite right-wing calls to make it legal to run over protestors who block roads and sloganeering with phrases such as "all lives splatter," Republicans began to travel en masse to places like Lansing and block access to hospitals with their cars, in order to call for an end to lockdown measures. In the time since this meme, Republicans have even gone as far as to storm the American Capital building with a stated mission to murder politicians and yet this style of meme has not slowed down. The inability to see their own hypocrisy is what leads to this variety of meme making.

I would be remiss if I did not also mention the large number of online comics that make a career out of anti-Black—and frequently specifically anti-Black Lives Matter—sentiments. Some have made a career out of it—the likes of StoneToss and Ben Garrison⁵⁴⁸ have an online following and make a variety of right-wing bigoted comics, to varying degrees—but there are also individuals who seem to make one-off strips, because they believe that their beliefs would be best described in such a format. It is important to point out that the medium does not make much difference, as these comics are still made to be easily spread and border on ephemerality.

⁵⁴⁸ It may be necessary to make a point on this varying degrees designation. Both of the named individuals here have created deeply bigoted comics that have been appropriated and celebrated by many members of the online right-wing. However, Garrison has claimed that he is not necessarily right-wing, claiming to be a libertarian, despite his admiration for Donald Trump and many other right-wing talking points. StoneToss, however, protected by his anonymity has admitted to being a Nazi. In other words, this is not a point of spectra, but rather a point of admittance to one's true political leanings.

They also allow for a more timely, so to speak, take on issues of the day. This accounts for a lot of anti-Black Lives Matter comics taking the guise of editorials while incorporating imagery that would be at home in a minstrel show. In fact, this editorial aspect is more than likely why the creators of these comics feel they can get away with them.

Of course, this raises the question of why it is that these humorous memes are so popular, with a follow-up questions of why it is that blatant racists insist on disguising their racism behind a thin veneer of humour. The short answer to this question is that it is an attempt at plausible deniability. Despite the blatant racism that is often displayed by members of right-wing political parties, there is still a realization that it is a negative thing, especially for one's public image, to be a racist. While these individuals will gladly espouse racist beliefs, a large number of them—pretty much anyone to the left of self-avowed Nazis—will refuse the label of racist, because they recognize it as a negative label. In the last decade or so, a variety of terms have been created to suggest one's racist views without being referred to as a racist: terms like race realist are often used to bypass this dilemma. As such, these people will often suggest that they are not anti-Black racist; they are merely anti-Black Lives Matter, an ultimate BLMization of the Black body. They will further suggest that their issue is with Black Lives Matter, the organization, and not with the slogan.⁵⁴⁹ It is with this bit of mental gymnastics that they will be able to repeat their racist beliefs under the guise of anti-organizational rhetoric. However, it does not take much to realize that the jokes being posted against the organization are no different from those that would be posted against the individuals. In fact, they often find themselves without any mention of Black

⁵⁴⁹ Some right wingers have gone so far as to conflate Black Lives Matter with Antifa, an anti-fascist belief system with no organization behind it, which has become a scare tactic in modern parlance. Just like they do with Black Lives Matter, these individuals will ignore the meaning behind the name Antifa and suggest that Antifa is an organization meant to harm and terrorize right-wing or American causes. As such, many have conflated the two groups, with online posts referring to the harm caused to a person or place by “Antifa/BLM.”

Lives Matter. So, how can they claim any plausible deniability in this case? Four simple words: it's just a joke.

The greatest strength of the humorous meme is that thin layer of alleged comedy that surrounds the racist beliefs therein. While the opinions and beliefs are very real, this veneer allows the meme's creator to essentially play victim when called out. Owing to the image's guise as humour, the cry of "can't you take a joke" takes the meme's creator out of the defensive position, replacing them with their critic. It is no longer an issue of racism, but rather an issue of one's right to make an offensive joke. This gives the critic a vast variety of negative labels running the gamut from humourless and easily offended to censorious—both as a condemner and as a censor—and an infringer on the freedom of others. This singular act of criticizing a racist statement will immediately demonize the critic and let the meme's creator off the hook, especially in digital spaces where freedom of speech is given more importance than freedom to criticize. In fact, there is a whole new vocabulary being built around this style of censure: when the urge to criticize is deemed political correctness, the act of criticism is deemed cancel culture and the point behind the criticism is called critical race theory,⁵⁵⁰ and all three are oversimplified to a point where it becomes easier to demonize them, sometimes it is easier to keep out of the dialogue.

This refusal to engage is ultimately what these meme makers are hoping for, because they recognize the absurdity of their claims of being non-racist and they further recognize that they cannot defend themselves against this designation. This is exactly why they insist that it is all just a joke. Of course, it is not just a joke. Even in cases where it is a joke, the addition of *just* is

⁵⁵⁰ While political correctness and cancel culture have been terms that have been partially created by their critics, critical race theory is a fairly new scare tactic taken from a widespread misunderstanding of the central tenets of the theory, which have been further sullied by right-wing grifters. This statement is not meant to refer to critical race theory, but rather to the "critical race theory" that is misused by the right.

inaccurate, because there is no such thing as “just a joke,” especially in a political joke. Numerous studies have found a deep personal connection between racist humour and actual, unquestionable racist beliefs. These studies have been conducted in the United States,⁵⁵¹ Canada⁵⁵² and Australia⁵⁵³ and they all lead to the same results; the fact that racist humour is simply an offshoot of actual racist beliefs, often in countries that claim to be post-racial and colour-blind, wherein the only way to respectfully state one’s racist beliefs is to disguise them as jokes. Unfortunately, it is this appeal to humour that often brings out comedians in defense of the alleged joke, out of a fear of some slippery slope where not being able to use a racial slur will eventually lead to comedy becoming illegal. This hyperbole makes it difficult to criticize such bad faith humour. And yet, it is this inability to criticize this style of humorous meme, out of fear of being deemed humourless or censorious, that is its greatest strength as a tool for regressive political rhetoric.

Informative Memes

It is necessary in introducing the informative meme to immediately point out that it is an absolute misnomer. In the world of memes, this variety fulfills the role of a tabloid, allowing a medium for the quick and easy distribution of misinformation. It could be occasionally argued that this misinformation is not the primary purpose, that the creator is not attempting to create misinformation, and that is indeed a fair assessment. However, the format of the meme, as a medium, would inherently lead to the creation of misinformation. The meme is not meant for complex information. It is meant to be exclusive on the amount of text, direct to the point and

⁵⁵¹ InJeong Yoon, “Why Is It Not Just a Joke? Analysis of Internet Memes Associated with Racism and Hidden Ideology of Colorblindness,” in *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education* 33 (2016): 93.

⁵⁵² James Baker, Jonathan Price and Kenneth Walsh, “Unwelcoming Communities: Youth Observations of Racism in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada,” in *Journal of Youth Studies* 19 (2016): 103.

⁵⁵³ Kaine Grigg and Lenore Manderson, “‘Just a Joke’: Young Australian Understandings of Racism,” in *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 47 (2015): 195.

somewhat confrontational. In order for information to be transmitted through a meme, it must be cut down to its most basic elements and exclude any sense of nuance or certain contextual cues. This is not *necessarily* an exclusively right-wing issue, as many issues of importance to all political backgrounds fall victim to a similar loss. However, when speaking of anti-Black Lives Matter memes, it is an almost exclusively right-wing issue.⁵⁵⁴

The issue does not end with misinformation, however. Owing to the meme's baffling ascension to political relevance, many bad faith right-wing commentators also use it as a way to spread disinformation. Where misinformation can be the result of a mistake or of one's unintentional location within an echo chamber, disinformation is intentional and depends on an echo chamber; knowing one's audience is extremely necessary in situations like this and this audience is exactly what is needed for this disinformation to become an ideology and for that ideology to become action. This disinformation does not even necessarily need to be realistic or logical because the meme gives it an air of legitimacy. It is important to remember that the roots of QAnon, possibly the most successful modern right-wing, regressive political grift, exist in memes on websites like 4chan, Facebook and, to some extent, YouTube, locations of minimalist, meme-dependent rhetoric.⁵⁵⁵

This meme style is also noteworthy because of its surprising ability to be monetized. While a lot of people do create these memes for nothing more than political gain—often just to “own the libs,” as they might say—there are whole organizations based around creating these informative memes, occasionally with a hint of humour, based on the belief or assumption that younger people will be more easily swayed by providing them your rhetoric in a meme format.

⁵⁵⁴ I say almost exclusively because Black Lives Matter, as an organization, holds Marxist beliefs, occasionally making them the targets of moderate liberals when they dare question the status quo.

⁵⁵⁵ Lewis, “The Joke’s on Us.”

These groups, with names like Turning Point USA, Liberty Hangout and Prager U, attempt to create a sense of legitimacy for themselves through a variety of signifiers. First, they tend to give themselves educational designations. Prager U takes the guise of a university, while Turning Point, advertises their ideology on American college campuses, in an attempt to rid higher education of its “liberal bias.” Secondly, they push their ideas as revolutionary—despite the right wing being inherently anti-revolutionary—whether they are calling for a turning point or advertising their love of liberty. Finally, these organizations place publicity above even their own message. Ultimately, being seen is more important than what they say, because they recognize that their ideas need to be seen by many for the few who accept them to have any large numbers behind them. This is why they often participate in publicity stunts meant to reframe transgression as reactionary, like the Liberty Hangout founder walking around a campus with a rifle or Turning Point employees wearing diapers to show how modern students are “babies.” Once they are seen and accepted, their messages can be spread to their audience who will, in turn, spread it to their own captive social media audience, which will continue the spread.

It is at this point where the informative meme’s power becomes apparent. The point of an informative meme, at its base, is not to spread established, accurate and confirmed information, but rather to create “information” which can be spread to an audience who will refuse to confirm anything that agrees with their sensibilities. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, numerous studies and theories have shown that images realize falsities. In other words, placing an image next to a textual caption is much more likely to convince a viewer that the caption is accurate, even if the photo does not provide visual proof of the statement being made. Creators of this style of meme take advantage of this bias and create memes which incorporate images which often fall into one of three categories, ones I will refer to as neutral, contextless and

photoshopped. The neutral images are unusually the rarest variety. What this means is that they will simply use an image of the person or organization to whom they are referring. The only purpose that this variety of image serves is to essentially remind the viewer of the person to whom they are referring. A meme accusing a politician of a heinous act could simply incorporate an official photograph of said politician to give reality to the accusation through a simple reminder of the politician's face.

The contextless image is far more prevalent and involves using an unflattering image to give credence to the claims being made by making the accusation appear more legitimate. For example, an accusation of violence against Black Lives Matter might use an image of a looter who is not affiliated with Black Lives Matter or an image of someone who has been beaten by protestors without mentioning that they had threatened the protestors with violence first. This variety also depends heavily on images of individuals appearing crazed or sickly. Often, these memes need to push an idea of their opponents as mentally or physically damaged, in order to show their own superiority. This is done by finding images of their opponents appearing less than presentable. There is a very serious racial and gender-based issue at play here, as white men are far less frequently victims of this visual manipulation. Black and brown racialized men are often darkened and given exaggerated stereotypically racialized characteristics, while women are either made to look older, sicker or less intelligent than they are. Meanwhile, someone who happens to be a racialized woman is given the worst of both worlds. In these situations, the truth is irrelevant, as long as the text attached to the image seems true, based on the properties of the image. These memes recognize the importance of visual proof to their cause, doing their best to gather proof even if that proof is inaccurate.

Finally, the photoshopped image is fairly self-explanatory. These are images which do not see a need to conform to reality, instead creating their own reality through the modification of images. The photoshopped variety of meme image is an interesting one, because of the various layers of its ability to convince. For example, the first question is how realistic is the image? Was it photoshopped by someone who knows how to flawlessly manipulate images or is it made by an amateur who leaves too many digital artifacts for the image to be convincing? The next question would be one of realism. For example, if someone takes a photo of the same politician from a contextless image and, instead of looking for an image where they look unhealthy, they photoshop the image to look unhealthy, it might look realistic, but how far can that be pushed? Would it still be realistic if a cut was applied or a tooth erased? There is a point where the photoshopped image stops being realistic and finding that point could be a challenge. Finally, there is a question of audience. The meme creator needs to be aware of who they are planning to trick. For example, a younger, more technology-literate audience may be tricked by a particularly well-done photoshop, but a badly done photoshop would only find success on a platform with a less technology-literate audience, where the images are either less likely to be shown to more aware people or where the audience would be less likely to believe the more aware people when they question the image. As such, this variety is often less successful, but more dangerous when successful.

And, of course, it is when these memes are successful that the real issue begins, because, with informational memes, once a “fact” is stated once, it remains a fact forever. Just as nothing can be removed from the internet, no statement can be forgotten from the internet either. No matter how many times a false statement is refuted, its original existence means that someone will still continue to believe it. The interesting thing about this process of “factification” is that,

first, the unsourced nature of these memes makes them more difficult to prove and therefore to disprove—not impossible, but it requires more work than can be done in the attention span of the internet—and second, the facts are designed to outlive the images. When one side has no interest in good faith arguments, it is much easier to get past the criticism. So, while the image is available, the arguments will often revolve around fallacious reasoning about the critic’s inability to disprove the facts at play: the more nonsensical the facts, the better this “argument” works. It is when the image disappears, however, that the true power is revealed, as the factification continues, as people will often remember hearing a fact but not where they heard it. As such, these lies become truths upon something as simple as remembrance. A falsity is given legitimacy first by an image, then by memory, never receiving that legitimacy through a legitimate venue.

There are numerous informative memes that cover a vast variety of topics, often going with whatever is in the news at the time.⁵⁵⁶ As such, it is important to look at the various subjects that are covered within an anti-Black Lives Matter sphere. Perhaps the most common theme of this variety of meme is the “criminal record” theme. These memes attempt to absolve the murderous police officers of wrongdoing by pointing out the victims’ past criminal records. These memes will occasionally incorporate a mugshot or caricature of the victim, but the text is often the most important part. By pointing out the victim’s past criminality—often ignoring the context for why young Black men are criminalized at a young age—the strain of wrongdoing is immediately taken off of the status quo—often white, often male police officers⁵⁵⁷—and placed back where the right wing believes it belongs, on the backs of Black individuals who refuse to

⁵⁵⁶ At the time of writing, the most frequently covered topic in this medium is COVID-related issues, such as anti-mask and anti-vaccination sentiments.

⁵⁵⁷ Before Derek Chauvin’s conviction, the two most high-profile cases of police officers being convicted as a result of murdering a civilian involved a white woman who murdered a Black man and a Black Somali man who killed a white woman. While police officer is a highly protected class in the United States, there are still some layers of complexity.

step in line. This criminalization makes these memes easier to create, but a lack of a criminal record does not harm their creations, as “innocent” victims can still be accused by way of the criminalization of Black bodies, prevalent in statements about how a young, Black man looked “crazed” or “dangerous” or “older than he was.” The right-wing is reliant on Black bodies being criminalized and white supremacy remaining unquestioned, which makes this theme extremely popular.

This theme can be somewhat extended to two similar themes: memes questioning the innocence of protestors and of Black Lives Matter as a whole. In response to calls for better training for the police, one such meme suggests that “maybe it’s the people, not the cops, that need better training.” This quote is attributed to Larry Elder and is accompanied by an image of a white woman giving a Black police officer the middle finger. Once again, the police are placed in the role of victim—racialized victim, at that—while all protestors are represented by a singular, (rightfully) enraged woman who let her emotions come out in the form of an “inappropriate” gesture. One of the most frequently used bad faith arguments of the right has to do with civility and public appropriateness. As such, they will pretend to be indignant about something that they would not look at twice if it was done by one of their own. Even beyond that, the singular middle finger is stripped of all context and presented as an inappropriate response, as if it was not a response to not just murder, but chemical warfare against protestors.

Another element to take note of is the use of this particular quote. This quote could have been spoken by anyone, but this particular speaker was chosen. Larry Elder is an American conservative talk radio host. He is also a Black man. These individuals may hate Black people, but they love Black people who agree with them. Another similar meme quotes former Wisconsin sheriff David Clarke, who is quoted as saying that the statement “Black Lives Matter

suggests racial superiority.” In other words, the meme maker took the statement that their side has been ignorantly saying for years, found a Black man who agreed and used him as their spokesman. This comes from the belief that, if a Black man agrees with them, that means they are not racist.

Black Lives Matter and its founders are also constant victims of attacks by these posts. Firstly, the organization is constantly accused of various crimes through this medium. Images of fires or injured individuals are frequently attributed to Black Lives Matter with no evidence. One such meme depicts someone who attempted to stab rioters outside a bar and received a beating as a result. In this reasoning, Black bodies equal Black Lives Matter and, if Black Lives Matter committed an act of violence, it is inherently intolerable and must be repudiated, even if it was in self-defence: essentially, the exact opposite of the treatment of police officers. Similarly, another such meme depicts an old man bleeding from the face and speaking to a news reporter. This man was later found to have been attempting to shoot protestors with a bow and arrow. However, like the earlier examples of informative memes, the truth travels much more slowly than meme “facts.”

Finally, one of the most insidious themes in these memes is the “rich BLM leader” archetype. Black Lives Matter is a decentralized organization which was founded by several queer, Black women, which gives to charities. This is at once the most contemptible organization for a right-wing agitator and something that cannot be outwardly criticized to avoid giving away their prejudicial ideology. As such, it becomes necessary to question their ideology from a perspective to which they do not necessarily subscribe. One of the most common meme narratives that applies to this theme is the frequent attacks on movement co-founder Patrisse Khan-Cullors. Once again, the general way to attack these individuals is through cognitive

dissonance, pushing racist and sexist ideas while insisting on their lack of racism and sexism and supporting capitalism while decrying it. The attacks on Khan-Cullors tend to focus on her participation in capitalist society, questioning her possession of several properties and insisting that these properties were bought with stolen donations.⁵⁵⁸ Essentially, if she is a Black woman, she must be a thief and if she is part of an organization that holds any Marxist beliefs, she must starve and own nothing. It is important to keep in mind that these individuals only care because of Khan-Cullors' political leanings, as they would likely celebrate her if she agreed with them.

Another similar situation involves a man by the name of Christopher DeVries. DeVries was arrested in 2020 on child pornography charges. He also happens to be a supporter of Black Lives Matter. In order to disavow the movement, a series of memes were created calling him the founder of Black Lives Matter, making the obvious claim that Black Lives Matter was founded by a pedophile. There are a few things at play here. First, these memes often name the people they are attacking leaders of leaderless organizations. This can be seen in a lot of anti-Antifa memes. Perhaps more importantly, the fact that Black Lives Matter, as a hashtag and fledgling organization, was founded by women is being brought under question by these memes, because of the belief that, if there is a shadowy organization, it must secretly be controlled by a man. These memes, at once, criminalize Black men and inferiorize Black women. Ultimately, one must ask the question are the individuals behind these memes making an intentional point of spreading disinformation or are they simply ignorant? In other words, are they lying or are they speaking what they assume to be the truth?

⁵⁵⁸ A good example of this type of rhetoric can be found on a Newsmax article, a platform at the forefront of far-right American politics, entitled "Marxist BLM Founder Loves Capitalism. Blacks Should Too." This article references all of the talking points mentioned here and can be found at <https://www.newsmax.com/patriceleonwuka/BLM-Capitalism-Communism-Patrice-Khan-Cullors/2021/04/15/id/1017759>.

This question could potentially be answered with one interesting video that I found during my research. This video was posted to the social media platform TikTok.⁵⁵⁹ The video begins with a white man with a thick beard and an American flag hat talking in front of a New York Post article. While this is not a meme, I think it is important because it follows the general rhetoric of an informative meme. The man angrily and smugly discusses the news article, referring to how the “organization”—his finger quotes—Black Lives Matter took in 90 million dollars last year and how none of it went toward helping anybody. This is accompanied with a simple and frankly unnecessary image of several Black individuals in front of a black background and a caption naming the group, how much money they accrued in 2020 and the line “funds used to help Black communities: \$0.” This is followed by the person responding to it, whose takedown of the video explains all of the issues with this style of rhetoric. First, this man uses a conservative-leaning source in the New York Post and still mischaracterizes its argument. A link to the Black Lives Matter impact statement would have disproven his central thesis, but he avoids it. Then, this video is posted by a secondary source whose video is seen by many others. So, despite the primary source being ignorant at best and a malicious liar at worst and the secondary source deleting her account, everybody who saw the original uncited, mischaracterized video—including the secondary source—will believe the original statement and likely not even see its refutation. So, a total lie becomes the truth for many. As the poster states “you guys say that the left uses the word racist too often, but what the fuck else are we meant to call it when you deliberately lie to smear the biggest Black social justice movement in the country?”

⁵⁵⁹ In a fantastic example of online hypertextuality, I discovered this video on the website Reddit, on the /r/tiktokcringe subreddit, which collects TikTok videos on a non-TikTok archive. The video is a creation of @almostjj who made it by using and responding to a video by @cierra_mistt, who posted a video created by someone else. The original video’s source cannot be found, because @cierra-mistt deleted her account after @almostjj’s video went viral. The internet is a wild place!

And that is ultimately why this variety of meme is so useful for right-wing aggressors. As Stephen Colbert once famously stated “facts have a liberal bias.”⁵⁶⁰ When the facts do not subscribe to your viewpoint, there are two options: you either change your viewpoints or you create your own facts. One of the most often stated ideas that is used to argue against provided facts in online discussion is that the source being used to refute your claim comes from a leftist source and it is therefore useless. Unfortunately, the shifting of the Overton window means that everything from Snopes to the Washington Post is now considered leftist media, with the only valuable sources being the sources that subscribe to right-wing ideology. The informative meme is essentially an attempt at creating a brand new, populist right-wing media platform. If the right-wing internet can create its own facts, then there will be nothing to stop them from stating anything they wish as fact. And, if they have control over the facts, they have control over the narrative. In other words, this is less about putting their opponents down and more about raising themselves to their opponents’ level, even if it is at the sacrifice of reality.

Appropriative Memes

Appropriative memes share a lot in common with informative memes, in that they forgo humour and introduce their idea through historical or political ideas. What separates these memes from the informative ones is that they do not establish their own facts, they merely recontextualize and reappropriate the facts and ideas of others. This variety of meme is slightly rarer, but it is also extremely damaging, as it often takes the form of racist individuals using the words of old, often deceased, anti-racism advocates to attack or question modern anti-racism advocates. This results from the constant evolution of social justice ideals, making the previous iteration seem more palatable in comparison to the more modern version. This is perhaps most

⁵⁶⁰ Newman et al., “Nonprobative Photographs (or Words) Inflate Truthiness,” 969.

blatantly apparent in anti-feminist circles, when anti-feminists suggest that third-wave feminism goes too far in comparison to the second wave, when many of the issues that they have with feminism were introduced in the second wave. Once again, their refusal to commit to research ensures that their ideas are wrong.

When it comes to anti-racism advocacy, there is a very similar process of normalization among racists. What follows is an oversimplified, non-intensive attempt at showing the absurdity at play. Slavery abolitionists were once considered overly radical. Then, with the arrival of the civil rights groups of the 1960s, the anti-slavery advocates would be the ones brought up as the right way to fight for one's rights and the right goal to have. After all, ending slavery is a noble cause; why would any Black individual want to fight for anything more? And yet, the same people who hated the leaders of the civil rights movement will now hold up Martin Luther King Jr as an example of how to protest racism, especially when compared to the inappropriate antics of Black Lives Matter. While the goals have always been the same things that the American dream promises every American, it just so happens that the newest person or organization fighting for those rights is doing it incorrectly.

The mention of King is not just a random selection: the vast majority of these memes incorporate his words as a way to speak down to Black people, often using King's speeches to question either the violence of Black people or their refusal to take responsibility of their own lives. One such meme compares King to Black Lives Matter, labelling the meme "liberal logic 101" and labelling the two sides "MLK" and "BLM," respectively. MLK is quoted as saying "hate cannot drive out hate," while BLM is quoted as saying "white lives don't matter! Kill the cops!!" I am sure it does not need to be stated, but the first obvious issue is that the second quote is not something that has been spoken by anyone. The multiple exclamation marks are likely

there to indicate an uneducated piece of writing, but the fact is that these words were taken directly from the meme creator's brain. That is not important, however. What is important is the suggestion that Black rights and anti-racist advocacy has moved away from anti-hate beliefs and toward the hatred of white people and police officers. This meme says more about its creator than they likely meant by conflating whiteness with law enforcement, as if one cannot exist without the other. It also conflates the idea that Black lives matter with the idea that that statement being true makes their vision of its opposing statement—white lives matter, cops' lives matter—false. This meme insists on the idea that equality is a zero-sum game and that more Black rights means fewer white rights. Again, if this is what the meme creator actually believes or if this is being done to feed an ignorant audience is something that cannot be truly known.

Furthermore, one of the biggest complaints against this style of meme is just how sanitized King's message becomes in its presence. Many critics of the white appropriation of King have questioned why white people are so obsessed with his "I have a dream" speech or his quotes on non-violence—the last refuge of the colonialist bourgeois when they realize their hold on power is slipping, according to Frantz Fanon—while ignoring his more radical beliefs. The meme mentioned above is captioned "you can't pretend to honor a man while completely ignoring everything he stood for," making this point even more obvious. King's whole legacy—the things that made this meme creator's ancestors hate him in his day as much as they hate Black Lives Matter today—has been distilled to a more modern version of "love thy neighbour" without a hint of necessary context. King preached anti-hate sentiments, but he also preached the right to fight back. On March 10, 1968, King stated in his "The Other America" speech, that despite the fact that he condemns rioting, "a riot is the language of the unheard."⁵⁶¹ This does

⁵⁶¹ Martin Luther King, "The Other America" (speech, Grosse Pointe High School, March 14, 1968).

not, however, go far enough in confirming the opinions of racist white people. As such, they need to pretend that such a quote has never existed. This is often the reason behind things such as the modern pushback against concepts such as critical race theory and the 1619 project. If the truth can be ignored, conservative beliefs can continue unquestioned.

This is also why these meme creators will often use these figures as nothing more than mouthpieces to spread their own racist beliefs. Using another example of King, a meme uses an image of King during his “I have a dream” speech—the only thing some of these people know about King—with the caption “I have a dream that Black people will actually take responsibility for their actions, learn how to speak proper English and stop blaming white people for everything.” A small watermark at the bottom designates this as comedy, as it bears the name of a humour website. This meme signifies itself as a humorous meme, but its appropriation of King’s speech places it in this category. This meme’s creator has taken a speech about unity and used it as a front for a racist attack, attacking not just the usual sense of victimhood that is placed upon the Black American population by racist white people, but also their speech. There is no connection that could possibly be made between the image and the caption, other than the appropriation of those first four words, but the connection to King makes the meme extra insulting with the suggestion that even King would be against the sensibilities of modern Black people.

If King is the most common target for such memes, Rosa Parks is likely a distant second. While other figures are far too controversial for the individuals who make these memes—Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon or any Black Panthers are often deemed as too violent or hateful by the sort of people who make these memes—Parks is still seen as mostly peaceful, even though her actions were criminal and anti-status quo for her time. Honestly, the criminality of her

actions is likely one of the biggest reasons as to why she is less represented in these memes, along with the fact that she was a woman, as well as Black. One of these memes uses an image of Parks sitting on a bus with the caption “Mrs. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus. But she didn’t trash the bus. Big difference.” Once again, a revolutionary, criminal act is stripped of all of its transgressive action and diminished to an acceptable act in a modern sense to contest modern revolutionary acts. Parks’ act of staying seated, which would have been admonished in her time, is established as the hegemonically correct way to protest—in other words, given white respectability—while the actions of Black Lives Matter are diminished to the most violent among them and explained away as an incorrect way to protest. Not only that, but these respectability politics come into play once more as the meme creator suggests that, despite Parks’ actions being seen as acceptable, violence against the property of those in power is inherently unacceptable, both because property is often seen as more important than Black bodies and lives and because they believe that those in power should have no fear of losing that power.

The reason that these memes work is a bit more complicated. With the previous varieties of meme, the purpose is singular: the meme creator means to either mock Black people or to create misinformation about them. The appropriative meme exists somewhere in between the two: the image mocks, while the text misinforms. As Sontag points out, images are not inherently political: it is the text which gives them their political context.⁵⁶² While this is not necessarily true within a pictorial turn context, it is definitely true about these memes. The image is meant to humiliate Black Lives Matter as an organization and Black people as a whole. It is meant to remind them of their past with the suggestion that they are devolving. Through this

⁵⁶² Sontag, *On Photography*, 109.

reminder, racist meme creators give themselves the right to decide what is right and what is wrong for people other than themselves.

The text, in turn, is meant to inform the viewer about the correct way to protest—the right way designated by the racist meme creator as dictated by hegemony—by further shaming the protestors. The general idea behind the text of these memes tends to follow a very basic template: the past, which was ostensibly successful—many people still believe that racism ended in the 1960s—is compared to the present, which is not successful. This lack of success is of course not taking into consideration neither the general novelty of the Black Lives Matter movement nor all of the changes that they have in fact affected,⁵⁶³ because the meme creators do not believe that there are any changes to be made in the first place. This humiliation is what is being aimed for, but, in a strange way, Black populations are not the intended audience for these memes. Instead, these memes are meant for ignorant white audiences—ignorant meaning uneducated as opposed to unsophisticated—whose understanding of American Black liberation movements is limited to the radical non-violent resistance of the likes of King and Parks. There is a sense of recognition that those who are aware of the more righteously violent-if-need-be side of Black liberation will not be swayed by such arguments, but there is still an important audience available. These three varieties of memes show how important memes can be for regressive causes, but can memes be equally useful for progressive causes?

Black Lives Matter Memes

While regressive and reactionary politics have certainly taken over large segments of meme creating communities, there is also a more niche competing leftist meme creating community. While Black Lives Matter is involved in a lot of meme creation—Black Lives

⁵⁶³ Travis Campbell, “Black Lives Matter’s Effect on Police Lethal Use-of-Force,” in *SSRN*, May 13, 2021.

Matter, as a slogan and as a hashtag, is itself a meme in a classical sense, after all—their contributions are a mere drop in the bucket when compared to the massive amounts of anti-Black Lives Matter memes. Still, the Black Lives Matter memes fill in certain holes of the online discourse on race relations.

While they are fewer in numbers, Black Lives Matter memes have two distinct qualities: first, the central arguments of their memes are often much more focused on the issues at hand instead of more generalized attacks, and second, they are much more likely to work in media that take more effort than their opponents. Firstly, the majority of the pro-Black Lives Matter memes that I came across in my research tended to poke fun at police officers and anti-Black Lives Matter groups. The anti-police memes are fairly uniform: they often incorporate an image of the police committing acts of violence with a comment in form of text or, more rarely, performing an act of support followed by a comment on their hypocrisy. These memes are ultimately just as likely to incorporate pop culture elements, such as one such image of police officers taking a knee in Miami followed by an image of three men saying, “we were bad, but now we’re good,” an image that would be immediately recognizable to anyone who has seen the viral video “Sex Offender Shuffle.” The memes about their opponents are often much more varied while still staying on point, so to speak: these memes often characterize their opponents as uneducated, self-centred or “bootlickers,” people who are submissive to police. These memes also often make references to pop culture to get their points across, from *King of the Hill* and *Friends* to children’s cartoons and pornography.⁵⁶⁴ These are the memes that attempt to fight on similar

⁵⁶⁴ In order: the *King of the Hill* meme uses an image of Bobby Hill holding up a piece of paper that reads “Black lives matter” to a classroom full of children and Donald Trump, at which point the school principal responds “if those kids could read, they’d be very upset;” A scene from *Friends* where Phoebe attempts to teach Joey how to say a sentence is exploited to have her trying to teach him to say Black lives matter with him responding all lives matter; a scene from the 2000s kids show *Rocket Power* is labelled “what people really mean when they say all lives matter”

grounds as their opponents. However, there are also plenty of memes that have had more work put into them whose real purpose is to educate or memorialize.

Similar to the aforementioned humorous memes, Black Lives Matter also incorporate a lot of comic strips into their meme-based communications, with a large number of them devoted to the ridiculous nature of responding to Black Lives Matter with all lives matter. Perhaps the most viral of all of these comics is one that is attributed to the website chainsawsuit.com which depicts a stick figure stating his belief that all lives matter before also declaring that all houses matter and spraying a house with a hose while another house burns down nearby. This comic is the most often posted and shared of these styles of comics, but it is not the only one. Similar comics include Matt Bors' explicitly political comics. One of these comics depicts an all lives matter protestor arguing with a Black Lives Matter protestor before telling a Muslim immigrant seeking help from who she assumes to be an ally "no Muslims allowed. Or can't you read?" Another such comic depicts the same man demanding a Black protestor protest peacefully, quietly and respectfully, only being satisfied when the protestor dies. These comics are joined by an Adam Zygis comic where an angry fuming white man steps into a variety of protests and demands that all of the causes—including all cancers, all words and all mammals—should matter and a Steve Greenberg comic where people in positions of power remind others being victimized that there are a lot of people being similarly victimized. The format is almost a cliché, but it goes a long way in proving the ludicrous nature of this style of argument and seems to mainly serve the purpose of convincing those who hold this viewpoint. As a comic by Joel Pett puts it, we need to remember that we live in a time where the only lives that actually matter are "the obscenely rich, angry white dudes [and] fetuses."

with a character stating "look at the bright side...it's not happening to me;" finally, images for "bootlicker" memes often incorporate highly sexualized images of men licking boots being worn by others.

The other style of meme-like creation is the Black Lives Matter memorial. This style of meme is wholly meant for the supporters. Unlike every other style of meme, these memorials are not meant to make a point to outsiders and are meant exclusively to be consumed, appreciated and spread by the inner group. These memorials are also surprisingly successful, often taking the form of a portrait of a victim or the ever popular “say his/her name” variety. These images may not be considered memes by most, but they share many of the characteristics, as they often incorporate images and text, are meant to elicit a response and are meant to be spread virally on the internet. What differentiates them from other memes is the inherent *pathos* within them, whereas memes are almost meant to be emotionless. This *pathos*, in turn, has a tendency of enraging the opposition as they do not appreciate the connection between their own regressive culture and progressive politics. This also often leads to the opposition attempting to appropriate the memorial memes in a strange full circle process, but that should only be seen as a victory. Black Lives Matter has managed to defeat their racist opponents in their own field of combat without even making an attempt at doing so.

Memes as Injury and Healing

Memes are simplistic, amateurish and frequently offensive. However, they are also a new language, one which is “spoken” heavily by young people. As such, it is important to learn how to both understand it and utilize it. This chapter may appear to suggest that memes are a lost form, that they have been overtaken by the right-wing, but that could not be further from the truth. While Black Lives Matter is less involved in memes, online leftist politics are just as heavily dependent on memes as the right. There are even online communities wholly devoted to the creation and distribution of memes from a leftist standpoint. There is indeed a “political” meme war happening, at least in a modern, online definition of politics. In this definition, politics

is a dirty word; these memes push ideology, but are seen as non-political by their creators, because they are also the ones complaining that everything is too political or insisting that it is a joke and jokes cannot be political. This leads to an unwinnable war fought entirely on their rules.

As such, it is important to recognize the weapons of the right-wing and how they incorporate those weapons in campaigns of humiliation and (mis/dis)information. These memes appear in the forms of humour, information and appropriative imagery to mock the fight for civil rights and create a new narrative. This narrative must be recognized and combatted because it is this narrative which will sway a young generation of children and older generations of less educated individuals. When these vast swaths of people become convinced that these small, captioned, often crude images speak the truth, then the battle for their hearts and minds will be lost. One way to go about this is to create response memes which promote historical facts and alternative, progressive history. The better way to fight this is through education, fact checking and correction, but, unfortunately, these acts become extremely difficult in an online environment. As such, meme making could be the best option available on a smaller level while more comprehensive race studies and massive changes to the educational system are put into place at a more gradual pace.

Chapter 11: Conclusion

Where Do We Go From Here?

*“And we hate po-po
Wanna kill us dead in the street for sure
I'm at the preacher's door
My knees gettin' weak and my gun might blow
But we gon' be alright” -Kendrick Lamar*

Black Lives Matter, as a movement, a slogan and a hashtag, is coming up on its tenth-year anniversary. In this decade, a lot has changed while a similar amount has stayed the same, leaving one to wonder if the movement can be considered a success. It cannot be denied that awareness and activism has gone up, but so has antagonism and racist reactionary sentiments against the movement, which have developed a series of their own movements. It could be suggested that the number of enemies that they have accrued suggests that the movement is successful, as it is seen as a threat, but the overwhelming response to it has similarly led to massive amounts of misinformation and disinformation that has been accepted as facts, often by those whose support of reactionary movements helps them spread. It will require much more than a decade to truly see how successful this movement is—the effects of previous civil rights movements were not seen until much later—but some results can be studied currently through the use of images that have become important parts of the movement. In this dissertation, I studied and discussed some of these images soon after they were created and distributed in order to better understand their position in the birth and continuation of the movement.

This story must start before the beginning. Whereas the movement started with the putting words to screen or the stepping out of domiciles into public streets, the story of Black Lives Matter begins earlier. It begins with Black lives, of course, but the beginning that this

dissertation focuses on is the inspiration for the movement, the lives that were lost to murderous, power-tripping police officers—and occasionally regular citizens—who gave themselves the permission to do something as despicable as take a life. These extinguished lives became a catalyst for the creation of a new movement for change, a movement that came from a steady incline in the reported number of deaths of Black people—and all people—at the hands of the American police—which cannot be dismissed as mere bias, as evidence shows that American civilians are killed by the police at a much higher rate than in other nations⁵⁶⁵. The movement also came from a more sudden increase in social awareness and protest movements, occurring mere years after the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement and the much more mainstream awareness that came with Time magazine’s designation of the protestor as the person of the year in 2011.⁵⁶⁶ This specific zeitgeist ensured that the movement would be heard by all, but not necessarily accepted by all.

The movement began with the shooting of Trayvon Martin, which is interesting both for its lack of focus and lack of historicity. This is to say that Martin’s murder, the inciting incident, was not at the hands of a police officer—in fact, a police officer told Zimmerman to not follow him, although the police did also refuse to charge Zimmerman, bringing the whole incident full circle—was not recorded on video and, obviously, was not the first such incident. However, something about an innocent, unarmed teenager being murdered as he walked home served a better purpose than many cases which preceded it. This narrative also happened to enrage reactionary racist audiences who could not see past the skin colour of Martin, refusing to give him the designation of child or teenager, preferring designations such as thug. These

⁵⁶⁵ Alexi Jones and Wendy Sawyer, “Not Just ‘a Few Bad Apples:’ U.S. Police Kill Civilians at Much Higher Rates than Other Countries,” *Prison Policy Initiative*, June 5, 2020, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2020/06/05/policekillings/> (accessed April 4, 2022).

⁵⁶⁶ Reuters Staff, “Time Names ‘the Protestor’ 2011 Person of the Year,” *Reuters*, December 14, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-time-person-idUSTRE7BD0ZB20111214> (accessed April 4, 2022).

designations became more common as more children and teenagers began dying at the hands of police, with their more frequent coverage and sympathies becoming even more ammo for the reactionaries, who began criminalizing them, not just for their skin colour, but also for their size, their photos, their clothing and, for those lucky enough to reach childhood, their petty criminal records.

A large part of this historical inspiration for the movement came from videos depicting the deaths of the individuals, shot in real time and occasionally even viewed by an audience in real time. These videos, recorded by way of personal cameras—most frequently cellphone cameras—or body-, car- or building-affixed security cameras, began to show the world—at the least the world of the white dominant classes—the unseen world that Black people have to deal with every day. These videos realized the criminalization that the Black body goes through every time a Black individual has an interaction with a police officer. They showed not just the ease and quickness with which Black individuals receive capital punishment, but also the generalized fear of Black bodies, even when they are obviously of no danger. This is apparent in the prevalence of police officers “arresting” the corpses of their victims in favour of providing first aid or other support. This is a common occurrence in these videos, owing to the belief of racialized pollution in the very “act” of Blackness.⁵⁶⁷

These videos have shown an image of the Black individual’s spot in American society: they are to be feared at all costs. If they come across a police officer, the officer’s job is to shoot or suffocate them and then leave their body as a warning to others. Centuries of American history has not changed this spectacle. Furthermore, the rights afforded to “all men” are not and have never been actually afforded to everyone. This is apparent in both the fear of witnesses

⁵⁶⁷ Rima Vesely-Flad, *Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies: Moral Pollution, Black Lives and the Struggle for Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017): 168.

practicing their first amendment rights—in the days before everyone had a camera on their person, police officers could murder anyone who offended them without fear of reproach—and of Black people practicing their second amendment rights or even appearing to do so. And, of course, it becomes overly apparent that the reason that such videos keep being recorded is because of a total lack of fear of punishment or repercussions. The police have recently begun to see those among their ranks face some consequences for their actions, but the reason it took this long is because they have never been on trial, even when committing crimes. It has always been the other who has been on trial; in this case, the other is the Black victim.

This led to a need to delve into the representations of Black victims in news articles, whether distributed by mainstream or more tangential sources. White women have shown themselves time and again to be perfect victims for news coverage,⁵⁶⁸ but white men make similarly good victims, owing to the general acceptance of their future possibilities. Even white men who are the aggressors will often face fewer repercussions because of their bright futures.⁵⁶⁹ This is not something that is often afforded to the other; however, the most interesting result of this section was the changing impression of Black victims on mainstream representation. Throughout time, left-wing sources showed support and empathy for the victims, while right-wing sources let their usual ire shine through. However, mainstream sources' opinions changed fairly steadily along with mainstream acceptance of Black Lives Matter. While mainstream media unquestionably influences public opinions, it also reflects public opinion. When a culture war becomes unwinnable, the best option is to yield and pretend that the new opinion is the one you always held. This is how the victims went from criminalized figures in the days of Michael

⁵⁶⁸ Danielle C. Slakoff and Henry F. Fradella, "Media Messages Surrounding Missing Women and Girls: The 'Missing White Woman Syndrome' and Other Factors that Influence Newsworthiness," in *Criminology, Criminal Justice, Law & Society* 20, no. 3 (2019): 82.

⁵⁶⁹ Kathleen Tierney, "The Leniency Epidemic: A Study of Leniency Granted to Convicted Rapists in America and Australia," in *Penn State Journal of Law and International Affairs* 6, no. 1 (2018): 350.

Brown to more sympathetic, tragic figures as time went on. Mainstream media sources still ensured that there was no threat to white supremacy, as is their duty, but they did that through more socially acceptable means, as their more blatant ways began to threaten their hegemonic power over their audiences. This is not something to celebrate, of course, as the terror of the Black body has not been removed, but instead just deflected from victims to everyone else in the community.

These deaths ultimately led to one of the most widespread civil rights movement in the world, owing to social media's ability to push ideas outside of a limited physical space.⁵⁷⁰ With the movement in full swing, the pictorial turn within which we currently live demanded images as a form of storytelling. This storytelling process was yet another struggle between the protestors and reactionaries who were both trying to make their side of the story the established narrative. As such, images of peaceful protests were distributed alongside images of burning buildings. The war began for the hearts and minds of the people. The reactionary side used various dirty tactics to turn the people against Black Lives Matter, including the use of *agents provocateurs* and general disinformation to create a trove of falsified evidence against the movement. Ultimately, this disinformation was mostly useful for those who were against the movement to begin with, but they did serve as important "evidence" for them, evidence which would be used to potentially great avail later. This is not to say that the movement did not have its own missteps, however. Some sympathetic critics of the Black Lives Matter movement have criticized some of their tactics as being too liberal, namely the "hands up, don't shoot" motto. The belief is that this sort of appeasing rhetoric can only hurt the movement in the long run, especially since it appears to go directly against their anti-respectability origins.

⁵⁷⁰ Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjorth, *Understanding Social Media* (London: SAGE Publications, 2013), 37.

Another controversial tactic that appeared alongside these protests was the process of iconoclasm and eventual iconopoeism that occurred with the destruction, reappropriation and replacement of statues dedicated to agents of Black suffering throughout the protests. These acts responded to images of violence with violence⁵⁷¹ and ensured a new meaning would be attached to them or their now empty or changed locations. This process is also seen in the usage of the American flag at these protests. Two sides of an American struggle both see the flag as theirs, as a sign of their strength, and they both wield it in different ways. What results is a similar process of iconopoeism. It must also be noted that this same process is evident in a rhetorical struggle between the two sides, one which situates Black Lives Matter as terrorists. Terrorism is, and always has been, a term created to criminalize the racialized other.⁵⁷² Acts that would be simple violence at the hands of white people become terrorism when committed by racialized individuals.⁵⁷³ As such, it is necessary to consider this terrorist rhetoric, but through an alternative Baudrillardian perspective as opposed to a mainstream one. In this sense, terrorism is not just positive, it is necessary. The struggle against the dominant hegemonic ideals needs to occur and when traditional methods do not work, terror is necessary. Of course, in this case, it is merely the terror of Blackness and not terror in a traditional sense.

With this fear of Blackness so prevalent in certain populations, it is not surprising to realize the anti-Black Lives Matter industry that has resulted from the reaction to the movement. This industry does not necessarily make money for everyone who partakes in it—many will create and proselytize for the movement for no more payment than the pleasure of spreading

⁵⁷¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 375.

⁵⁷² Caroline Mala Corbin, “Terrorists Are Always Muslim but Never White: At the Intersection of Critical Race Theory and Propaganda,” in *Fordham Law Review* 86, no. 2 (2017): 456.

⁵⁷³ This is not to suggest that white terrorists do not get deemed terrorists, but rather that acts of non-terroristic violence by racialized individuals are more likely to be deemed as such.

racist misinformation—but there is absolutely a class of grifters working among their ranks, making money by becoming “experts” on their side’s lies and using their newfound accreditation to further their hateful means. Meanwhile, others simply create anonymous memes and slogans that outgrow them and become famous without the author’s dead weight. These means ultimately take on a death of the author philosophy, wherein a before and after is formed between the creator’s authority and intentions and the dismissal thereof in favour of a sense of ease of access and exploitation;⁵⁷⁴ the author is far less important than the message or how the message can be twisted for one’s own gain. This death is similarly blatant in the exploitation of the beliefs, slogans and symbols of the Black Lives Matter Movement.

The grifters of the reactionary side have shown themselves to be capable of twisting any word that comes out of the Black Lives Matter movement in order to further their own motives. This includes intentionally misunderstanding the movement’s political basis and insisting that every Black person is part of the movement. In the former, an attempt is made to paint the movement as hypocritical using the “where’s BLM” method. This involves finding stories that have some sort of similarity to Black Lives Matter’s aims. These similarities are usually just the presence of a Black person in the event but can also involve police violence against white people; in other words, things in which they have never shown any interest before. These incidents, just far enough away from Black Lives Matter’s aims for them to avoid,⁵⁷⁵ but just close enough to be attached to them, are then used as proof that the movement is hypocritical or bigoted in some way.⁵⁷⁶ The latter uses the process of BLMization to equate all Black people,

⁵⁷⁴ Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977): 145.

⁵⁷⁵ This is an oversimplification out of necessity. As such, it should be noted that these incidents that they avoid are sometimes not avoided, but the truth is less important than the argument.

⁵⁷⁶ A similar situation occurred during another right-wing activist movement, Gamergate, when a famous pornographic actor spoke out in favour of the anti-feminist movement because feminists had not helped her sex worker friend who had been raped. This argument shares many similarities with these anti-Black Lives Matter

which further allows them to use any Black individual as an agent of Black Lives Matter. Any act of violence, even in self-defence, therefore becomes a crime of the movement and another spot on their record.

This leads to another campaign which is the victimization of white people placed at the forefront of the anti-Black Lives Matter movement. Reactionaries understand that, while Black-on-Black crime is powerful rhetoric in their attempts to discredit Black Lives Matter, their audiences do not particularly care about Black victims. As such, it becomes necessary to once again recentre white people as the true victims. This is done through various methods. First, falsified acts of *en masse* racialized violence against white people are established. These could take the form of editing videos recorded at protests to make the aggressors look like victims or inventing moral panics wholesale. Either way, one must convince the necessary audience that their very whiteness is putting them in danger, while ignoring that this whiteness also gives them the power to create legislations to ensure their own safety. The next step is to reappropriate Black Lives Matter talking points to either further bolster white supremacist institutions or to mock the victims. The former is done by changing the wording—ideas such as Blue Lives Matter—while the latter is done by using the words of victims as an inside joke or redefining descriptors of the victims to become synonymous with criminal activity. Either way, the reactionary side appropriates the idea of empathy in order to show just how apathetic they feel about the suffering of others.

This apathy is perhaps most successfully shown through the use of memes. Whereas the exploitation of talking points can be believed as an attempt at discourse, the use of memes is

arguments, seeing feminists as a monolith and ignoring the greater discourse in favour of one specific incident. The argument in both cases is unconvincing, but the people making such arguments are not trying to convince their opponents. They are simply trying to bolster their position and convince those on their side, people who have shown themselves willing to believe anything, as long as it comes from their compatriots.

blatantly disrespectful and a steady source of disinformation. These memes, with their ease of creation and distribution, are a powerful tool in spreading lies and insults whose ephemeral nature will inevitably ensure that they appear and disappear in front of a large audience before they can be argued and disproven. As such, the lies that they put forth become new truths of their side, ones which are repeated so often—echoing the original sentiment of a meme as a form of cultural information that reproduces through imitation—that they simply cannot be argued against, due to the argument’s inability to spread anywhere near as fast. This is further aided by the meme’s lack of citation, which becomes immediately irrelevant when the meme disappears from public view. While these memes are easy to dismiss on an academic level, their power is irrefutable within their online audience, with memes even finding their way into the house of representatives under the power of right-wing congresswoman Marjorie Greene, who does not seem to realize that the power of the meme comes from its ephemeral, wholly digital state. Meanwhile, pro-Black Lives Matter individuals have created their own memes as well—the very slogan can be described as a meme—which absolutely is the correct path to take in fighting online indoctrination.

The Black Lives Matter movement may have arguably arrived too late. Even if one were to ignore the murders of Black revolutionaries in the 1960s and on, this act of murder of average young Black individuals at the hands of police officers has definitely been going on for some time. There was less awareness, perhaps, but the likes of Amadou Diallo were being murdered near their homes for reaching for their wallets. However, its continuation, despite being a nightmare for right-wing groups, is absolutely necessary, as stories of Black individuals being murdered by police officers continue to be released steadily. A pessimistic view might see this movement as a failure. However, the pessimistic view is incorrect, at least this time. It is correct

that the Black Lives Matter movement has not halted police brutality and acts of murder. It is also true that the movement's rise has coincided with a similar rise of white supremacist racism—coincided rather than led, because this rise is arguably much more deeply related to the rise of Donald Trump and Trumpian politics than the rise of Black Lives Matter. However, this only seems to prove one thing: Black Lives Matter is working. When every act of murder by the police is not only reported on, but often with video or photographic evidence, it means that these acts are no longer seen as unimportant. Furthermore, this reporting will eventually lead to more arrests, charges and repercussions, if only for the American police departments to save face. This power scares the white supremacists and makes them grow louder, as they understand that they no longer control the narrative. All of this seems to suggest that Black Lives Matter is succeeding, but the only way to be sure is to allow the movement to play out and check back in another decade or two.

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