

**“I CAN’T BREATHE”  
RACE, POLICE, AND THE SUFFOCATION OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY**

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES IN  
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES  
YORK UNIVERSITY  
TORONTO, ONTARIO  
MARCH 2017

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## **ABSTRACT**

The role of violence when it comes to the black experience in the United States is foundational. If one looks at recent studies of slavery, such as Sven Beckett's *Empire of Cotton* and Edward Baptist's *The Half Was Never Told*, much of early American economic and political history has been predicated upon violence against black bodies. This project aims to trace the historical roots of violence vis-à-vis black bodies, and identify its modern manifestations. Through three case studies of racialised murders (Emmett Till, Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown), the thesis will attempt to illustrate the political, economic and social context behind the killings, and explore larger questions of what these deaths represent in terms of how institutions like the criminal justice system operate when it comes to people of color.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This thesis cannot be completed without the support of my supervisory committee. I wish to acknowledge Dr. David McNally, Dr. Eve Haque, and Dr. Livy Visano for their hard work and dedication to this thesis. Thank you for pushing me to pursue my research and dedicating so much of your time even given your demanding schedule.

Thank you also to my graduate program Interdisciplinary studies, namely Cheryl Van Daalen-Smith for acknowledging the importance of this work, and for giving me confidence and for always providing a warm welcoming environment.

To my parents Addiszemen Jembere and Fantahun Biadlegne, who have worked very hard and dedicated their lives to the betterment of their children. Thank you for instilling in my siblings and me, the importance of education. Thank you also to my older brother Dilnessa Asres for always being a great role model and encouraging in all my endeavors. My younger sister Lidia Asres, thank you for your support.

Finally, to my sister in law Alpha Abebe, who was the first person that pushed me to pursue graduate studies and is the only one to see this project develop from scattered brainstorm ideas to a complete thesis. Thank you for your unending support, encouragement, and critiques, which have led me to this point.

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## Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION

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This project was influenced by the racialized murders that took place in the United States. The murders of Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin and Eric Garner (and the lack of accountability of their perpetrators), among many others, have gotten many people's attention and sparked social unrest among towns across the U.S., from riots in Baltimore to an all out social movement known as BlackLivesMatter, garnering the attention of the media and lawmakers. These cases represent the consequences of a system that is designed to control and subjugate African Americans. One cannot develop any interpretation or understanding of racialised murders without understanding the larger network of institutional functions and historical legacies. The cases of Eric Garner, Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin have been compared to that of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Chicago native who was violently killed in 1955 for talking to a white woman. The perpetrators were acquitted; the killing of Till went devoid of accountability. The fact that Till, Brown, Martin and Garner died in a racialised way and the culprits went without being held accountable, has led many to make comparisons between Till's death (1955) and the recent murders from 2012-2014. These comparisons are insightful in some respects but erroneous in others. They are insightful because they pay close attention to the historical residues of violence against African Americans. However, the relationships are drawn with such close proximity that the profound levels of differences, indeed opportunities for insightful interpretation, are obfuscated. This project aims at contextualizing these murders, and using these murders as the lens to better view the political, economic and cultural infrastructure that lies at the foundation of American democracy in general and African American society in particular. These cases will not be judged in comparative modes, rather they shall be viewed as opportunities for looking at a specific element of various institutional characteristics, be they

criminal justice system, educational system, economic models and so on. Some of the overarching themes that will be analyzed in this thesis include slavery —more importantly the systematic use of violence in chattel slavery. Secondly, the institutional frameworks that constitutes Jim Crow United States. And finally, it will examine the politics and institutions the surrounding mass incarceration. These principal themes will set the background out of which we can examine the racialised murders mentioned above.

Before going any further, it is germane to clearly define the word race. Race is defined as a socially constructed entity that is designed by various means in order to categorize human beings by phenotypes such as skin color for the purpose of maintaining or keeping a social hierarchy of human beings. Race is made politically, socially and culturally. Politics forms an important role with the ways in which we understand the making of race. The thesis will look at how laws and government practices divide human beings into different categories that sustain the interest of power. Race is also made socially through discourse. For instance, that the institution of slavery, according to slave owners, is not only an economic need but was viewed as a moral institution. What lay behind such internalized beliefs is are a set of discourses that make a completely arbitrary thing such as race the very means by which institutions such as slavery are able to exist without troubling the consciousness. One of the aims of this paper will be to explore the various sets of said discourses and how they operated historically, as well as how they inform contemporary events. The process of racialization also takes place culturally. Cultural practices in the United States such as lynching and entertainment like minstrel shows played a key role in the construction of race. Lynchings or other types of mob violence were acts targeted so exclusively at African Americans that they made up part of the identity of what it meant to be

black. Lynchings, not unlike the institution of slavery, were not seen as morally reprehensible acts but rather as acts that were justified because black men in particular were viewed as a threat. Lynchings were viewed as such a benign practice that it was sometimes customary to send postcards to loved ones with pictures of lynched bodies hanging from trees. This is not the result of people being nefarious, but rather it is the product of discursive models operating in such a fashion as to normalize violence against black bodies.

### **Thesis Overview and Research Scope**

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This thesis will be divided into four parts. Each segment deals with different epochs in African American history, and illustrates the continuity that exists at the level of African American subjugation. This work is heavily reliant on works of historical, legal and political scholarship and social theory, in order to build a framework that best allows us to understand the case studies of the afore-mentioned racialised murders that anchor this thesis. We will be covering the historical significance of slavery, with specific attention given to the role of systematic violence in driving the lucrative institution. We will then look at the legacies of such violence in the emerging epoch of Jim Crow segregation; again, our focus is the function of violence in shaping what it meant to be black. We will move towards the re-criminalization of black life culminating in the War on Drugs and mass incarceration. Afterward, the thesis will look closely at the function of police in the lives of African Americans and the consequences of the over policing. And finally we will deal with contemporary moments of resistance and the possibility for change.

The second chapter will serve as the historical guide to violence during slavery. As historians such as Edward Baptist (2014) note, the role of violence was the most significant

factor that drove the institution of slavery to higher profits. But Baptist and other historians warn that the role of violence may be misunderstood. Violence during slavery was not merely a disciplinary measure. It was a systematic practice that ensured that slaves met the proper quotas that were set; if they failed they would be subject to severe physical violence or, in Baptist's term, torture. Two paramount questions arise when discussing slavery. If one were to look at the abolitionist critique, one of the main arguments they put forward is that slavery was an inefficient, unproductive source of labor that ought to end primarily for those reasons. The empirical data however shows that despite the lack of technological innovation, chattel slavery was the leading means to the acceleration of cotton production, which at the time was the most traded commodity in the world (Baptist, 2014). Therefore it was not only imperative to the growth of the United States economy but to the world economy as a whole. So, one is confronted by the inconsistency that lies in the lack of technological advances and increase in productivity, and we can explain that gap by looking closely at the role of torture in the labor camps (euphemistically referred to as plantations) across the antebellum United States. Closely analyzing slavery vis-à-vis violence is foundational in order to understand the roots of contemporary forms violence faced by African Americans.

Continuing on the theme of violence and African Americans, the second chapter will also deal with the next significant epoch of African American history, that of Jim Crow (roughly between 1877-1960s). Named after a derogatory minstrel show routine, Jim Crow was a set of segregationist laws throughout the southern United States. It is worth remembering that slavery was pragmatic in its selection of slaves. It was believed that bringing slaves from Africa would be ideal because the difference in culture and, more importantly, language would limit the



possibility of slaves ever forming any personal or political bonds with poor whites (Harvey, 2004). After the civil war, the abolition of slavery and the reconstruction period, a new order of laws had to be created in order to maintain a stark racial separation between poor whites, and their African American counterparts. These segregationist laws were backed by such propagandas as “separate but equal”, and they maintained African Americans as a marginalized population. When one sometimes thinks of the Jim Crow South, images of bathrooms and water fountains marked “colored” appear. Jim Crow laws extended to schools and hiring practices, housing, and other social faculties that were qualitatively inferior. Not detached from Jim Crow laws, vigilante mob violence known as lynching also shaped African American life and identity. Vigilante violence, as Kathleen Belew (2014) argues, serves a systematic function. Whenever a state is unable to enforce forms of subjugation due to changes in law, informal structures to uphold it emerge. Lynchings should be understood as way in which people, who enjoy levels of privilege, take it upon themselves to enforce boundaries and punitive measures against acts that they deem threatening or unacceptable. The period of lynchings are directly related to the end of slavery, and the state’s inability to enforce violence upon the black bodies without fear of legal consequence. And as slavery ended Vigilante mob violence in general and lynching in particular emerged to maintain the subjugation of African Americans amid economic and political changes.

Under the broad context of mob violence and lynchings in Jim Crow, the first case study is analyzed. Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Chicago native, was lynched and thrown into a river in Mississippi in 1955. What Till was guilty of was crossing the boundaries by allegedly talking to a white woman. There was no statute that prevented him from doing anything of that nature, but it was a tacit law that existed and for breaking that tacit law, Till was subject to vigilante

violence. This analysis of violence, as a way to uphold laws and punitive measures that cannot be enforced by local and state governments, will aid in the aim of understanding the case of Emmett Till. Such analysis also explains the lack of criminal accountability for the perpetrators of the murder. The case of Emmett Till's murder also goes to explain the sexual dynamic of Lynchings. The fact that the culprits of this murder thought a black boy talking to a white woman garnered a death sentence speaks volumes to the discursive nature that shaped the frameworks of such violence. Like all forms of violence, lynchings were accompanied by ample amount of propaganda, and most of this propaganda begins and ends with fabrication and evidence-free accusations of lynch victims as rapists, or as having embodied sexual threats of one kind or another. We can see this for example in the case of Sam Hose (and many others), who was lynched in 1899. In such cases the justificatory foundation had remained consistently that of the victims being rape threats against white women, with the aim of destroying the wholesome white family. Such high levels of propaganda had infiltrated media outlets across the U.S and the discursive nature of lynchings was saturated with justifying discourses related to black sexual threat. Analyzing such elements of the bigger societal role is key to understanding the motivation behind Till's murder and the intransigence of the court to produce a guilty verdict despite the evidence, as well as the national and international attention it gathered.

The next two chapters of this thesis form the main body. They will rely upon the historical analyses of the previous chapter, and explore contemporary forms of racial violence and racialization in the United States. Chapter Three will look closely at various economic and political shifts in the United States. It will focus on the neoliberal shift in the American economy, and the effect it had on African Americans. The neoliberal direction is also complemented with

the high rates of imprisonment of African Americans throughout the United States. Attention will be given to the “War on Drugs” which intensified under the Reagan administration. This so called war, which was initially received with surprise and resistance among law enforcement due to the decline of drug crime, led the United States to having the biggest prison population in the world. Most noteworthy is that, the majority of prisoners that were sent away during this ‘war’ were African American males, particularly poor African American males. Analyzing works by scholars such as Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2006), Loïc Wacquant (2001, 2003) and Michelle Alexander (2010), and others, the thesis will attempt to explain the process of criminalizing black life, and expose the relationship between mass incarceration, the emergence of neoliberal policies as well as the War on Drugs. For instance with regards to the economical dynamic of mass incarceration, It is no coincidence that the War on Drugs and mass incarceration occurred at nearly the same time as when neoliberal policies were being implemented, which resulted in many industrial jobs either being shipped overseas or moving to white suburban areas, and mass incarceration of African Americans is, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2006) notes, directly related to high black unemployment. The thesis will also explore the political dimensions of the War on Drugs and mass incarceration. The War on Drugs was fueled by a specific set of political aims that, as it turns out, were not very new. The War on Drugs, and the accompanied propaganda, set out to perpetuate a very real racial divide in the United States. We can see this aim behind the policies, which relegated most police officers to survey poor African American neighborhoods, even though evidence shows that both black and white people in the United States consume illegal drugs at roughly the same rate (Alexander, 2010). The motivation is also evident in various tools that were used in order to sell the War on Drugs. For instance, much television features images of a menacing black man. Moreover images of “crack whores” and “crack

babies” have flooded TV and other media outlets. Focus will also be given to political labels such as tough on crime vs. soft on crime, and the criminalizing effect they have on African Americans.

The mass carceral regime that was driven by the War on Drugs and ‘tough on crime’ movement cannot be understood without the analyses of the ghetto. The ghetto is defined as a “sociospatial device that enables a dominant status group in an urban setting simultaneously to ostracize and exploit a subordinate group endowed with negative symbolic capital” (Wacquant, 2000, Pg. 383). The ghetto as an African American institution saw its inception long before mass incarceration. Due to ugly violence and employment opportunities that opened up in Northern United States after the outbreak of the First World War, many African Americans moved to the north. Awaiting them was the ghetto. Although it was less rigid and fearsome than the southern United States they had fled, which expressed its commitment to racial difference often in violent forms such as lynchings, it was nevertheless encompassing and constricting. The ghettos of the North — which are informed by legacies such as that of Chicago’s ‘black belt’ policies that place the black poor and working class in a distant space that is underfunded, crime ridden and overcrowded — are closely tied to prison. As Wacquant (2002) argues, both the prison and the ghettos operate as tandem institutions to control and regulate the black working class. The ghetto makes it easier for the privileged class to exploit black labor, while at the same time keeping black bodies at arms length; the prison, on the hand serves “to warehouse the precarious and deproletarianized fractions of the black working class” (Wacquant, 2002, Pg. 25). This institutional structure, much like lynchings in the south, definitively illustrates what societal positions blacks ought to occupy.

Here now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, no laws exist that directly state blacks must occupy the ghettos or be absent from areas outside of it. But political and economical forces have pushed black folk into inferior geographical location i.e. the ghetto. And such spatial segregation has made it a tacit law that blacks occupy this space and when they step out they risk being deemed a threat and met with punitive measures. As discussed earlier, vigilante violence can perpetuate a law that can no longer be enforced by mainstream governmental and judiciary bodies. The killing of an unarmed African American teen, Trayvon Martin, by white neighborhood watch captain, George Zimmerman on February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012, becomes salient as it serves to symbolize vividly the relationship between race, space and criminality. Martin was visiting his father in a gated community, after which he proceeded to return home until he encountered George Zimmerman, an encounter that would ultimately spell Martin's death. The minute details that were contested over the trial and all over the media will have little importance here. However, many structural elements of the trial do illuminate some startling features of the criminal justice system. Especially the fact that in the trial, out of six women of the jury that were selected five of them were white women and one of them was Hispanic. The absence of black people from the jury is emblematic of a structural problem. As Michelle Alexander (2010) points out, black people have been barred from serving on juries because courts have

Tolerated the systematic exclusion of blacks from juries by allowing lower courts to accept 'silly' and even 'superstitious' reasons for striking black jurors, to make matters worse a large percentage (about 30%) are automatically excluded from jury service because they have been labeled felons (pg. 194).

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These two factors, argues Alexander, have contributed a great deal to juries being homogeneous and unrepresentative of African Americans. She argues that this has left black defendants subject to implicit and explicit biases of all white juries. On the other hand we can see that such structural flaws can have another inequitable outcome: white defendants who commit crimes against African Americans are treated more leniently, as showcased by Anwar et al. (2012) who show that “in cases with no blacks in the jury pool, black defendants are convicted at an 81 percent rate and white defendants at a 66 percent rate” (pg. 3). Hence when George Zimmerman entered his trial, it is safe to say the likelihood of a guilty verdict was minuscule. The aim in this chapter therefore is to explore the various legal and discursive models that have shaped both the murder of Martin as well as the acquittal of Zimmerman. The thesis will attempt to correlate the dominant political and economic power structure that exists in the United States, while juxtaposing it to the methods by which this particular case was covered by media outlets. I argue that the fashion of coverage that is made evident on Martin’s death and Zimmerman’s trial illuminate the larger discourse that aims to vilify African American males as threats.

Chapter Four will continue to expand on the areas where we see most the historical continuities with regards to race in the United States. Three components will be addressed. First, the issue of over-militarized police force. Second, the permeating of police in schools, and the school to prison pipeline which is a set of policies that effectively limit the opportunities for education and expands the prospects of arrests for students of color. Third, the legal and institutional makeup behind the lack of criminal accountability of the police who engage in unlawful killings of unarmed African Americans. The militarization of police is one of the

legacies of the ‘war’ on drugs. It was during the early stages of this so-called ‘war’ that the federal government dedicated extensive resources for local police in the form of sophisticated arsenal that literally turned a slogan into an actual war (Alexander, 2010). During this process of militarization, which is not disconnected from the overall security agenda of the United State vis-à-vis its foreign policy, the growth of paramilitary forces was being utilized. For instance, the usage of Special Weapons and Tactics or (SWAT) teams became more normalized as the War on Drugs was taking hold. These forces were originally introduced for responding to extraordinary emergency situations (Murch, 2015). The militarized nature of the United States police force and practices are fuelled by political as well as pecuniary motives, and this has been shown to have a disproportional effect on people of color residing in the ghettos.

Chapter four continues on the theme of police practices and the pernicious impact they have on people of color, focusing on the level of police presence in schools in the United States. What is referred to as the school to prison pipeline is the cascade of changes taking place that alter the ways in which schools operate; changes which are grounded upon, but not limited to, zero tolerance and neoliberal principles (Price, 2009). Some of these changes include, police presence on school grounds, the market-oriented view of school, the closing of “low performing schools” (mostly located in the inner cities) and the criminalization of student misbehavior. Such development has desacralized schools from sites of education to apparatuses of state and market discipline. It is important to understand the trend of school-to-prison pipeline as a set of policies that do not exist in a vacuum, but are indeed a manifestation of political and discursive elements that complement neoliberal principles, which states that every organ of the social body must abide by the rules of the market. As it relates to schools in inner cities, this has resulted in cuts to

funding, privatization and closure. This is complemented by zero tolerance policies that aim to criminalize student misbehaviors. For example, there is a trend in the United States of making truancy a crime, which means students or their parents can be arrested or children can be moved to foster homes for missing classes. It is also the case that student misbehavior on school grounds is becoming a criminal matter; students who misbehave can find themselves in a jail cell (Lipman, 2011) instead of detention, and the overwhelming number of students and parents that are being abused by such punitive laws are from poor communities of color. This chapter will link these institutional frameworks and to juxtapose them to the last case study case study Michael Brown, an 18-year-old man unarmed man killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. It will attempt to answer the question of how school to prison pipeline, mass incarceration, the War on Drugs and other legal and political realities contribute to the death of Brown.

The final and concluding chapter will look at how community organizations and nation wide activism bring about discursive and policy changes. The murders of Eric Garner and Michael Brown, which occurred merely 13 days apart and resulted in both officers leaving without indictment, has sparked a grassroots national movement aiming to bring to attention the high levels of institutional racism that exist in the United States. The Black Lives Matter Movement, which emerged shortly after the two aforementioned killings of unarmed black men, I believe clearly displays how grassroots community organization can have an impact on discourse and perhaps even on policy. For instance, recently activists from the movement have interrupted various Democratic and Republican town hall meetings as well as organized rallies where the issue of institutional racism is brought to the forefront, to the point where candidates



such as Bernie Sanders have echoed the various points made by the activist. Further, the thesis will provide a critical analysis at the arguments and tactics of Black Lives Matter, its strength as well as its shortcoming. The concluding chapter will also study the significance of these protests to African Americans, and what that means to those of us living in Canada. The chapter will deal with what can be gained from the grassroots organizations in the United States against police killing of African Americans. And it also looks at parallels between political, social, cultural and economic forces in the United States that give way to a dehumanization of blackness, and affect anti-black racism in Canada, with a focus on Toronto. Toronto is an ideal situation for comparative analysis, because law enforcement and public policy has demonstrated its indifference to black lives, in similar fashion to the United States. Moreover, Toronto is also at the moment of writing this thesis, becoming a site where grassroots organizations are rallying against police killing of blacks and systematic racism, and demanding justice and accountability from police officers and law enforcement in general. Interestingly, these organizations have embraced the Black Lives Matter Movement in the United States and even adapted the same name, and Black Lives Matter Toronto (BLMTO) is also ignited by the killing of unarmed black man Andrew Loku, in much the same way that the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States was sparked by a few tragedies of police violence against African Americans. The African American experience, is sometimes treated as something that Canada's institutions cannot immediately compare to, however these activists in BLMTO demonstrate that the killing of African Americans at the hands of law enforcement is an institutional behavior that is more relatable than one might think.

## Theoretical Framework

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In her book *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2016) describes the police killing of Michael Brown and Eric Garner and ascertains that the destructive trend of killing unarmed black males constitutes state violence, and furthermore she argues they are part of the DNA of American society. Her analysis proves particularly useful in framing the theoretical approach of this thesis, as it examines violence against African Americans as neither new, isolated nor random rather, as an institution of its own that correlates directly to the economic, social and political realities of the United States as a whole. In broader terms, this involves analyzing the forms of marginalization of African Americans – whether it is imprisonment, barriers to accessing employment, or poor quality education – as part of larger project of state control. One cannot begin to understand these recent racial killing without understanding the larger political and economic projects of the state. When we analyze the broad context that permits these killings to take place, we see that various economic and political forces are at play. For example the lynching or the public mob killings of African Americans, primarily in the southern United States, are closely connected to the need to control the black labor in the south after the abolishment of slavery. Hence to analyze the context of racial violence in the post civil war South is also to look at the economic conditions of the time. This research frames racial killing in the United States as the direct outcome of a statewide social and political, and cultural project. Indeed, if racism is institutional, as civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael suggested, and these racial murders are manifestations of institutional racism, then that begs the question, what institutional framework or institutional behaviour perpetuates the outcome of black males being murdered at the hands of police or vigilante violence? It is also important to look at the ways in which race and racism are discussed and understood. To that end, the methodology for

this research uses both qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the historical development of racial violence as doled out by the state towards African Americans.

## **Methodology**

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We have defined race, as a social construction that hold no scientific foundation, but is a social reality nonetheless. The means by which such social constructions become real are through discourse. Premised upon Foucauldian literature and thought, “discourse can be defined as an institutionalized way of talking that regulates and reinforces action and thereby exerts power ... Discourses exercise power in a society because they institutionalize and regulate ways of talking, thinking and acting” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 35). In the case of this research, which looks at violence perpetuated against African Americans, it is central to identify the ways in which race and racism is discussed, and how they inform, and are informed by the social realities. That is, to look at how the current discourse on race in the United States explain, not only the killing of unarmed black males by police or vigilante, but also the various economic and political marginalizations that African Americans are subject to. The thesis will look at, for instance, the mass incarceration of black males, unemployment and spatial segregation, access to quality education and juxtaposed to the discourses that accompany the policies and political decisions that produce such effects. And more importantly it will attempt to outline the role of discourse in producing knowledge that conforms to power interests. This form of discourse analyses is referred to as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Philips and Hardy define CDA as a method of analysis that focuses “on the role of discursive activity in constituting and sustaining unequal power relations. Critical discourse analysis should describe and explain how power...is enacted, reproduced or legitimated by the talk and text of dominant groups and institutions” (2002, p. 25). This method is interpretive, and as such, will seek to study various texts, including

historical moments (the killing of Till for instance), newspaper articles, television coverage, speeches, scholarship and cultural representation, as a unit of discourse that produces a specific set of knowledge about race vis-à-vis African Americans which abide by the limits and regulations of power.

While racism, particularly anti black racism, has clear roots in the cheap labor that slaves provided, we should also note that this economic policy was accompanied by various justifications, scholastic and otherwise, which made it a legitimate business institution. When we look at the current state of African American oppression, the justifications that are produced are filtered through the idea that the United States is a “colorblind society” or “post racial” society, meaning that American society is no longer a state where racism exists in any tangible way but rather it is something that is interpersonal, and a result of an individual’s ignorance or bigotry (calling a black man “nigger” for example), not an institutional characteristic. In his book *Racism Without Racists*, Eduardo Bonilla Silva (2013) explains the contours of what he calls “new racism” – a package of non-racial ways of suppressing African Americans politically, economically and even culturally by engaging in both discourse and policy formation that do not contain any reference to race but nevertheless perpetuate the marginalization of African Americans. A recent example is the voter I.D. laws in mostly southern states. In broad terms, representatives and lawmakers pushing for such laws, which would require registered voters to present photo I.D. before they are permitted to vote, are presented as regulatory means of addressing the problem of voter fraud. There is little compelling evidence to suggest that fraudulent voting is a serious problem in the United States. These laws which are enforced strictly in Republican dominated states, serve to disenfranchise the poor and racial minorities

who reside in states like Texas, where Voter I.D. laws are quite strict (Simmons, 2013). The use of non-racial language to pass laws that have a clear disproportional impact among racial minorities is part of the discursive tool that is used by concentrations of power to maintain political influence.

Another contour of a “color blind” society is cultural racism in which whites as well as the powerful attempt to articulate the clear differences that exist among black and white citizens as stemming, not from material differences but rather, cultural differences. For instance Fox News personality Bill O’Reilly has stated that the lower socio-economic condition of many African Americans is a result of children raised without fathers<sup>1</sup> and high rates of black teen pregnancy (as cited in Sandmeyer, Marshall and Lowndes, 2014). Such arguments have become the launching pads for most commenters, politicians and civil rights leaders to blame blacks for their inferior socio-economic conditions. President Obama, who has been labeled as the proof that United States is a “color blind” society, time and again has relied on these racist characterizations of African Americans when addressing issues of race and racism more generally. In a convocation speech at the historically black Morehouse College, he scolded the graduates with patronizing language, telling them “no more excuses”, unaware of the irony, the President would continue...“when it comes to getting an education, too many of our young

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<sup>1</sup> This explanation that suggests that many African American children grow up without fathers, may have some validity in mere facts, but a crucial element missing is the fact that many black father have been locked away in prison due to the policies of the War on Drugs and ‘get tough movement’ which made the United States the largest, in the words of Loic Wacquant, warehouse of mostly “deproletarianized” people, most of whom are African American males. While the disappearance of black father is discussed the reasons for it are left devoid of scrutiny.

people just can't be bothered. Today, instead of walking miles every day to school, they're sitting on couches for hours playing video games, watching TV. Instead of dreaming of being a teacher or a lawyer or a business leader, they're fantasizing about being a baller or a rapper” (as cited in Coates, 2013) – employing the stereotype of African Americans as lazy, the president is perpetuating the idea that the disadvantaged position of African Americans is the fault of their lethargic attitude, and not the result of governmental policies. Of course, what is missing from his speech is also the ways in which his policies have been responsible for the closing of many public schools in inner cities, which results in African American students having reduced access to quality education. He also uses this platform in order to use elements of black culture in order to blame blacks for their marginalization. There is nothing wrong with aspiring to be a hip-hop artist, anymore than wanting to be a painter or an author, the only difference is rap or hip hop music and basketball are cultural phenomena closely connected to African Americans as a whole, and hence regarded as an inferior cultural quality that is limiting black people from achieving success. Obama’s speech demonstrates the ways in which discourses on race and racism can be subject to mere stereotypes and cultural blaming, without ever discussing systems of wealth distribution, employment and educational policies and the impact they have on African Americans.

## Positionality

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Defining my positionality as it pertains to this research is one of the most ambiguous tasks. When my graduate studies commenced it was my aim to juxtapose recent cases of racialised murder in Canada and United States, however due to various factors, I chose to focus on the American cases, and that can have some alienating effect. I was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and raised in Toronto, Canada, so the struggles of race and racism in the United States are not ones I can claim any direct tangible relation with. However many of my own experiences and feelings towards racism in Canada have informed my interest in this this research. As a black male living in Toronto, the American political and social atmospheres are not directly applicable to me, but much of the experience of black males in United States, in many ways, mirror Canadian black male experiences. Moreover the cultural influence that deems American black males as threats spills, in apparent ways, to the structures of racism in Canada. Indeed given the similarities between the forms of racism in these two states, it would be difficult for me claim an outsider position. On the other hand it would not be genuine to claim an insider position, for although similarities exist, vast levels of difference exist in the nature of race and racism in Canada and United States, making it difficult for me to be an insider.

That is all to say, I don't approach this research as purely an outsider and objective observer. Indeed the very idea of objectivity is one that I mistrust greatly. I'd argue that one's ideas and observations are filtered by one's position in society, his or her relation to power, class, race, gender, etc. The American historian Howard Zinn (1991) states,

Perhaps the closest we can get to objectivity is a free and honest marketplace of subjectivities, in which we can examine both orthodox accounts of the past

and unorthodox ones, commonly known facts and hitherto ignored facts. But we need to try to discover (which is not easy) what items are missing from that marketplace and insist that they be available for scrutiny. We can then decide for ourselves, based on our own values, which accounts are most important and most useful (42).

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Therefore, following Zinn, it would be prudent to let go of any attachments to ‘objectivity’ and come to terms with the fact that events, be they social, historical or cultural cannot be analyzed outside the boundaries of one’s own mental filtration systems. Hence, it is my hope that this thesis will be viewed not as an ‘objective’ product, but rather as a work of a particular individual with a particular set of lenses which shape the ways in which we absorb any set of knowledge. This of course is not an argument for being closed to ideas and arguments that contradict one’s own; however I feel it is of grave importance to state that knowledge and truths — when talking about history, politics and social organizations — are rarely set in stone, rather they are complex and malleable, and thus subject to the vicissitudes brought on by time, circumstances and experiences. I have no intention of discussing the murders of Michael Brown or Trayvon Martin in any ‘objective’ manner, in much the same way I would not give any legitimacy to KKK speeches by assenting them to an ‘objective’ analysis; instead I would like to present a research that is undertaken in order to understand these racialised murders and present new ways of discussing them. The work should be judged by the persuasiveness of its arguments and originality of thought. Not in its features of objectivity.



## Limitations

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In writing this thesis, many blind spots can be detected. When one attempts to discuss the nature of race and racism in the United States, the first thing encountered is how different forms of racism exist for different peoples. My focus is on new ways of thinking in relation to the recent racialised murders that have taken place against black men. Even in so doing that, I would like to add that the cases that are looked are mere examples, and that deaths, like Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, symbolize a plethora of others who have met the same fate but did not garner a place in the headlines. Furthermore the case studies are all male, and the unique place of subjugation that women of color face inside American society is also absent from this thesis. The thesis also is not focused on the plight of indigenous peoples, Hispanics, LGBTQ men and women of color, and trans women of color. As we focus on the killings of unarmed black men by police and vigilantes, we must remember that cases like Jessie Hernandez, the unarmed 16 year-old queer woman who was shot and killed by police in Denver, Colorado, are becoming more and more commonplace. The thesis looks at the evolution of racism as it is encompassed in the overall makeup of the United States. Hence the analysis that pertains to the complexities and nuances of local institution and people is limited. As instructional racism in the United States is examined through the lens of historical epochs such as slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration, it will have a limiting effect because these trends are implemented in various forms in different location with varying degrees of impact.

## Chapter 2

### Roots of Anti Black Violence

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*“I’ve been a victim:  
The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.  
They lynch me still in Mississippi.”*

*Langston Hughes.*

### Slavery And Violence

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Considered one of the original sins of the United States, the institution of chattel slavery —along with the extermination of the indigenous peoples — is foundational to the establishment of American social and economic bodies. After the land confiscations, genocide and displacement of indigenous peoples, a source of cheap labor was needed. In earlier segments, this need was established by indentured servitude, facilitated between Europeans. However, as the European immigrant population was becoming more and more assimilated to the mainstream political and economical atmosphere, the constant supply of cheap labor was thinning (Harvey, 2004). The solution to this problem was finding a way to a large supply of cheap labor, while at the same time assure that the labor force will be alienated and divorced from any mainstream associations. Kidnapped Africans became the solution. African slaves were strategically chosen because it was reasoned that they came from a part of the world that was different in language, religion, traditions and customs, hence their ability to integrate with other people of low economic and social standard, be they indigenous peoples or poor whites, was diminutive (Harvey, 2004). The importance of chattel slavery cannot be overstated when one discusses early American economics. Slaves serve two important functions in the economic models. They were both cheap labor that produced a commodity as well as commodities themselves that were

bought and sold. Slavery though has been somewhat misunderstood, and the ways in which it is discussed has led to some erroneous claims.

One fallacy is that the emergence of American capitalism had little to do with slavery, although we can see that slavery had many roles to play in many aspects of American capitalism, from the credit system to banking systems, the institution of chattel slavery has had a profound and lasting impact on early American capitalism. A second fallacy is that the institution of slavery was a Southern United States problem and had little to do with Northern United States. Conversely, the magnitude of slavery was felt, not only in the North but also the world economy; in fact the manufacturing of cotton was heavily dependent on both markets and capital from the Northern United States and Britain, including mills and factories that manufacture cotton products. Amidst these debates, one crucial factor has been left to the periphery among historians until very recently. The most important element of cotton production was in fact the picking of the cotton, yet a machinery solution was not introduced until the 1950s, begging the question, what accounts for growth of cotton production by enslaved people from 1.4 million pounds in 1800 to over a billion pounds by 1860 (Baptist, 2014). It was innovations in physical torture that were responsible for it. Torture was not merely for disciplinary purposes; it was applied in a very calibrated and systematized form.

Physical violence towards enslaved Africans has long been an accepted exercise. Even prior to the importance of cotton, violence against slaves has been utilized for the purposes of capital. The first site was the slave trade. Although the importation of slaves from Africa into the United States was banned in 1808, the domestic slave trade was fully operational, albeit in a

clandestine fashion. Between the years 1790 and 1860 approximately one million African American captives were forced across state lines from North to South to serve as slaves (Bell, 2013). By the year 1841 hundreds of vessels full of slaves, had made the journey from the “southeastern coast of North America, from Virginia, along the Gulf Coast, and on to New Orleans; as would, in succeeding years, hundreds more” (Jonson, 2008). Moreover, auctions of slaves, particularly in New Orleans, were also the spaces of much physical coercion, especially in the city jail, which was available to slave traders at a low cost. The violence continued on plantations, where slave owners used whipping and threats of physical violence to extract labor from their slaves.

Less discussed was the very capitalist nature of the ways in which the violence was perpetrated. Violence was not new to plantations, but the systematic nature of violence became more sophisticated during the cotton revolution, when cotton became the central commodity in the world and the picking of cotton an important element of extracting the raw material. And, the innovations and creativity that it took to pick cotton faster and more efficiently became a burden not on the capitalist or the overseers but on the slaves themselves. Enslavers would continually implement new ways of surveillance as well as calibrated time and torture in order to force enslaved people to invent ways of making their labor more efficient. Baptist (2014) explains that slaves would be subject to whippings if they fell short of their quotas. For example, if an enslaved person’s quota was thirty pounds, and he or she was only able to pick ten pounds, they would be subject to twenty whippings. If the enslaved person was to surpass their quotas from thirty pounds to forty pounds, forty pounds would be their new quotas, and if they come short of meeting that target, they would be whipped based on the number of pounds they were short. This

kind of calibrated torture, Baptist argues, is not mentioned much amongst historians and economists. Instead, torture of slaves — which is rarely called torture — is discussed as something that occurs in order to discipline or punish those who crossed boundaries. The discussion on torture is important because firstly, it illuminates the very ways by which physical violence contributed to economic growth of the United States and abroad, and secondly it informs how violence operated in the demarcation of the black body from the white body.

The many innovations in torture are directly linked to the economic boom that was felt in the United States due to the popularity of cotton. While at the same time mills and factories in Britain were innovating new machinery for the manufacturing of cotton products not much changed in the harvesting of raw material in American southwest, Baptist states that,

The total gain in productivity per picker from 1800 to 1860 was almost 400 percent. And from 1819 to 1860, the increase in the efficiency of workers who tended spinning machines in Manchester cotton mills was about 400 percent. Meanwhile, the efficiency of workers in weaving mills improved by 600 to 1,000 percent. Therefore, even as textile factories harnessed increasingly complex machinery to more powerful non-human energy sources, even moving from water to steam power, cotton pickers produced gains in productivity similar to those of cotton factories (2014, pg. 128).

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This utilization of violence would perhaps best illustrate the nature of the African American experience for years to come. When talking about slavery and violence, and how that informs the present, two points are shown. First, the nature of slavery was very much a straightforward attempt to extract labor from human beings, which was done in such a way that African American labor was being extracted at an increasing rate while at the same time the enslaved

people themselves were kept at a distance in terms of political and social inclusion. The second point is that the torture that was employed on the backs of African Americans was unique not only in its capitalist features, but also in the fact that during the process of slavery, embedded ideas about African Americans were being created. The idea that African Americans were mere resources was a discursive element of the time. Even among some white abolitionist circles the debate had less to do with equating African Americans as human beings, and more with the fact that slavery was an inefficient form of labor management. In this scheme of thought, African Americans were still seen as property. Moreover, the violence that has been inflicted among enslaved people has led many people to fear for slave revolts, not unlike the one that took place in Haiti (1791-1804). This fear of slave revolt seeped itself even among some white abolitionists who viewed the possibility of slave revolt as a bigger evil than slavery. Furthermore, the fact that African American slaves were subject to severe torture marks an important separation between black and white bodies. Although certain punitive measures were to be expected upon white transgressors, it was an exception. Hence the institution of slavery, and the very systematized, calibrated and normalized usage of torture, started in many ways the defining experiences of what it means to be black in the United States.

### **Lynching as Terrorism**

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On April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1865, Southern General Robert E. Lee signed a treaty with Union General Ulysses S. Grant that would lead to the end of the American Civil War. After which southern Confederate states accepted Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. This would mean that southern slaves would be free under the law. Months after the Civil War had ended, Mississippi, along with other southern states, began passing laws intended to control the newly

freed slaves through formal legal channels. After the fall of slavery, white elites turned to the courts for help in regulating black labor. Legislators in several southern states passed laws, which included systems of county courts, to control freed black people. Those laws, as Waldrep (1996) notes, "...required freed slaves to have written evidence of employment, forbade interracial marriages, and barred Blacks from testifying against whites in court" (pg. 1426). Most illustrative of the desire of white elites to control black labor was the courts' decisions to grant authority for whites to arrest any freed black man who had violated an employees' contract and left (Waldrep, 1996). Black Codes codified various changes to the legal apparatus in order to establish continuity of a status quo amidst the end of formal slavery. There was however, a dangerous force that secured the control and subjugation of African Americans (and African American labor in particular), namely terrorism. Terrorism, being used for the purposes of control and subjugation of black people after the Civil War, was more than acts of grotesque violence being implicated upon individuals. It also served to dichotomize people on the bases of race. While during the period when Jim Crow laws were being implemented in the southern United States, separating public institutions and facilities for black and white residents, a more violent act of terror known as lynching was achieving the same goal of racial demarcation.

The term "lynching", as anthropologist Andrew S. Buckser (1992) notes, is derived from the name of an American revolutionary war colonel Charles Lynch. During the epilogue years of that war, the breakdown of local government in Lynch's home county had left many farmers vulnerable to theft both by bandits and by British loyalists. Therefore, Buckser (1992) continues, Lynch and the local landowners systematized an informal legal system, which detained suspected criminals, even held trials, and carried out punitive measures of convicted thieves. In

the coming years, Lynch's law came to refer to any punishment of criminals that was outside legal boundaries (1992). The development of lynching, which has become one of the defining elements of African American experience in the Jim Crow south, emerged later on. As Buckser notes,

lynching came to involve capital punishment exclusively, using a few fairly standardized methods of killing and often severe torture. Secondly, it began focusing mainly on black criminals. Although white criminals were lynched as well, their proportion among lynching victims declined steadily, and the image of a black victim at a stake came to dominate both Southern and Northern perceptions of the practice (1992, pg. 12).

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Lynching is defined “as an extralegal killing perpetrated by three or more individuals who claimed their murderous actions were intended to uphold justice or tradition” (Baily & Snedker 2011, pg. 845). And during the period of 1880s to 1940s more than 2,462 lynchings of African American men, women and children took place at the hands of mostly white mobs (Tolnay & Beck, 1995). Most lynchings in the United States did take place in the southern United States, but lynchings also occurred in places like Delaware and California. Lynchings, as Tolnay & Beck (1995) assert, are a clear display of terrorism that performed the task of keeping control of the African American labor force. And these acts of terror, like any acts of terrorism, were justified through a variety of moral as well as cultural channels that made them virtually a norm. The act of torture and murder of African Americans was seen devoid any of its reprehensible characteristics. In fact, quite the contrary was true. Lynchings were events that were spectacular in nature, in which cultural attractions such as singing, orations and trade of souvenirs were inculcated in a way that made lynchings, not as acts of murder, but rather festive events in which people took collective parts in asserting white supremacy and black subjugation.



Lynching derives its spectacular nature from the tradition of public execution, as well as the legal and religion rituals that accompanied it. Among Southerners, it was believed that this extralegal torture and killing of mostly African Americans was necessary because the ending of slavery and the emancipation of slaves had bequeathed too many rights to black people, and thus the formal legal system failed to show enough respect for white victims (Woods, 2011). In reality, the legal infrastructure had made it so that black people had inadequate representation, hasty trials and disproportionate conviction rates in relation to whites — a pattern not unfamiliar in today's context. Moreover, African Americans were more likely to face the death penalty than their white counterparts (Woods, 2011). In *Lynching and Spectacle*, Wood (2011) investigated the various social and cultural norms of lynchings' social acceptability. She demonstrates, from approximately 1880s and 1890s, white Southerners attended state-sanctioned public executions of convicted criminals, which introduced the notion of public killing as something that was socially accepted. Woods argues that, because lynchings were intimately connected with the traditions and rituals of public execution, many southerners fail to acknowledge the cleavage that existed between the legal and illegal, thus the argument follows that lynching was just as legitimate as public executions, hence socially acceptable.

Woods focuses on the spectacular nature of lynching and the ways in which the rituals of public execution permeated lynching practices. According to Woods, public executions were gradually eliminated for concerns over the moral degeneracy of the population and from criticisms of Northern elites that viewed public execution as an element of barbarity, hence the emergence of lynching. The discrepancy lies in the fact that whites did not predominantly attend

public executions of blacks. In fact it was mostly black residents who attended the public hanging of African Americans. But during lynchings, whites constituted a majority of the spectators. Michael Trotti (2011) explains that the many religious elements vis-à-vis African American attendees of public execution played a major role in the move from public to private execution. Public execution of a black man, although a norm in the South, nevertheless presented a peculiar challenge to white authority. The problem was that, black religious revivals were taking place at the scaffold of a condemned black man. Trotti (2011) argues the moment at the scaffold was a stage where a salvation of the condemned would take place, and the many religious experiences from singing to dancing seem to undermine the horror that was taking place. Indeed the scaffold was, in some ways, a tragedy reversed. On the scaffold we see a tacit conflict between white authority and black agency, in the form of religion. Thus it was, as Trotti describes it, “the display of African American piety and religious fervor in front of a vast black and white congregation. African Americans set the horror of the moment within their own rich Christian context, appropriating the event to their own ends” (pg. 201).

Therefore the moves from public execution to private execution can be met with at least two varying explanations. On the one hand, it was decided that the social and moral integrity was being undermined as people’s appetites for public execution grew more extreme, and in resistance to the move, extralegal channels were pursued in order to restore the disturbed pattern of social behavior. Another reason is one provided by Trotti, which states that the scaffold became the very congregation where black people condemned to die, mostly on dubious or false charges, claimed their salvation through a cultural appropriation that took place in the form of religious ceremony. The scaffold then, proved a space where agency of African American bodies

was expressed freely. The expression of piety among black people at the scaffold created a sense of insecurity regarding the threat posed by African Americans. Trotti's argument about the role of religion is indeed interesting and convincing, but it does not go to the extent of explaining the phenomenon of lynching in its complete form. We should see Trotti's assertion, in relation to lynching, as demonstrating southern whites' complete disdain of any form of black agency. And this in turn might explain Southern whites resorting to terrorism — in order to mitigate any sense of black agency. The end of public executions, whether the cause was religious appropriation vis-à-vis black victims and black spectators or concerns over the moral fabric of the South or both, led to a campaign of terrorism against African Americans.

Lynchings were illegal and terroristic, but it would not be entirely accurate to label them as 'terrorism', because terrorism implies that an individual or group of individuals operates outside social, legal, institutional and moral boundaries in order to achieve some form of political agenda. Lynchings are better defined as state/state-sanction terrorism, because while these acts of terror were outside formal boundaries, they did fully operate within a climate of institutional and systematic racism that was prevalent in the southern United States. Consequently, the brutal murder of these people did not provoke significant reprehension. Furthermore the term state/state-sanction terrorism is more accurate because, as Kathleen Belew (2013) suggests, vigilante forms of terror are acts that are conducted in order to restore a balance of power that official means can no longer sustain. She argues that people who conduct a vigilante terror are people who have the most at stake, and restoring such power structures would aptly play in their favor. As she puts it, "only persons who claim systemic power... can carry out vigilante violence such as lynching"(2013, pg. 92).

With this in mind, one must ask what power structures are being protected or restored by lynchings of African Americans. In their book *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930*, Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck (1995) demonstrate with statistical studies the relationship between the economic forces and the rise in lynchings. They show that as the price of cotton was on the decline, along with the demand, lynchings of African Americans peaked. The 1890's, a decade they describe as 'bloody,' follows a pattern of decreased demand for cotton along with populism and agrarian protest. They conclude that patterns of cotton prices and the terrors of lynching are entangled. In their finding, we see the opposing effect that follows an increase in cotton prices leads to a decreased in lynching. These acts therefore, were performing economic and social duties that were in the interests of the state power. By subjecting African Americans to mob violence, the vigilante actors were able to maintain control and subjugation of black labor in the aftermath of slavery.

For these reasons, amongst others, Jacqueline Goldsby (2006) argues that mob violence went unchecked, and in fact she goes on to argue that such forms of terror were normalized. Additionally, in her book *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature*, Goldsby asserts that lynching's persistence is connected to the new development in media and communications that allowed many whites across the United States to witness the spectacle of lynching in a more normalized fashion, which led to a high tolerance towards the violence and terrorism that many African Americans face in the Southern United States. Lynching was not merely a form of racist southern vigilante violence, but it should also be understood in the context of northern complacency and government inaction. Acquiesce and procrastination of

both the North and the federal government is rooted in their vested interests of docile black labor force. In the case of the government, Goldsby (2006) explains, that by nullifying African Americans rights of citizenship, the mobs were granted tacit permission to perform a duty that she argues was necessary in order to bring about modernization of the state, meaning maintain the same racial power dynamics in the face of changing circumstances, i.e. abolishing of slavery and 'freedom' of black people. With regards to the North, or indeed the rest of the United States, lynchings were normalized by new media outlets, and the terrorizing effect of lynchings had broader reach than the confines of the South, and this results in creating a terrorized population of African Americans that is throttled into political subordination and labor docility. In our chronological look into lynching's history, we see that the same media outlets that have served to normalize the horrors of lynchings and terrorize black people all over the United States into submission, would be used in order to pose serious challenges to the practice of lynching, and expose the true horrors of this cultural and political institution.

### **Emmett Till and Resistance**

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One event in particular is illustrative of the ways in which media sources play a role in challenging the status quo that has marginalized and terrorized African Americans. The events surrounding Till's murder, funeral and trial of his killers are significant because first, it is a case where we see an event, that is made into a media spectacle, which goes a long way in not only identifying the violence perpetrated upon African Americans in the South, but it is also framed within the larger context of political, social inferiority of black people. Secondly, the events surrounding Emmett Till's murder put into display a case in which a tragic event is used for a political movement. Till's murder unlike any other murder of African Americans in the United States attracted the media's attention, and groups like the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) used the tragedy of this murder in order to mobilize a political movement that dealt with the violence against African Americans as well as broader questions of civil and political rights across the United States. A critical look of Emmett Till's case is quite illustrative of the varying sorts of narratives that are either committed to maintaining the status quo or seriously challenging such conformist views and offering alternate methods of analysis. With the political reaction we also see similar patterns, in which certain political actors aim to pose Till's death under a larger context of oppression and violence against African Americans in the South, and political reaction that aims to portray Northerners and groups like the NAACP as posing a threat to the security of whites in the South. Both media and political responses surrounding Till's murder are important, and exploring these responses are helpful in order to analyze the ways in which certain historical developments led to his death, and how his death challenged the status quo.

The murder of Emmet Till took place at a moment in American history where lynchings were on the decline. Nevertheless, his murder demonstrates the resilient persistence of discourses that justified lynchings in the Southern United States. As noted before, lynchings were a tool of terrorism meant to send a clear message to black citizens that despite whatever progress is made, there are clear boundaries that must never be crossed. Also, the ways in which this is done demonstrates a clear set of messages of where there are strict boundaries. For instances, most lynch victims were killed for charges of rape, or posing some sort of sexual threat to white women, and lynchings taking place under such pretexts involved torture, killing, and also castration of black male victims. This symbolic gesture is illustrated to terrorize black males from engaging in interracial romance, driven by the larger political project of white supremacy,

which adamantly opposed miscegenation. In the Jim Crow South, such boundaries were the norm, and were enforced by formal means in strict fashion. There were laws, though not instituted by official means, that were present and enforced, and failing to abide by them could have dire consequences for the transgressors. One of these unofficial laws pertained to the Southern custom that considered it a grave act of defiance to enter into the white speech community. In discussing the linguistic differences that existed between African American vernacular and standard English, James Fairfield (2007) asserts that through historical periods both black and white Americans have gone to inhabit different spaces. Black vernacular, Fairfield asserts, “includes such linguistic constructs as playing the dozens, subverting, inverting, or outright omitting certain grammatical structures found in Standard English” (2007 Pg. 66). And this linguistic dichotomy reflects certain power dynamics, where one symbolizes power and privilege (standard English) while the other signifies social inferiority. Moreover, Fairfield explains that many symbolic acts in lynching of African Americans make clear the desire of Southern power centers to silence black people (2007). For instance “the lyncher customarily inserted the victim’s penis into the victim’s mouth” (Fairfield 2007, pg. 64), in order to demonstrate the fact that speech spaces were separate and ought not to be crossed. These sorts of southern historical and social development inform the circumstances during which Till was murdered, and therefore makes it almost a foregone conclusion that Emmett Till will meet his tragic fate, once it was believed that he made a grave transgression by talking to white women.

One of the important reasons that this case is significant is because of the nation wide coverage that it received. And the coverage of this case demonstrates the social and political environment that existed during this period in the United States. The press coverage that focused

on Emmett Till's death and the trials of his murderers makes it clear that there was a dichotomy in terms of the framework of analysis. On the first hand, we encounter a set of stories that aim to portray the victim as either a deserving target, whose killing was justified, or others that, while acknowledging the tragedy, adamantly reject the notion that this was part of a larger institutional problem. The mainly southern press, particularly in Mississippi where the Till was killed, put forth a set of stories with a narrative that revolved around the specifics of the case, always divorced from any larger issues pertaining to systematic subjugation of black people in the United States, and the southern United States in particular. In their study of press coverage vis-à-vis Emmett Till, Spratt et al. (2007) show that the social and political atmosphere very much influenced the coverage. For instance they show that two newspapers in Mississippi, *Sentinel Star* and *Commonwealth*, in both news stories as well as editorials, "rejected charges (from Till's mother and from civil rights leaders) that Mississippi's racist culture was responsible for the boy's death" (Spratt et al., 2007, pg. 178). And by focusing primarily on crime stories and the profiles of those involved, most Southern papers were able to avoid any discussion of civil rights and systemic racism. Additionally, many of the lynchings' discursive elements were present in the pages of Southern newspapers. For example the same *Sentinel Star* made explicit links between Emmett Till and sexual threat by claiming that Till's father had been executed for rape (Spratt et al., 2007). This connection, which was printed in other papers, not only is it removed from any talks of civil rights but it purports to a tacit justification of Till's murder, even though it was known that Till was not guilty of such crime. This link nevertheless, expresses the very persistence of such insidious discourse that governed lynching practices.



The Southern press was not an anomaly in its reliance on racist tropes with regards to covering Till's death and its aftermath. The *Chicago Tribune* did not shy away from making connection between Emmett Till and some form of sexual misconduct. Out of the 33 stories about Till's murder, 18 (54.5%) described him as a "wolf-whistler" and 14 (42.4%) characterized him as making "ugly" or "suggestive" remarks (Spratt et al., 2007), further demonstrating that the particular kind of narrative that is often expected of the Southern press can just as easily be found in Northern press as well. The *Tribune's* usage of such words also exemplifies the fact that racial characterizations that had to do with portraying black males as somehow possessing criminal proclivities and posing sexual threat to white women is not indigenous to the southern press but an institutionalized practice nation wide. Such narratives however, did not dominate the coverage of Till's murder and trial. In fact many publications, such as *Chicago Defenders*, an African American newspaper and, the left wing publication, *The Nation*, among others, presented coverage of this case that did not follow the common practices of the day of mainly focusing on the crime and ignoring the bigger problem. They instead wrote in a way which aimed to make clear that Till's murder was neither an isolated incident nor something that is separated from the general lack of rights that African Americans had during this period. For instance, in many of its news articles and editorials, the *Chicago Defenders* maintained that race was an important factor. In an article titled 'DOPE and DATA' the authors begin by stating, "the life of Emmett Till was shorter than most because of racial prejudice" (26 November 1955, pg. 9). The article further notes that Till's murder was a reminder that despite progress which has been made towards better race relations, this case of a murdered boy "indicated the magnitude of the job ahead" (26 November 1955, pg. 9). In many other articles as

well as editorials, the *Chicago Defenders* aimed to demonstrate the link that exists between nationwide issues of racial prejudice and the killing of Emmet Till.

*The Nation Magazine*, similar to *Defenders*, was committed to illustrating the connections between the events surrounding Till's death and broader issues of racism in the United States. In his dissertation on national media coverage surrounding Till, Darryl Christopher Mace (2007) illustrates that *The Nation*, more so than other publications, drew reader attention away from the miniscule and trivial details of the case, and focused on Till's killing in the context of the general trend of the United States towards racial equality, most aptly illustrated in *Brown vs. The Board of Education* which stated racially demarcated schools were unconstitutional. *The Nation* asserts, "the mounting violence in Mississippi is related, both in time and circumstance, to the stepped up campaign of the White Citizens Councils against the 37 Supreme Court rulings that segregation in the nation's schools is unconstitutional" (as cited in Mace 2007, pg. 87). *The Nation* was one of many publications that juxtaposed these two key events; mainstream newspapers, like the *New York Times* expressed the inconsistency that has been exposed. On the one hand a landmark supreme court case rules that separate public schools for white and black students is unconstitutional, yet the murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi seems to cast a heavy doubt as to whether any serious progress has been accomplished. In an article titled 'Till Case Linked to Negro Plight' the *New York Times* does not fail to mention the fact that a boy was murdered and that an all white jury acquitted the murderers. The article also uses voices that express criticisms. The article, talking about a sermon in a local synagogue read in part, that Till's case was "a grim reminder that the American Negro was not automatically emancipated by the supreme court's decision on segregation in schools" (October 30<sup>th</sup> 1955, pg.

86). In the op-ed section of the *New York Times*, one can also find sources that attempt to illustrate the connection between race relations in the United States and Emmet Till's killing. *New York Times* journalist John N. Popham, talking about the reaction from both the African Americans and Southern whites, notes that the killing of Till "involves the whole picture of race relations" (September 18 1955, pg. 7). All these examples illustrate a trend in both local and national press that sought to contextualize Till's killing in a broader sense. It would be a mistake to attribute the nuanced analyses of Till's case, in mainstream American Newspapers and magazines, to any progressive nature of these publications, but rather it would be prudent to analyze such interpretations of Emmett Till's case as a direct result of the political activism that emerged as a reaction to what activists rightfully saw as a grave miscarriage of justices.

The case of Emmett Till is demonstrative of how pragmatism and a tragic event form the bases for a political movement. The project of transforming a wide ceremony of mourning Till's death into a political goal begins with Till's funeral. Till's mother insisted to have an open casket ceremony, in clear defiance of Mississippi's authorities. In order for the nation, and indeed the world, to see the very ugly consequence of white supremacy and Jim Crow. This decision combined with *Jet Magazine's* publication of the gruesome images of Till in his casket juxtaposed with pictures of him with his mother prior to this death, created an atmosphere of mourning that extended far beyond regional, and even racial boundaries. This spectacle, made possible by Mamie Till's adamant commitment for an open casket, created an atmosphere whereby black people across the United States can experience collective mourning, and moreover this collective memory opened up an opportunity in which collective political action can take place (Harris, 2006). In his study on collective action and collective memory, Fredrick

C. Harris, using survey data concludes that, early African American civil rights activism relied heavily upon several key memories. They include the Brown decision, the Montgomery bus boycott and Emmett Till's murder. Till's murder, along with other events, hold key significance in understanding the trajectory of African American history. With regards to the civil rights movement, Till's case bears an additional significance. The courageous act of Till's mother to hold an open casket, while rejecting any rhetoric of violence or retribution embodies the zeitgeist of 60's civil rights movement. Taking a profoundly non-violent course of action in the face of extreme terror is the essential quality of the civil rights movement, and the action of Mamie Till clearly epitomizes this tradition.

Mamie Till's actions did more than expose the ugliness of southern racism, it also illuminated northern complacency in a racialised 'democracy' that privileged whiteness and suppressed blackness. It became a rather difficult task for northerners to claim that the plight of African Americans in the south has improved and progress has been made in race relations in the U.S. Moreover, it also demonstrated that although lynchings ceased to be a public event, it was still utilized as an instrument of terror, now very omnipresent and lurking in the shadows. It was invisible but it nevertheless possessed the same power to subjugate and terrorize Black people living in southern United States. The Emmett Till case, put against progressive steps, such as Brown vs. Board of Educations, also allows us to see the different political and social circumstances, which governed both northern and southern whites. Heather Pool (2015) states that white people who resided in the north "were perhaps pleased with the Supreme Court's decision, but tried hard to avoid knowledge of the violence visited upon African Americans in the South. Southern whites tried to avoid implementation of the Court's decree, while holding

fast to their racial privilege through undisguised threats and acts of violence” (pg. 427). And this ambiguous political position that African Americans were in, where on one hand progress was being accomplished to the delight and acceptance of Northerners and severe opposition was taking place in violent forms in the south, forms the foundation as to how we might better understand the kind of mobilization that took place around Till’s death. Another important point regarding the activism in the wake of Till’s case, is the fact that Till was a Northern. Unlike many deaths in the south which, for the most part, do not attract the same kind of media attention, “Till was connected to a community that had access to political power and media outlets, his death did not disappear but became visible” (Pool 2015, pg. 427). Emmett Till, through wide view of his battered face, became a symbol and a tool by which many activists were able to exploit a boy’s death in order to mobilize both northern liberal whites and southern African Americans.

Till’s death was not the only event that triggered a political reaction in the United States that eventually led to legislative change. It was also the farcical trial of his murderers that pose serious challenges to the United States national and international image. The trial of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, the two individual who were charged with the murder and kidnapping of Emmett Till, resulted in them having been acquitted, and they later would admit to the kidnapping and killing of Till. This trial was condemned in nearly every large daily newspaper outside the United States (Whitaker 2005). Heather Pool (2005) refers to the trial as a “virtual lynching”, she states:

Removed in time from the actual death, it nonetheless affirmed that white power was not to be stymied by the rule of law; the communal, carnivalesque

aspects of lynchings-past resurfaced in that Sumner courtroom, almost inverted. While only a handful of men had perpetrated the crime, the entire community celebrated their acquittal. Lynching moved from the backwoods to the courtroom, and no one in Washington or anywhere else intervened to call foul or demand a trial that approximated justice (pg. 437).

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In essence, the trial that followed the murder of Till clearly demonstrated in the eyes of all citizens and indeed the world, that the United States was not the ideal form of democracy and equality that dominated the cold war propaganda. It instead showed that, despite the liberal euphoria that followed *Brown v. Board*, oppression and violence against African Americans was a prevalent characteristic of the nation.

It is therefore of grave importance to understand the Emmett Till case because it allows us to see the many ways in which present political, social and media response are, explicitly or perhaps tacitly, informed by it. Every major event in Emmett Till case, from his murder to the acquittal of his murderers, to the protests, tells us the very nature of his historical, political and social conditions. And as such one should take the time to appreciate the peculiarities of this case. At the same time however, one cannot escape the profound similarities that arise when one looks at recent murders of black males across the United States, either by police or vigilante, and the events surrounding Emmett Till. The main point that should be made is that Emmett Till for African Americans represented a reality that is often familiar, while at the same time it challenged many conception of progress that Northern white citizens might have. And one can argue the events surrounding Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown etc. demonstrate similar recognition. On the one hand there exists a tempting illustration of American society as post racial, as one that no longer sees race as a defining character. This of course is exemplified by the

election of the African American president, urging many to understand this as an unprecedented sign on progress in relation to African American struggle. But Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, along with others stand to contradict such analyses. Their murders clearly demonstrate that despite genuine progress since the death of Till, it still remains that the spirit of his death is reignited vividly in the stories of Martin, Brown and more recently, Tamir Rice, the 12-year-old boy who was shot and killed by a police officer in Cleveland Ohio while playing with a toy gun.

### Chapter 3

#### Criminalizing Black Life

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*“Instead war on poverty, they got the War on Drugs so the police can bother me”*  
Tupac Shakur.

Following the outbreak of WW1 and WW2, black migration from the southern United States to the newly industrial North, in cities like Detroit, Cleveland and Chicago, was accelerating. This period, known as the Great Migration, began approximately in 1910 and ended around 1970 (Tolnay, 2003). It had occurred for a number of reasons. The first was the intense violence that many African Americans were subjected to. Tolnay and Beck’s study finds that in the decades, 1910-1920 and 1920-1930, the out-migration of blacks was largest from Southern counties where more lynchings had occurred (1992). Hence lynchings and other forms of mob violence perpetuated against African Americans were important social factors that drove black people from the South. Secondly, due to the shortage of labor caused by the outbreak of the First World War and the restricted European immigration to the United States, many cities in the North attempted to recruit African Americans from the South in order to fulfill the labor shortage. Moreover, the acceleration of the Second World War also created a large defense industry, which meant more employment opportunities in Western and Northern cities. Economic motivations as well as fear of violence in the South, and the hope of equality, combined to lure many African Americans from South to North.

The North that awaited them, however, was not the beacon of tolerance and equality that they were led to believe by the various recruiting tools, but rather they were met with a political structure and spatial arrangement that relegated them to secondary status. They were subject to a new form of labor exploitation and spatial marginality in both the way that they were integrated



into the economy — in that they were placed in unskilled labor jobs — and spatially they were subject to live in low quality neighborhoods, that are referred to as ghettos. These sets of circumstances provided the very means by which the North had a labor force that was docile and unskilled, spatially separated and politically inferior, thereby creating Northern cities, whereby labor exploitation would take place without the fear of African Americans being a serious economic or political threat.

This relationship would be intensified in the 1980s and 90s during the era of mass incarceration, in which many African Americans are shipped away to prison while at the same time, the neoliberal assault on the economy would see many jobs that once had black people flocking to the North, shipped to white suburbs and cheap factories in the Global South. And the mass incarceration era, which encompasses not only astronomical increases in prison populations in the United States (mostly of African American and Latino males), but also involves a large network of institutional practices that include a criminal justice system largely based on harsh punitive measures, political disenfranchisement and the curtailing of voting rights, media manipulation and economic ailments. And the current era of mass incarceration for African Americans represents a close relationship to their spatial arrangement. The ghettos, through close interaction with instructional changes in economic forces and the criminal justice system, is subjected to police control and scrutiny, economic marginality, and political alienation. Wacquant (2001) states that this trend represents a process for African Americans whereby they no longer live in a society with prisons but rather a prison society. This means that the black communities are controlled and regulated by state forces. These forces are manifested, for example, in the school to prison pipeline, the discriminatory hiring practices toward ex-convicts,

which perpetuates recidivism. Voting restriction, limited access to loans, public housing and education are also treatments received by previously arrested people in general and African Americans in particular. These institutional dynamics ensure that African Americans are never fully integrated into mainstream society.

## **The Ghetto**

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The creation of the black ghetto is perhaps one of the central places to start in terms of understanding what is behind renewed methods of controlling and punishing African Americans. The word ‘ghetto’ can signify different meanings. For our purposes, we’ll rely on Loïc Wacquant’s analysis, which is drawn from the works of W.E.B Du Bois, amongst others. The word ghetto, which derives from the Italian *gietto*, referred to the forced consignment of European Jews to special districts by the city’s political and religious authorities. In medieval Europe, Jews were commonly apportioned spatial arrangements where they resided, managed their own affairs, and followed their religious and cultural customs (Wacquant, 2004). The ghetto, as it pertains to the 20<sup>th</sup> century black experiences in the United States, is best understood as a residential, economical, cultural and societal space that is designed to “enclose a stigmatized population” (Wacquant 2001, pg. 103). As discussed before, much of the history of the African American experience for equality and inclusion, like many other struggles before and after it, is met with both progress and serious regression, and the inception of the ghetto or inner cities or urban spaces — or countless other euphemism — as an idiosyncratic property of black or African American identity, to the point of synonymy, demonstrates this case. In one instance, the great migration, as well as the victories of civil right movements seems to suggest a direction towards positive change, but the policy changes that led to the creating of the ghetto symbolize a grave setback. The process by which ghettos are created in former industrial towns vary from

city to city, and the specific details of each process are many, and beyond the scope of this project. The aim here is to outline the overarching themes that are present in this process.

At the turn of the 20th century, prior to the zenith of the great migration, business and personal interactions between blacks and whites in northern cities, though not devoid of antagonism, were tolerated. This was due, in large part, to the fact that there were not many African Americans living in Northern cities, and hence they did not constitute a major economic or political threat. As one can imagine, the large-scale migration of African Americans to the North, as well as Western, metropolitan cities was met with serious resistance, and the resentment of the white residents of the newly industrial towns was sometimes expressed by violent means. But this was but one means. Residential arrangement was allocated for African Americans whereby black people would reside in increasingly inferior places, and away from mainstream white society. Moreover, “between 1900 and 1930, the residential segregation of Blacks in northern cities steadily rose, reaching new levels” (Boyd 1998, pg. 597), reflecting the drastic change in race relations in Northern towns. The great migration represented for many whites, a serious political and economic threat. And the social policy that is responsible for placing them in secluded neighborhoods with lackluster housings and limited amount of resources was a reaction to the threat perceived by the influx of black migrants.

The hostilities towards black migrants to the North and West had manifested in the form of racial riots. The riots in “East St. Louis, Illinois, in 1917 and Chicago in 1919 were the worst manifestations of the North’s racial tensions” (Flamming 2006, pg. 46). The eruptions of violence were a reaction of whites to black migration and the response of blacks to their inferior

economic and social position. These racial tensions however, can only go so far in explaining the varying responses to the African American presence in the North. The emergence of the First World War played a crucial role in terms of incentivizing African Americans to move north, and World War II increased the demand for industrial labor in the North at the same time that agrarian upgrading reduced the demand for farm workers in the South (Tolnay 2001). These circumstances assured the continued migration of southern blacks away from the South and into Northern cities. “It was not until the relaxation of immigration restrictions in the 1960s, and a resulting increase in the arrival of immigrants, that the great migration came to a close and a significant stream of return migrants to the South developed” (Tolnay 2001, pg. 574). Furthermore, WWII also presented great economic gains for African Americans in certain areas. For example during WWII, the economic boom that was created in California lifted the state out of depression (Gilmore, 2007). “Several hundred thousand African Americans, move to California to build war machines...workers across the board made more money than they ever though possible” (Gilmore 2007, pg. 35). The combination of wartime circumstances mixed with Keynesian<sup>2</sup> market principles of the golden age of American capitalism employed many African Americans in Northern and Western industrialized cities. The brief economic independence of African Americans was also coupled with black political organizations in movements such as “Garveyism, the NAACP, CORE, the National Urban League, the Southern Regional Council, and the CIC,” (Bonilla-Silva 2013 pg. 29). At the same time, participation in both World Wars outlined a crucial contradiction for the United States, as blacks were fighting for freedom abroad but lacked freedom in their home country, and the Cold War tension between the Soviet Union

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<sup>2</sup> Named after British economist John Maynard Keynes, Keynesianism, emerging under the context of the Great Depression, is an economic framework which asserts that the market does not poses any inherent quality at self-correcting, therefore the government must intervene in the form public policy in order to produce full employment and price stability.

and United States made it necessary for the United States to eliminate overt forms of discrimination in order to portray the United States as free and democratic to the international community (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). The economic necessity of black labor during the World War I and II created conducive circumstances that resulted in African Americans having advanced access to political and economic liberty. And these changes constitute some of the reasons why there was hostility and fear of African American migrants, and help explain some of the regressive policies that would follow the post war period.

The post war period for African Americans, in Northern and Western cities, presented a set of segregative procedures that would form the building blocs of what we understand as ghettos today. The first was the process of suburbanization, whereby whites that had once lived in the metropolitan centers moved to newly constructed suburban communities. While on one hand, white families found new opportunities in the suburbs, black families in the north, suffered disproportionately from overcrowding and limited mobility (McGrew, 1997). Moreover, African Americans were disqualified from the newer and whiter suburbs “by private and institutional discrimination such as that from White real estate brokers and landlords, by discriminatory practices in the administration of Federal Housing Administration (FHA) loans, and by newer exclusionary zoning ordinances” (Darden 1995, pg. 681). It was also the case that state capital investment was more concerned with making a conducive environment whereby the uniquely American cultural ideology of home ownership could flourish, while at the same time implementing many road blocks in order to ensure that African Americans were excluded from achieving this ideal (Darden, 1995). What we have then is a segregated North where by the post war economic conditions drove whites into suburbia. And the twilight of the Keynesian

economic model, as well as the decline of war-time employment opportunities had left many African Americans in the northern ghettos with even lower political and social resources.

### **Neoliberalism And Race in United States**

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More broadly, the late 1960's presented a set of social changes. As the civil rights movement premised upon non violent means of resistance had lost its momentum and the black power movement or black nationalism was gaining momentum, such expression were epitomized by the Black Panther Party, amongst others. The definition of the phrase black power can be contested; activist Stokely Carmichael and author Richard Wright have been credited for coining of the phrase and popularizing it. Today, the phrase ought be understood as "the cutting edge of black activism, a movement whose militancy contrasted with the more measured tone of the civil rights movement and seemed to signal a break from past modes of black activism" (Joseph 2009, pg. 755). The significance of the black power movement, for our purposes, lies not in what material achievements it gained, but rather the reaction they incurred from formal branches of government. Various government activities, such as FBI's counter intelligence program (COINTELPRO) had dedicated large amounts of money and resources in order to crack down on any Black Nationalist groups like the Black Panther Party. But perhaps the most important reaction to these movements were Richards Nixon's war on drug policies as well as his law and order rhetoric, which were color coded euphemisms that were designed to subordinate and control the various social unrests that were linked to these movements. In short, Nixon's War on Drugs, which was accelerated by future administrations, had little to do with drugs and more to do with Nixon's commitment to pulverize any expression of Black Nationalism and curtail the presence of counter culture of the 1960's. In fact, due to the process of criminalizing such forms of activism, the state of California, which is the center of such expression, had its prison

population increase from 16,500 to 23,000 between 1967 and 1971 (Gilmore, 2007). But Nixon's War on Drugs seems rather insignificant when juxtaposed against the war on drug policies of the Reagan administration. The Reagan Administration's use of the war on drug as a policy did not emerge *ex nihilo*, nor did it arise from any real concern for the genuine drug epidemic. Reagan's embrace of this 'war' should be understood in the context of his larger economic plan of introducing what we now call neoliberal policies.

Neoliberalism is an economic, social and cultural model that began its ascent in 1980s in the United States and abroad, and is now a dominant principle that shapes most American, for that matter the world's, economic and social policies. Neoliberalism is premised upon neoclassical ideas that "all societies, economies, institutions down to the level of the individual have to acclimate, compete and abide by the objective laws of the market" (Kamat, 2011). This shift from the post-Fordist and Keynesian economy to an economic principle heavily insistent on cuts to social spending, privatization and deregulations had its roots in the late 1960's but did not emerge as a powerful force of economic, political and cultural phenomenon until the Reagan administration in the 1980's. Neoliberal political and economic outcome were largely due to the declining effectiveness of the Keynesian model and the rise of racial tensions in the United States following the victories of the civil rights movement. Neoliberalism emerged as the Keynesian system was falling apart and high unemployment and inflation were both surging everywhere, escorting in a global phase of stagflation (Inwood, 2014). This economic crisis was complemented with the gains of civil rights movement that saw more integration, such as the United States Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* which ruled that segregated schools were unconstitutional. And the Voting Rights Act of 1965 under the Johnson

administration symbolized, for African Americans, a sign of progress; for those on the other side, this represented a challenge to white supremacy. For political operatives it represented an opportunity for exploiting white anger at civil rights victories in order to gain the votes of poor Southern whites that had grown dissatisfied with the Democratic Party, which they viewed as seceding to the demands of African Americans.

The Republican establishment used the racial tension, created by the economic shifts and social change, in order to attain the class privilege that was curtailed during the Keynesian era. The articulation of racist language as the cause of economic grievances is no new phenomenon, however, in the midst of social changes where naked racism — the kind that one can detect from current republican President Donald Trump<sup>3</sup> for example — is perceived as a political malpractice, Republican officials in local, state and federal levels developed a way to kill two birds with one stone. In the one hand they incepted a political maneuver that allow them to exploit racial animus in a more subtle fashion, and they also fashioned the racial tension in order fit their neoliberal agenda. Racial tensions were used in order to assert both white privilege as well as class privilege. This political maneuvering is referred to as the southern strategy. This strategy had success in helping elect Ronald Reagan to the presidency. And it was a strategy that capitalized on the fear and insecurity of working class white people who had grown dissatisfied with the gains of civil rights movement. Reagan and his campaign, who were forced to curtail their racial rhetoric due to the discursive changes brought upon by the civil rights movement, and

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<sup>3</sup> What Donald Trump has managed to do is tap into the racist, islamophobic and anti-immigrant elements of the Republican base in order to appropriate their legitimate economic grievances away from institutions responsible, and focus on a politically weak population, such as undocumented persons, as a source of economic stagnation. This approach is consistent with the Republican Party's attempts of winning back the southern vote dating back to Nixon and Reagan.



abstain from using racial terms in explicit form, found a way to appeal to blue-collar whites by using racially coded language as well as some subtle tactics. For example, in the 1980 presidential race, Reagan began his campaign in Mississippi by declaring his fundamental belief in state's rights, just few miles from Philadelphia, Mississippi where 3 civil rights workers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, were murdered 16 years prior on June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1964. Advocating for states rights isn't something that one can easily associate with a process of racialization, however Reagan was assiduously using racists sentiments by veiling it in states' rights rhetoric. The various federal laws which have been passed during the Civil Rights movement, which undermine states' racist policies, such as segregation, were seen as threatening forces that weaken states' sovereignty, hence Reagan was able to exploit such fear into a political tool which would win him and his party a vote over the working class and poor white communities in the South. This was also part of his campaign for economic restructuring, as he was avowing to grant more independence to states, he was also speaking in terms of limiting government regulation, as in his election eve address in 1980, where he promised to institute reforms that "get government off our backs, out of our pockets". This kind of rhetoric accomplishes the goals of challenging civil rights progress while at the same time embarking on a project of neoliberal implementation. By repackaging anti black racism in coded fashion, the southern strategy uses "historic vestiges of white supremacy in broader class-based rhetoric that gives those in power the cover to enact their agenda" (Inwood 2014, pg. 415).

### **The War on Drugs and Mass Incarceration**

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Ronald Reagan would make good on his implicit promise to launch an attack on the gains of the civil rights movement. Reagan would undertake his commitments by launching the War on Drugs. The modern War on Drugs, which would accelerate under the next two

administrations, was a set of policies at both the federal and local levels that aimed to generate fear of illegal drugs in order to create legal, political means of marginalizing and punishing African Americans. The model of controlling and marginalizing people of color by criminalizing drugs is neither new nor exclusive to African Americans. One can detect traces of such developments in the criminalization of opium for example, in which the pressure from low wage Chinese workers in San Francisco led to the Anti-Opium Ordinance in 1878, largely fueled by the anti-immigration sentiment towards Chinese migrants (Provine, 2011). In this case, the city of San Francisco, and later the federal government was criminalizing a drug associated with a particular minority group and using the platform to control the population which it perceived as constituting a threat. The method of criminalizing drugs in order to control African Americans has a long history far proceeding Nixon and Regan's War on Drugs. Southern lawmakers and politicians as an ideal form of disenfranchising African American residents embraced the prohibition of alcohol, as Doris Marie Provine (2011) explains, "White Southerners took advantage of the attractions of Prohibition to push for...impediments to black voting. In state conventions Blacks were deemed "wet" by nature and so had to lose the vote in order for the South to go "dry" and progress to a brighter future" (pg. 44). Reagan's declaration of the War on Drugs are in accordance of a particular American social, political practice that aims to exert its power upon an already marginalized group by approaching drugs with less medical attention and more punitive principles.

The implementation of the War on Drugs follows the deaths of two college star athletes, Len Bias and Don Rogers who died after ingesting cocaine, the large scale media attention that these deaths received, offered law makers an opportunity to push harsh punitive measures for

crimes related to cocaine. This was the political calculation that laid the foundation for the War on Drugs. As Ojmarrh Mitchel (2009) explains,

In 1985, prior to the deaths of Bias and Rogers, and President Reagan's call for a national crusade against drugs, 1% of respondents reported that drug use was the nation's most important problem; in 1986, after the Bias and Rogers tragedies, and the ensuing political and media frenzy, 10% of respondents believed that drugs were the most important problem facing the country. In September of 1989, after President Bush's national address declaring drugs "the gravest domestic threat," 64% of respondents believed that drugs were the country's most important problem. (Pg. 53)

The media's role in generating such fears cannot be overstated, and looking at the media coverage of the 'crack epidemic' reveals that the media accomplishes this by outlining the addictive nature of crack, representing it as a root cause of violent crime, projecting it as reaching epidemic proportions, and associating crack (mainly crack dealers) with African Americans (Mitchell, 2009). Crack was talked about as a dangerous element of black culture that will pose serious threat to suburban communities. For instance, one New York Times article is headlined *Police Say Use of Crack is Moving to Small Towns and rural Areas*, and in it the article suggests that the transportation of crack cocaine was moving from cities like New York to suburban communities across the United States, moreover the article (merely reciting police reports) argues that crack was the cause in the increase of "robberies and violent crimes including murder" (Schmidt, 1986). Another New York Times article which is titled *Crack, Bane of Inner City, Is Now Gripping Suburbs: The Spreading Web Of Crack*, describes crack cocaine as a pathological epidemic that is bleeding from inner cities to the homes of "investment bankers, homemakers, assembly line worker" (Malcolm, 1989). Using personal examples to outline this point, the reporter would go on to engage in subtle racial language. By associating wholesome

and normal activities (such as being a banker or homemaker) with suburban existence, and portraying these people as victims of “inner city” (which in itself is a racially coded language that is meant to describe a ghetto, which is a racially homogenous socio-economical space) problems that is infecting the white suburban spaces. Articles like these, which could be found in various local and national press, and television programs often demonstrated the danger of crack cocaine by associating it with a black epidemic which is going to inflict the white suburban population (Lassiter, 2015).

The War on Drugs had the disproportionate impact on African Americans for several reasons. First, the philosophy that guided the policing was to put emphasis on responsibility and accountability of drug users, meaning that punitive measures had to be adapted for those suffering from drugs addiction<sup>4</sup> (mainly crack addiction). And billions of dollars that were given to local law enforcement was contingent upon local forces demonstrating their embrace of this philosophy. In practical terms, this means that police had to report many arrests and conviction for users and low-level drug dealers (Alexander, 2010; Mitchell, 2009). As a result, between 1988 and 1990 nearly 1.4 million people were arrested for drug related felonies, and black drug arrest grew from 1980 to 1989 by 140% (Mitchell, 2009). Second, the police tactics that were used to wage this war were centered on targeting poor black communities. Although evidence suggests that the use of illicit drugs is as likely, if not more, to occur in suburban household or

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<sup>4</sup> The racial element tied to the punitive nature of the War on Drugs is illuminated when one juxtaposes how contemporary problem of heroin addiction is talked about. When, in the 1960's heroin was considered a 'black' problem, there was, a violent and punitive response from law enforcement. Today however, where heroin use is perceived as a 'white' problem, there is a larger commitment towards rehabilitation. And heroin addiction is seen as a health issue rather than a criminal one. This highlights how drugs are still used in United States to demarcate between black and white (Cohen, 2015).

University and College dorm rooms or on in Wall Street Offices, the open-air feature of drug trade in the black ghettos makes it easier for police to target them instead of affluent homes in the suburbs or campuses (Bobo & Thompson, 2010). The fact that drug trades in the ghettos are more observable are not the only reason that drive police to target such places, one has to also take into consideration that these communities are both economically, socially and politically weak and hence less capable of producing any form of resistance.

Another feature of this 'war' revolves around police discretion. Police officers are granted levels of discretion, which might explain the racial disparity that exists in drug arrests. When police officers are given the option of using their discretion to stop, search and arrest anyone they deem a suspect, it allows their conscious and unconscious racial biases to operate in the process of policing (Alexander, 2010). Mitchell's (2009) research notes, "black drug dealers were considerably more likely than white dealers to be convicted of a drug sales offense, 12.7% vs. 3.2%, respectively" (pg. 62). Moreover, the police targeted (and continue to target) ghetto communities and exploited people's fear and ignorance, by subjecting them to what is referred to as consent searches, meaning that police can approach any individuals, and ask to search them, many do not understand their constitutional rights to refuse and other fear the consequences of declining to refuse, and people who have been stopped and search with no evidence whatsoever have been disproportionately poor African Americans (Alexander, 2010). Additionally, the decision to police open-air drug markets instead of drug transaction the occurs behind closed doors, or implementing punitive sentencing for drug users and drug dealers, are not fundamentally racially motivated but, as Mitchell (2009) explains "all of these decisions capitalize on stark racial inequality that spatially, socially, and politically isolate blacks from whites" (pg. 64). That is to

say, the state is able to implement policies with clear racially disproportionate impact by relying on the colorblind politics, which entails navigating and producing policy with racial consequences without ever referring to race. In this case, the policies that were put in place had managed to lock away poor black people, and politician and pundits alike did not have to mention race in any form.

The incarceration of poor blacks also had political value. Those who opposed harsh punitive policies were vulnerable to being labeled as soft on crime. And members of the Democratic Party were committed to avoid such attacks by embracing such punitive measures. Also, many Democrats viewed the racially disproportionate impact of such policies, as a way to exploit the Southern racial animus. In other words, if the Democratic Party were to win over the Southern vote, they had to show them how racist (or tough on crime) they can be. President Clinton, who presided over the largest increase of mass incarceration, had used the War on Drugs and punitive justice in order to win over Southern and other Republican dominated constituents. In fact in 1992, the then presidential candidate, “Bill Clinton vowed that he would never permit any Republican to be perceived as tougher on crime than he” (Alexander 2010, pg. 56). In order to show just how tough on crime he is, he interrupted his campaign just before the important New Hampshire primary in order to oversee the execution of Ricky Ray Rector. Rector was a mentally ill African American man, who was wholly unaware of what was about to happen to him that he asked if he could have his desert after the execution (Taylor, 2016; Alexander, 2010). Indeed, the general trend to “get tough on crime” had prompted Clinton to increase funding for prison expansion, advance mandatory minimum laws and increase incarceration. The Clinton administration continued the assault with the passage of a welfare

reform bill. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, as it was known, denied access to public assistance to those with a criminal record, as well as public housing and Medicaid. The punishment of criminals would also be adapted by landlords and employers who ask potential job seekers to “check the box” if they have been convicted of a felony (Alexander, 2010). The passage of such punitive laws also results in a precipitous decline in political participation for those who had been convicted of a crime.

39 states forbid convicts placed on probation from exercising their political rights and 32 states also interdict parolees. In 14 states, ex-felons are barred from voting even when they are no longer under criminal justice supervision—for life in ten of these states...nearly 4 million Americans have temporarily or permanently lost the ability to cast a ballot (Wacquant 2002, pg. 58)

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Mass incarceration is attached with a set of provisions that make funding cuts to educational loans, access to housing, employment, and political participation to those with any criminal history. Furthermore, by 2007 more than 7 million people, through parole or probation were under strict state supervision, most of whom were African Americans (Bobo and Thompson, 2010). Mass incarceration is not merely a system of putting away “deproletarianized” African American labor en masse; rather it is a network of institutions that operate in conjunction with one another to control the extent of African American participation in mainstream economic, social and political functions.

### **Trayvon Martin**

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The death of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American boy in 2012, the eventual acquittal of George Zimmerman, as well as series of events that surrounded this case,

encompasses all the themes discussed thus far. One of the motifs that can be detected in this particular case is the legacy of race and space. Residential segregation still exists in the United States. Moreover, violence against black residents motivated by the desire to protect whiteness of neighborhoods is a norm that many African Americans face (Bell, 2015). The great migration, in which large influxes of black people migrated from South to North, and the racial diversity of some Northern cities created tensions between black and white residences. At times this had also manifested itself into violence directed at African Americans. The contemporary trend of racial minorities moving into predominantly white neighborhoods is also accompanied by acts of violence against minorities as a way to deter them from entering this space (Bell, 2015), and the profiling of Martin as a threat can be viewed with this framework of violence vis-à-vis racial integration of white spaces.

Violence against African Americans in relation to space is an idea that is rooted in white settler colonialism ideology. Meaning that the legal and political infrastructure of the United States has mainly been concerned with protecting white property against black ‘encroachment’, and using violence to enforce it. And African Americans who tried to enter white space have been regarded as a threat (Ralph & Chance 2014). In fact, going back to slavery, one of the main functions of legal and political realm was ensuring that there was no threat of slaves entering white spaces. For instance, one of the most controversial laws of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States was The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. This law was originally enacted in 1793, and it criminalized aiding escaped slaves, and directed their return to their masters, but as slavery was growing unpopular in the North, many Northern states began to pass legislations that made it easier for escaped slaves to gain freedom. As a result the North was becoming a refuge for slaves



(Balko, 2014). These developments furthered the already high tension between the North and South, and in an attempt to alleviate the tension, a package of bills were introduced as part of, what is known as, the Compromise of 1850. These set of bills extended punitive measures for those helping escaped slaves or people who interfered with the capture of escaped slaves. Enslavers had argued that free states presented a real threat to their property. This bill ensured, as Baptist (2014) puts it,

white people and their federal government were now obligated to pursue runaways from one end of the country to another. Collective revolt against slavery also seemed long since foreclosed by patrols, militias, armories full of powder and ball that ensured that any future Nat Turner was like a bug waiting for the hammer (pg. 347).

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Although slavery as a formal economic institution has ceased to exist, some of the governing principles remained. Especially in regards to using force in order to preserve white spaces. Slave patrols, which are the first recognizable organized policing force in the United States, were responsible for suppressing revolts and catching runways. And by the middle of the eighteenth century, every Southern colony formalized slave patrols as legitimate policing institutions. “It became the primary policing system in the South. In many jurisdictions—most notably Charleston, South Carolina—slave patrols would eventually morph into the official police force” (Balko 2014, pg. 28). American police originated as a means of controlling black people driven by economic and political interests, and cotemporary policing would suggest that the similar guidelines apply to the conduct of its activities. For example, much of the policing activities in the earlier segments of the War on Drugs were conducted in areas where poor African Americans resided, although they participate in illegal drug use at approximately the same rate as their white counterparts, they nonetheless were on the receiving end of harsh

punishment. And this discrepancy illustrates a new method of controlling African Americans from white spaces. Consider how crack addiction was considered a pernicious black problem that would begin to seep its way to suburban spaces. A November 1988 New York Times article, headlined *Crack Use on Rise in Suburbs: In areas where 'they have something to lose'*, describes the use of crack as 'urban' (a well known euphemism for black) problem that is making its way to middle class homes and bringing all of its associated pathologies. The article and many like it would insist on the unsaid notion of black threat to the wholesome middle class communities of the United States. And this portrayal of a black threat feeds much of media representation. African American males are overrepresented in news as perpetrators of violent crime, as well as the public face of unemployment and poverty. And as a result black presence in white spaces is immediately associated with crime.

When Trayvon Martin was stocked and killed by George Zimmerman, what is enacted encapsulated much of American history in relation to African Americans. When Zimmerman followed Trayvon Martin, he was not acting outside of the discursive models that exists in the United States. Quite the opposite, he was performing state sanctioned duty of vigilante, to protecting white space from black participation. Zimmerman viewed Martin as a person that does not belong in his community and decided to confront him, believing he took part in recent break ins in that neighborhood. The process of associating blackness with criminality is an idea that has a long history. As mentioned, during lynchings black males were labeled as sexual threat, however the real history of lynching has to do with new forms of violent repressions of black labor amidst the end of slavery. In similar fashion, the criminalizing of black life during the War on Drugs had little to do with black threat to white people or spaces but had everything to do

with rolling back progressive changes accomplished through the civil rights movement, and dealing with higher rates of unemployment through prison expansions (Wacquant, 2001). So the discourse concerning black criminality serves to preserve white supremacy as well as other economic concerns. When one looks at the events surrounding the killing of Martin, it is clear that it is a reflection of this power dynamics. Furthermore, this case, when juxtaposed to that of Emmett Till, similar patterns arise. When Till was executed for crossing sexual boundaries by speaking to a white women, it is reflective of a larger discourse of coalescing blackness with sexual threat to white women. And the case of Martin, much like the case of Till, had taken place with backdrop of the discursive joining of blackness and threat to white spaces.

The trial of Zimmerman is significant because it allows a view of a flawed structure of American criminal justice system, the exclusion of African Americans from serving on juries. Although the United States congress passed the Civil Rights Act in 1875, in part to stop discrimination in jury selection process, research had pointed out that jury selection in the United States has been racially homogeneous (Anwar et al, 2012; Alexander, 2010), and African Americans are systematically excluded from serving on juries. The omission of African Americans from jury, with jury composition being predominantly white, has led to disproportional rates of conviction for people of color in contrast to their white counterpart. And this is evident in the Zimmerman trial, where the jury that acquitted him was composed of five white women and one Hispanic women.

The exclusion of African Americans from serving on juries, like most forms of black subjugations, can be traced back to the institution of slavery. Before 1860 no black person had

served in a jury, but the passage of the fourteenth amendment, which was ratified on July 9<sup>th</sup>, 1868 introduced new variations in US Supreme Court jurisprudence on the matter of jury selection, as well as in the procedures permissible in selecting jurors (Gau, 2016). Furthermore, the Supreme Court cases of *Swain v. Alabama* in 1965 and *Batson v. Kentucky* in 1986, citing the fourteenth amendment, ruled that prosecutors could not discriminate against potential jurors on the bases of their race. This was seen as an important legal landmark, a decision the New York Times in 1986 described as “one of its most important criminal law rulings in years...Supreme Court today acted to protect the rights of black defendants by making it more difficult for prosecutors to exclude blacks from juries”. Despite the rulings, the Supreme Court had done little to combat the prevalent issue of jury discrimination. As Alexander (2010) explains, from Reconstruction era to the New Deal, the United States Supreme Court would continually “upheld convictions of black defendants by all-white juries in situations where exclusion of black jurors was obvious” (pg. 120). The Supreme Court as well as lower courts, have tolerated race discrimination in jury selection, and this has been shown to negatively impact people of color. Moreover, racial, gender and class diversity has been shown to enhance the ability of a jury to incorporate different perspectives and experiences in order to come to a sober and nuanced decision, one that is not filtered through conscious or unconscious racial biases, and “unrepresentative juries potentially threaten the public’s faith in the legitimacy of the legal system and its outcomes” (Ellis and Diamond, 2003, pg. 1038). Additionally, some researchers have found that all white juries are more punitive on black defendant than white defendant, making the lack diversity in juries more troubling (Anwar et al, 2012). One of the key reasons why there is a systemic omission of African Americans from serving on juries is peremptory strike. Peremptory strikes allows both prosecutor and defense attorneys to dismiss any juror that

they find unsuitable for the case or offer unfavorable response to evidence and witness presented in the trial (Alexander, 2010). This gives prosecutors and defense lawyers the discretion to select and dismiss any juror, this has resulted in black people being dismissed from participating on juries, for reasons spanning from a juror's political outlook to their clothing. The database out of which jurors are selected from also presents its set of problematic elements, as Alexander (2010) notes,

potential jurors are typically called for service based on the list of registered voters or Department of Motor Vehicle lists—sources that contain disproportionately fewer people of color, because people of color are significantly less likely to own cars or register to vote (pg. 121)

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One interesting quality about the discrimination against black people from serving on juries is the ways in which this obvious racial outcome takes place under race-neutral terms. Although The Supreme Court's rulings and legislative changes forbids the discriminating people from juries based on their race, this simply meant that lower courts, as well as attorneys must devise other 'color blind' ways of putting together all white juries. And peremptory strikes are a 'colorblind' method of perpetual racial discrimination. This also exemplifies the ways in which discourse of being 'colorblind' or 'post racial' society informs institutional behaviors.

As pointed out earlier, one of the features of colorblind racism vis-à-vis African Americans is using racial stereotypes and cultural elements in order to account for systematic problem. The death of Martin, and the acquittal of Zimmerman, was used by some as an opportunity to look at it as a symptom of historical and institutional problem while some media outlets used it to launch an attack against blackness. The framing Trayvon Martin by most

mainstream media sources was either that of a threat or of isolated incident. That is, the death of Martin seemed to be framed in a certain way as to not disturb the status quo of systemic racism in the United States. This was done in two ways; one was acknowledging the tragedy of a boy's murder and mourning of his parents while at the same time enforcing the viewpoint that this was an isolated incident by a racist individual, and not a product of larger systemic function. Secondly, there was a campaign of vilification of Martin and labeling him as a 'thug' or 'criminal'. Not unlike Emmett Till, Martin was subjected to posthumous character assassination, whereby public voices and media outlets used things as trivial as Martin's outfit, in order to paint him as someone who posed a serious threat to Zimmerman. This media campaign of attacks relies primarily on racist notion of crime, yet another residue of the War on Drugs. And much like the earlier stages of the War on Drugs, Martin's use of marijuana was used in order to associate him with criminal inclinations, which would serve as justificatory grounds upon which Martin, and other like him, would be robbed of their lives without impunity.

Media coverage of this case is particularly interesting because it seemed to play two contradictory roles. On the one hand, it had a role in pressuring law enforcement to charge Zimmerman. The Sanford Police Department did not file any charges until April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012, and this is due in part to the fact that the killing of Martin had received national coverage in the printed press and television news networks, and this in turn fueled a discussion of race and racism in the United States (Hodges, 2015). On the other hand, the media covered the case and trial with little discussion of institutions or flaws of the criminal justice system took place. Instead, what can be detected is hyper visibility of Martin and Zimmerman, and invisibility of institutional frameworks. Take, for instance how racism was discussed in relation to

Zimmerman. Much of the coverage was an attempt to discover whether Zimmerman was a 'racist' or not. On March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2012 CNN anchor Anderson Cooper prefaced his broadcast by asking:

What George Zimmerman said or did not say in the 911 call that he made moments before he shot Trayvon Martin. Did he use a racist slur? There's a big debate raging over two words Zimmerman used in the call or may have used. Some hear an ugly racial insult and an expletive. Others hear nothing of the sort (as cited in Hodges 2015, pg. 408).

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Aside from questioning the existence of a big debate concerning the words Zimmerman used, an informed viewer would understand that this is the function of a post racial ideology. One that hold individuals as being either racists or not racist, rather than institutions, and this framework was in display in the Zimmerman trial where media outlets attempt to ascertain if the killing of Martin was fueled by the prejudices of a racist person, there by shielding institutions, specifically the criminal justice system, from any serious structural critique.

The hyper visibility of Martin reached its peak when President Obama gave a speech approximately 20 minute long, in which he offered his condolences to the parents. Obama, with respect to race issues in the United States, has been reticent and it took the death of Martin and a nation wide protest that ensued as a result to pressure the president to offer some comments. The speech was not devoid of substance; he stated the disproportional impact that criminal justice system had in relation to African American. He also talked about racial profiling and the historical legacies of slavery and segregation as having an important significance to the ways that African Americans understand the death Martin. However, the President stated, "Traditionally, these are issues of state and local government, the criminal code. And law enforcement is

traditionally done at the state and local levels, not at the federal levels”<sup>5</sup>. This parallels some of the racially coded language used by Ronald Reagan during his first presidential campaign, in order to appeal to Southern democrats who felt threaten as a result of civil right progress. When Ronald Reagan gave a speech on the campaign trail not to far from where three civil rights activist were murdered, and stated that he supports states rights, he was assuring his constituents that the federal government is not going to impede state’s desire to implement racist and segregationist laws. And in his 2013 speech, Obama was invoking the same sentiments when he informed the American public “these are issues of state”. Moreover, one should remember that abolishing of slavery, the enactment of civil rights bills, and other progressive changes in relation to race were put in place by the federal government, responding to the pressures of grassroots movements. If the federal government did not compel the states and local government to move towards more progressive direction, many African Americans would undoubtedly still find themselves in Jim Crow style segregation and socio-political arrangements. The president’s remarks are an attempt to illustrate his commitment to status quo by invoking state’s rights. This linguistic maneuvering also accomplishes the goal of talking about race while at the same time absolving the federal government from any sense of responsibility or accountability. The president talked about the real issues of discriminatory allocation of a punitive criminal justice. And federal government introduced measures like mandatory minimums, which were unevenly targeted at poor African Americans. Therefore the federal government is and continues to be an active participant in the institutional marginalization of African Americans.

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<sup>5</sup> Full transcript of the speech can be found on the White House website at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/19/remarks-president-trayvon-martin>



Trayvon Martin's case captures both the historical and contemporary experience of African Americans. It is a representation of the residues of the past, and how it informs the current functions of institutions. Even though more than half a century separate them, much of the themes that are evident in Martin's case can easily be seen in Emmett Till's case. Beyond the fact that both lost their lives and their murderers escaped justice, they represent a pattern in American history that aims to criminalize blackness. Neither of what these two boys did qualify as a criminal act but they were nonetheless treated as one and lost their lives as a result. This shared historical pattern goes beyond the experiences of these two boys. Rather Martin and Till are metaphors that signify the current state of affairs when it comes to the operation of institutions in relation to African Americans. The death of Martin and the acquittal of Zimmerman are events that are driven by institutional mechanisms that ensure the repetition of an unbalanced criminal justice system. The death of Trayvon Martin resonates with the death of Emmett Till because they are both a tragic result of a state project that aimed to criminalize black life post slavery. Moreover, the lack of accountability to the Zimmerman (as well as Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, the two men charged with the killing of Till) is significant because it represent the complacency of the criminal justice system, and indeed the state. By not holding him accountable, the criminal justice system is in effect saying that it is not willing to put forth a deterrence to such actions, and as a result events like the death Martin might take place without the fear of any criminal repercussions. The death of Martin is microcosm, which signify institutional behaviors that aim to keep African Americans in a perpetual state of social inferiority.

## Chapter 4 Regulating Black Life

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*“The protection of evil must be the most self destructive job of all”*

Alice Walker

In the wake of neoliberal policy implementation, public funding for public schools, welfare programs and public housing have been subjected to cuts while funding for prisons has increased, and police departments at both federal and local levels seem unscathed by this economic shift. In many ways prisons have become a main source of housing for the black poor in U.S. Furthermore, economically disparate rural areas in the United States have sought after projects of prison construction as a way of revitalizing their communities, even though the expansion of prisons, as research demonstrates have minor impact towards improving the economy of these areas (Gilmore, 2007; Hanson & Besser, 2004). Nevertheless prisons are a source of employment for many Americans. According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, as of 2015 there are 445,520<sup>6</sup>, correctional officer, jailers and bailiffs throughout the nation. The importance of prisons becomes more significant, especially as it relates to African Americans, because much of the existence of black citizens, vis-à-vis the ghetto, seems to mirror that of prisons (Wacquant, 2001), the continued isolation from economic participation, growing political marginalization and spatial exclusion all makeup the important features and functions of life in ghettos and prisons. This prison model of controlling black life manifests itself in many ways, one is in the school to prison pipeline, which refers to the growing trend of police officers and other law enforcement presented as a disciplinary actors inside schools, a role traditionally reserved for teachers, principals, and other school administrators. This change has produced a growing criminalization of black youth. Student misbehavior is being treated as an act of crime

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes\\_nat.htm](http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_nat.htm)

and many poor students of color find themselves on a fast track to prison as a result. Another site where one can see the parallels between prisons and poor communities of color is policing. The focus of police activities on ghettos, the over-militarization of police, the targeting of people of color for pecuniary reasons, all collude to form a pattern of police behavior that has a proclivity to go after poor black communities aggressively and violently. And such patterns result in tragic events like the one of Michael Brown, an African American teen shot to death by officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson Missouri. These communities have deficient schools, lack resources, and are isolated from major participation in mainstream society. And the activities of police in these communities elucidate this power dynamic.

### **School to Prison Pipeline**

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The school to prison pipeline refers to policy changes at all levels of government, which results in a trajectory of youth towards prisons rather than education. These policies are modeled after zero tolerance criminal policies of the War on Drugs, and it is essentially the use of harsh punitive measures for various forms of student misconducts regardless of severity of the offense, and these policies are justified as being an important preventative measures. The implementations of zero tolerance policies include, but not limited to, the treatment of student misconduct as criminal offence, the presence of police officers and the use the general allocation of discipline authority/power from school staff (teacher, principals, etc.) to police officers (agents of state power). Emerging from similar criminal disciplinary measures that had been in effect during the War on Drugs in 1980s, this tradition of criminal punishment, which had had harmful impact on poor African American vis-à-vis mass incarceration, found its way to the schools in the mid-1990s. Many states had implemented various forms of policies consistent with zero tolerance principles. The execution of the policies took on a form of

“automatic suspension or expulsion for types of weapons, fighting, school disruptions, alcohol, tobacco, the use of laser pointers, and swearing” (Singer 2010, pg. 78). In many ways zero tolerance policies, in the United States’ schools, are a manifestation of the War on Drugs, but the battle for war expanded from the poor neighborhoods that house poor black people to its poor schools.

The criminalization of student misbehavior, which was hitherto addressed by the school administration, is not the only arena where we see the expedition of students towards to the criminal justice systems. It is also apparent that the growing number of police presence in schools is also aiding the criminalization of youth. What is noteworthy about the expanded police presence is that they are occurring when most studies show that there is a general decline in violence, alcohol, drug consumption and weapon positions on school grounds (Price, 2009). In fact, according to the Justice Policy Institute, in the United States, only 10% of schools reported any serious crime taking place, and student’s or staff’s odds of being victims of a criminal act at schools are one in a million (2011). Despite evidence that suggests a declined in criminal activity among students, more than half the schools in the United States have daily police presence (Price, 2009), which highlights a contradiction for the police on school grounds. Police therefore must justify their presence through action. This has led to police making arrests and charges against students. The police presence in schools has “dramatically increased the number of interaction that children, particularly those in low-income and minority communities, have with police officers in their lifetimes” (Price 2009, Pg. 548).

With the implementations of the zero tolerance policies, students who are suspended, or who get disciplined by school, are often left to their own volition, not being supervised by any teachers. This fosters students who are not heavily invested in school, which further leads to disengagement from their schoolwork; eventually leading to their dropping out of school (Hudson, 2011). Studies found that in the United States “More than three million students are suspended and approximately 100,000 students are expelled each year. Students of color are suspended at two to three times the rate of other students. African-American students, in particular, are disproportionately suspended” (Singer, 2011. Pg.84.) These statistics suggests that there is a disciplinary policy that aims to restrict the access of education for many students of color. The reason why suspension and expulsion are important is because those who are suspended are more likely to drop put, and students who drop out are three times more likely to be incarcerated (Singer, 2011). In fact “two-thirds of incarcerated juveniles report being suspended at least once in the year prior to incarceration” (Singer 2011 pg. 85). The link between prisons and school involves far more details and complex networks, the point however is that systems of education and criminal justice often coincide to expedite the trajectory of poor black people towards prisons or other forms of state control. Furthermore, this institutional relationship aids in the project that aims to criminalize of black life as a whole.

The criminalization of black life on school grounds was highlighted in October 2015, when a cell phone video surfaced of a violent arrest of a female student in Spring Valley High School in Columbia, South Carolina. The video shows white police officer, Deputy Sheriff Ben Fields, approaching the student who is seated at her desk, and then wrapping his arm around her neck and spinning her and her desk to the ground. He then proceeds to drag

her out of the classroom. The student was later arrested. The student who filmed the assault was also arrested and held on a \$1,000 bail (*Cops in the Classroom*, 2015). This video, which went viral, demonstrates in vivid ways the outcome of police presence in school, and puts in display what it means to criminalize student misbehavior. A similar video also surfaced showing a black police officer assaulting a student, this time in a high school in Baltimore, Maryland. The video shows a police officer striking, kicking and cursing at a 16-year-old student. The two videos led to the termination and criminal prosecution of the officers involved.

But regardless, these are outcomes of a coalescence between a criminal justice system, that operates in racist fashion vis-à-vis African Americans and schools in inner cities, which are qualitatively inferior to those located in affluent suburban communities. The school to prison pipeline is yet another site of institutional racism that seeks to criminalize black life and impede any progress towards political or economical inclusion. These shocking videos that sometimes go viral and grab the attention of major newspapers and television shows are not the stories themselves; the bigger story is the context that these behaviors emerge from. Given the extensively documented ways in which police have targeted African Americans disproportionately, it would seem inevitable that when the state places police officers and other agents of law enforcement in schools where majority of students are non-white (Anderson, 2015), and leaving officers to their own discretion, while at the same time limiting the disciplinary powers of teachers and school administrators, that African American youth would naturally be

subjected to an environment where they are systematically denied education, and geared towards state control via incarceration.

The school to prison pipeline also shares a kinship to neoliberal policy implementations. As stated, the principles of neoliberalism are founded on the grounds of ‘hyper-marketizations’. This does not necessary equate to merely privatizing former public institutions. It could also manifest itself in a manner of applying neoliberal calculation to various policies and funding decisions. Applying such methods as cost benefit analysis to education, for example has become the norm. In Chicago for instance, “it is characterized by closing public schools to turn them over to private management organizations, tying competitive teacher pay to student test scores, and expanding privately run but publicly funded charter schools” (Lipman 2011, pg. 223). These policies are accompanied by neoliberal discourse regarding meritocracy, which states that any student who is willing to work hard and get good grades can advance to high position in life. When president Obama, during a commencement speech scolded African Americans for being too lazy to go to school, he is not merely projecting racial tropes but rather exemplifying the discursive nature of his policies. His administration has been one of the adversaries for black youth who want access to education. As Pauline Lipman’s study of the president’s hometown, Chicago notes,

across African American communities, schools have been closed for low achievement even when lower performing schools in other neighborhoods were not. In one African American community, there is not one public high school remaining – all have been replaced with charter schools. In Latino communities experiencing gentrification, CPS (Chicago Public Schools) closed schools for low enrolment, despite counter evidence (Greenlee et al, 2008; Fleming et al, 2009) and replaced several with selective schools

championed by affluent parents that most neighborhood children cannot attend (2011, pg. 222)

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So it would seem rather disingenuous for the president to lecture black students on being too lazy to go to school, while his administration is continuing to implement neoliberal policies that aggressively alienate African Americans from accessing quality public education.

### **Police Militarization**

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The concept of militarism is an ideology, with a set of beliefs, assumption and values, which emphasizes the use of force as an essential element of problem solving, and when one discusses police militarization; it is the application of this concept to the actions of police forces (Kraska, 2007). Under these principles, police have always been militarized in some fashion, the focus here is the extent to which the local police in the United States are being militarized, and the impact it has on communities, more specifically poor communities of color. In the past four decades, local police forces across United States police have been the recipients of large amount funds in the form of equipment and financial grants from the federal government, making contemporary police forces in the United States quite undistinguishable from soldiers in a war zone. The relationship between African Americans and police militarization was put on displays as the protests in Ferguson, Missouri turn violent in the summer 2014 after an 18 year-old unarmed African American Michael Brown was shot and killed by a police officer, and a grand jury failed to indict the officer responsible.

The militarization of local police in the U.S is a trend that accompanied the inception of the War on Drugs. Given that the drug trade has a national and international quality, this federal campaign was able to find a circuitous rout around issues concerning federalism, meaning the



federal government was granted authority to circumvent certain state laws in order to heighten the War on Drugs. Hence in the 1960s, this allowed the Richard Nixon administration to increase the budgets for agencies that were associated with the War on Drugs. For Instance, the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA)—which was tasked with funding local police departments in grants and equipment—received increased funding under the Nixon administration. This arrangement between the federal and local governments created a milieu where state and local agencies and police departments became more dependent on the assistance of the government for resources (Balko, 2014). As the War on Drugs accelerated under the Reagan administration, so did the increase of funding to local and state police departments, which gave them larger arsenal of weapons and other military style equipment. In fact the first public policy change that the Reagan administration advanced through congress was the Military Cooperation with Law Enforcement Act, which was an amendment to a previous law called Posse Comitatus Act, which was passed in 1878 in order to limit the power and influence of the military over local affairs. And, despite Reagan’s lip service to his commitment of state rights, and smaller government, this amendment, As Radley Balko (2014) points out,

encouraged the Pentagon to go further and give local, state, and federal police access to military intelligence and research. It also encouraged the opening up of access to military bases and equipment, and explicitly authorized the military to train civilian police in the use of military equipment (pg. 145)

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The militarization of domestic police would increase with the 1984 Comprehensive Crime Control Act, which created the Department of Justice Assets Forfeiture Fund that was responsible for the administration of funds and equipment to local police from assets apprehended from crime cases involving drugs. Moreover, The National Defense Authorization

Act allowed the allocation of Department of Defense property to local law enforcement agencies. This statute, made permissible for “civilian police to obtain surplus military equipment at no or minimal cost” (Bolduc, 2016). The process of local police militarization in United States, accomplished more than arming the police with unnecessarily excessive arsenals, but it also shifted some grounding principals. The police were operating less like a body committed to serve and protect, and more like an armed force prepared to battle an enemy. Given the overwhelming negative impact that the War on Drugs, and subsequent policies related to it, has had on poor African Americans, it indeed follows that most profound side effect of police militarization, mainly police brutality and use of deadly force, has had its most impact on communities of color. And the events surrounding Ferguson, including the shooting of Brown and the violent response of police to the subsequent protests, are all emblematic of police militarization.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) published a report on June 2014, entitled *War Comes Home*. It outlines the ways in which the training as well as the large volume of military equipment that local police are given, entail the police to adopting what the report refer to as, “warrior” mentality, which is a term used in order to express how police officers can view the citizens as enemies. Because the militarization of police is largely targeted at communities of color, and absent from national attention, it continues to grow without much resistance. And this development of police’s growing embrace of the “warrior” mentality and its growing armament, continues to pose serious threat for those who reside in poor communities of color. As ACLU’s Kara Dansky (2014) notes, “excessive militarism in policing, particularly through the use of paramilitary policing teams, escalates the risk of violence, threatens individual liberties, and unfairly impacts people of color” (pg.18). The images surrounding the Ferguson protest in the

wake Michael Brown's death may have surprised those who have little knowledge of these spaces heavily patrolled by police, but the protests have shined a light, albeit inadvertently, to a problem that has been escalating since the Nixon administration. One ought to note that although the militarization of police developed from the War on Drugs campaign, it grew exponentially in the wake of the war on terror. After the United States suffered the largest terrorist attack on its soil on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, and as it prepared to launch a now highly unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the newly created Department of Homeland Security prepare to escalate the war domestically by increasing police militarization under dubious reasoning involving the threat of terrorism.

The police militarization also informs how structural racism domestically, and the foreign policies of the United States are closely connected. The Los Angeles Times reports that in the last 10 years after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York City and the Pentagon in the nation's capital, \$75 Billion has been invested in local and state emergency respondents and law enforcements with an array of spyware, automatic weapons, sophisticated navy weapons and BearCat armored vehicles (Murphy, 2011), all of which has not been substantially proven to deter any acts of terror. The close relationship between the foreign policy and domestic racial issues is best illustrated by program 1033. The program is part of the National Defense Authorization Act that conveys surplus military equipment to local law enforcement. This development is embraced by many local departments, and is viewed as a positive step, as a Missouri Department of Safety explained, "the 1033 Program provides surplus DoD military equipment to state and local civilian law enforcement agencies for use in counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism operations, and to enhance officer safety" (as cited in Greenwald,

2014). And these heavily armed forces employ the excessive weapons to conduct operations like raids and drug arrests. Many of the paramilitary weapons as well as techniques that were evident in the Ferguson protests were the same one used by U.S troops in its wars abroad. And one might suspect that the combination United States growing involvement in the Middle East in places like Syria and Iraq, and the complicated warfare taking place in the region will results in excess weapons being redirected to control and subjugate people of color domestically.

### **Police Brutality & Lack of Accountability**

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The issue of police brutality resurfaced to the forefront of national attention in 1991 when video surfaced of police officers assaulting motorist Rodney King. The officers would be charged and eventually acquitted in a trial, sparking riots in Los Angeles, and questioning the treatment of police towards African Americans. Thirteen years later in 2014, an officer was filmed killing Eric Garner in New York City, who was confronted by police on suspicion of selling untaxed loose cigarettes. Garner was killed by chokehold, which the New York Police Department banned in 1993. A grand jury failed to charge officer Daniel Pantaleo. The Garner case parallels that of many African American males who were recently killed at the hand of police, including Michael Brown of Ferguson in August 2014, and Laquan McDonald of Chicago in October of the same year. The theme that emerges in these recent cases is the lack of criminal accountability of officers. Although these cases, which garnered national and international coverage, brought the issue of police accountability to the forefront, they unfortunately fail to focus on the legal makeup of the criminal justice system at large that makes police impunity possible.

The issue of police brutality falls in line with the overall commitment of the American criminal justice system to grant police officers excessive discretion in their conduct. This has had asymmetrical effect among poor black populations, and if one were to look at what are colloquially referred to as stop and frisk programs across the United States, it becomes evident that police discretion results in racially disproportionate outcome vis-à-vis African Americans. Stop and frisk programs allow police officer to stop and search any individual based on their reasonable suspicion. Political leaders and police departments supposedly push these programs forward to deter crime, but no compelling evidence exists to suggest such a correlation. There is however, overwhelming evidence that suggests such tactics are exerted disproportionately on people of color. The New York Civil Liberties Union in 2011 reported, “of the 685,724 stops last year, 350,743 (52.9 percent) were of blacks, and 223,740 (33.7 percent) were of Latinos. Conversely, whites accounted for only 61,805 (9.3 percent) of the stops” (2011, Pg. 5). This practice is not limited to New York; according to the ACLU (2015) it includes Philadelphia, Chicago, Newark, Seattle, Boston and Los Angeles. Furthermore, stop and frisk programs demonstrate the correlation between a criminal justice systems’ reliant upon police discretion, and systematized racism that is embedded in police conduct. In other words, granting police unfettered discretion in various operation of police behavior, leads to people of color being the target more than any other demographic. The same outcome is true when it comes to the use of deadly force by police.

The United States police use deadly force among civilians more than most developed countries in the world. In a comprehensive database, *The Guardian Newspaper* reports that in 2015 the State of California fatally shot 72 people as compared to Canada who fatally shot 25

people in the same year. Police killing in the United States, at the macro level is far higher than most of the world. A closer look reveals that these killings reveal yet another racial disparity. *The Guardian Newspaper* found that African Americans were five times more likely to be killed by police than other demographics. Moreover, *The Guardian Newspaper* detailed database demonstrate that “one in every 65 deaths of a young African American man in the US is a killing by police” (Swaine et al, 2015). The shooting of Michael Brown is one example of the police’s embrace of deadly force, and represents the racial disparity, which exists in the general conducts of police officers. An important detail to note is that 25% of African Americans killed were unarmed (Swaine et al, 2015), which seems to suggest that there is a quality of police behavior that views African Americans, males in particular, as threatening. One can see the same motifs displayed when it came to the Trayvon Martin case, and similar mindsets seemed to be present in the fatal shooting of Michael Brown.

Under the law, police officers in the United States are to use deadly force as a last resort, and are to use such force under two circumstances. First is to save another person’s life, the second is to stop the escape of violent felons (James, 2011). The United States Supreme Court had established that a police officer had the right to use deadly force if the officer has probable cause that the suspect poses a threat of death or physical harm, based on a standard known as the “objective reasonableness”, which “established in a 1989 case, *Graham v. Connor*: severity of the crime, whether the suspect is resisting or trying to escape and above all, whether the suspect posed an immediate threat to the safety of officers or others” (Madar, 2014). Although these cases were designed to curtail police power, the standard of “objective reasonableness” has become an operational format whereby courts and judges are reliant upon the police recount of

the incident involving the use of deadly force, and any evidence including strong forensic evidence is insignificant compared to the officers own recounting (Madar, 2014). National data from the federal government is scarce and, indeed knowing the exact number as well as race of people killed by police is difficult. However, research based on incident report concludes that police are more susceptible to use deadly force when encountering minorities (James, 2011), and when incidents like that of Brown or Garner occur, it is believed that officers were operating within the strict protocols of using deadly force.

The legal framework that governs how police ought to use deadly force is heavily reliant upon the discretion of the individual officers, and thus it is unspecified and ambiguous as to what exactly is permitted and what is not. When it comes to searches there are proper and easily identifiable boundaries, namely prosecutors are not allowed to use evidence that was obtained through illegal searches, and judges and the criminal justice system as whole can deter the use of unlawful searches by relying on the principle of exclusionary rule. Such clear outlines are not visible when it comes to the use of deadly force (Oliver, 2015). The legal approach that governs police conducts vis-à-vis use of deadly force is very loose, and is often open to interpretation based on the particular event. When attempting to analyze the scarce legal accountability of police officers that kill unarmed black men, one has to take into account this vague legal makeup and juxtapose it to the long historical residues that constantly mark African Americans as threats. This general social sentiment in combination with a flawed legal framework contributes to the impunity of officers who have used deadly force against African American unjustifiably. Another obstacle to holding officers accountable is the fact that many juries and grand juries have to “engage in fact finding, a process that is always subject to the biases of fact finders”

(Oliver 2011, Pg. 1041). The ambiguity of the outlines that oversee the use of deadly force by police has created a vast leeway whereby police officers are granted minimal deterrence from using deadly force against civilians.

### **Michael Brown**

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The death of unarmed black teen Michael Brown by officer Wilson has sparked immense social unrest among people of color in Ferguson, MO. It is also significant because the death, as well as the failure to indict Wilson, and the media response, captures the frailties that are inherent in US criminal justice system vis-à-vis the use of deadly force. This case also exemplifies how historical legacies of African Americans fuel much of the decisions to use deadly force. The decision by the local police department to release a video of Brown committing petty crime illustrates this point acutely. By linking the death of Brown to a crime enforces racist undertones, which tacitly implies that his death was legitimate. The media coverage of this case is also illuminating in terms of how color blind ideology was used in order to explain the event as one that has less to do with social, political and economic conditions, and more to do with the failure of the local police department and officer Wilson. For many media outlets, the focus was less on the systems of justice and more of the property damages that ensued after it was announced that a grand jury failed to indict officer Wilson. Furthermore, the death of Brown also helps bring into light some major themes and continuities of racialised killings at the hands of law enforcement. If one were to compare the death of Martin and Brown, one can see familiar motifs. First the perception of black threats, secondly, the lack of criminal accountability for the killer, and finally posthumous assault of victims' character that rely on old racists tropes in order to legitimize their unlawful deaths. Moreover, the fashion by which this story is covered serves to undermine the feature of legal and political framework that form the



background out of which such cases emerge. For example question of whether Brown had his hand raised or not when he was shot occupied many media outlets, and this allows for unhelpful method of discussion. By narrowing the focus of whether Brown had his hands up, larger topics concerning race and policing are limited.

Nearly a week after the shooting of Brown took place on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2014 police publicized a surveillance video showing Michael Brown and his friend Dorian Johnson committing strong arm robbery at a nearby convenience store. The police acknowledged that Wilson was not made aware of this incident, and many including Brown's parents alleged that this was a clear attempt at persuading the grand jury that Brown was a menace, hence Wilson was within his right to kill him. Though Brown was guilty of the crime that was displayed in the video, the attempt of conjoining African American males with crime has wider implications. As discussed earlier, the historical developments surrounding violence against African Americans is supplemented with specific sources of justifications. For instance, when it came to lynchings it was either concocted charges of rape or murder of whites by black males, that merited torture and extrajudicial killings of black bodies, but the tacit role of this function was to gain control over black labor, and limit any political or social influence. The Michael Brown case suggests a re-embodiment of this principle, albeit under different auspices. Profound differences exist between lynchings and police killing of unarmed black men, however parallels emerge when we look at these two phenomenon together. One is the shaming of the victims. Terms like savage and animals that were used to describe lynching victims transitioned to thug and gangbanger (Wilkerson, 2014), and although terminology may have changed the function has not. These racially coded words like thug, serve to dehumanize black males as dangerous threats that should be eliminated.

The New York Times ran a front-page profile of Michael Brown. The article which was titled *Michael Brown Spent Last Weeks Grappling With Problems and Promise*, chronicles Brown's likes and dislikes, his recent spiritual awakening and interests in metaphysics, the article also goes on to outline his "rebellious streak", it goes on to say "he dabbled in drugs and alcohol. He had taken to rapping in recent months, producing lyrics that were by turns contemplative and vulgar. He got into at least one scuffle with a neighbor" (Eligon 2014, Pg. 1). This article is consistent with the current discursive framework that outlines the methods by which the shooting of African American males by police or vigilante is discussed. It is very much like this article, which ignores the larger workings of the systems, and does so by narrowing on particular victims. Similar outlines were true in Trayvon Martin's case. The excessive focus on the individual victims seems to divert attention from the larger institutional context that create dangerous environment for black males in the United States.

Another illustrative example is the question of whether or not Michael Brown had his hands up when he shot six times by officer Wilson. After the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) investigation concluded that there was no evidence to suggest that Brown had put his hand up, many media outlets were quick to point this fact. This again is another example of redirecting attention away from systems of justice and focus on trivial details of the case. This particular coverage also serves to delegitimize the protest that resulted shortly after the shooting of Brown. Protesters in Ferguson can be heard shouting the words "hands up, don't shoot", demonstrating their dissatisfaction, and illuminating the deteriorating relationship between police and the public. The wide coverage of DOJ finding about Brown's hands not being up, serves to delegitimize the grievances that the protesters had. The Washington Post for instance ran an

article titled *'Hands up, don't shoot' was built on a lie*, the article is quick to point out that there is real systemic racism that is prevalent in the United States, however in this case "Wilson was justified in shooting Brown" (Capehart, 2015). Be that as it may, this article fails to articulate the bigger grievances that are the force behind the demonstrations. Michael Brown was certainly not the first or last unarmed black man to die at the hands of police, and what these demonstrations illustrate is the frustration of systemically disproportionate policing killings and the lack of accountability to officer who commit the killings. Though the DOJ found no evidence that Brown's hands were in a surrender position, protest shouting the 'hands up, don't shoot' served as a symbolic moniker in which people were able to use the death of Brown as an opportunity to question the nature of police's use of deadly force in relation to African Americans. And article like that of the Washington Post while claiming to be a critical voice, miss this crucial point. The protests around Brown, despite what chanting was used, is precisely an attempt to shine light on the parallel that exists between Brown and many other unarmed black men who have shared the same ends.

Many pundits and commentators point out that activists and protestors express outrage and sadness at the death of Brown, but similar outrage is not apparent when it comes to black-on-black crimes. They argue that more African Americans fall victims to the violence of one another than to the violence of police. For instance, the night before a grand jury in Ferguson made the decision not to indict officer Wilson, former Mayor of New York City Rudy Giuliani appeared on a television program, and argued that a white officer killing unarmed black men is an exception, for many homicide of black males is done by other black males. He said, "Ninety-three percent of blacks in America are killed by other blacks. We're talking about the exception

here"<sup>7</sup>. The statistic is from Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2010, it reaches same conclusion. However it is devoid of context and such omission leads to problematic insertions because, it implies that homicide is a unique pathological feature of black life. The former mayor also forgets to mention is that most white victims of homicide are killed by other whites. As a 2013 FBI Report shows, 83 percent of white victims were killed at the hands other white offenders<sup>8</sup>. Moreover the attention to black on black crime also ignores that homicides have to do with geographical proximities. Homicides are more likely to take place by individual who occupy the same spaces. Truly, such a characterization of murder, does not allow the interrogation of the historical, political and economic intricacy that are involved in a case where a white police officer shoots and kills unarmed black teen. The issue of black-on-black crime ought not be ignored because it serves as diversion from serious critiques of institutions

Many historical developments have ensured that African Americans would be denied access to mainstream participation in important social arenas; this has entailed forms of severe economic marginalization, denied political participation and spatial isolation. And this social quarantining of African Americans results in negative outcomes, which include violence (Flynn & Shihadeh, 1996). Moreover, The issue of black-on-black crime is not something that is ignored within African American communities. And there are laws that aim to protect victims from being killed and there is a legal apparatus that punishes and disciplined those who commit acts of murder. This legal outline however does not seem to extend to officer. In fact fundamental legal designs ensure that police officers are not held accountable. It is clear that the

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2014/11/25/giulianis-claim-that-93-percent-of-blacks-are-killed-by-other-blacks/>

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

evocation of crime in the black community by power centers has nothing to do with confronting the issue. If that were the aim, included in that conversation would be the effects of poverty, access to education and spatial segregation. When one discusses black-on-black crime without also discussing such issues, it obfuscates and absolves larger institutional frameworks from any accountability.

Isolating black-on-black crime as an issue perpetuates the notion that problems that face African Americans is of their own doing. Bonilla-Silva (2013) argues that one of the contours of what he calls the “new racism” is explaining racist phenomenon like the killing of unarmed black men by white officers, by minimization of racism. This entails a way of describing racial outcomes as having little to do with systemic formats but rather as isolated exceptions that should not be understood as emblematic of institutions as a whole. When people of color protest that racism is behind certain events they are labeled hypersensitive, and accused of playing the proverbial ‘race-card’. The former Mayor Giuliani was operating within this understanding when he argues that cases like that of Brown and Wilson were the exceptions. He was in essence naturalizing the issue of racial violence in relation to African Americans. By omitting certain stats, and eliminating context as related to black-on-black crime, Giuliani is able to demonstrate that violence is an inherent quality of African Americans, and officer Wilson is a lone isolated case. The association of violence to people of color is a racist trope that is raised to delegitimize concerns over systemic racism and institutional injustice.

One can identify this particular link especially when it comes to protests that sometimes turn violent and property damage occurs. When peaceful demonstration in Baltimore Maryland took place April of 2015, after a 25 year-old African American man Freddie Grey died while

under police custody, many media outlets including national newspapers ran various stories covering the violence, although prior to that, the demonstrations were a peaceful affair where we saw prominent celebrities, athletes and politician taking part. This received little attention but as the state of the protests took on a more sinister nature, and sporadic episodes of violence took place, the coverage among cable TV news increased by 162 percent (Williams, 2015). As most media neglected to cover the many forms of peaceful protests, and focus on the violence alone, it perpetuates a racially coded argument that operated within codified form of racism that ultimately seeks to obscure real issues of police violence, and instead divert attention to property damages.

### **Visibilizing Black Bodies**

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The capturing of police officers killing unarmed black men via videos has made visible an action that has been invisible for the general public for the most part. The impact that these images have is reflected by the intensity of grassroots activism, and how far it is able to reach mainstream society. After Eric Garner was killed while under illegal chokehold, and the video was uploaded to YouTube for all to see, activists in Staten Island, New York used Garner's last words, which were "I can't breathe", and appropriated it into a call for a closer examination of police brutality as it pertains to African Americans. The phrase became a popular moniker. NBA superstars, Kobe Bryant of the L.A Lakers, Derrick Rose of the Chicago Bulls, and LeBron James of the Cleveland Cavaliers, among many others, were seen wearing a t-shirt with worlds "I can't breathe" prior to the start of games. This indicates the hard work of activism being reflected on popular social arenas such as sports. The successful attempt to visibilize a gruesome reality, and make it a fuel upon which a social movement runs is not new. The early formations of the civil rights movements were intimately connected to the violent death of Emmett Till.

Activists in the mid 1950s were able to use the death of Till, and the grotesque pictures of his dead body as a symbol of the violent racism that was prevalent in Southern United States. The visibilizing of the beaten or killed black bodies indeed poses a power to mobilize and ignite popular social response, which can result in state power being subjected to clear limitation in some instances. And as such, branches of state power have shown their clear disdain for the current attempt by individual citizens to capture police unjust actions via videos. As the case of Ramsey Orta, the 24 years old man who filmed the death of Eric Garner demonstrates, state power is willing to take actions against those who attempt to make the death of a black body visible.

Retaliatory actions were taken by police forces in order to discipline Orta. Orta has been arrested three times since August 2014. The first, for criminal possession of a handgun he, according to police, tried to give to a 17-year-old. This occurred just a day after Garner's death was ruled a homicide by the city's medical examiner. In February, he was arrested again on multiple charges of selling and possessing drugs. The third came on June 30 when he was accused of selling MDMA to an undercover cop (Sanburn, 2015). He also faced 60 days imprisonment in New York City's infamous prison, Riker's Island, where he went on a hunger strike due to his fear of being poisoned by the guards<sup>9</sup>. The retaliation towards Orta should be viewed not as police's dissatisfaction with citizen journalism via video but rather a reaction towards the intense social unrests, and the call into question police conduct in relation to minorities. Surely videos or any types of images in and of themselves carry little significance, if they are not coupled with grassroots activism. But mixed with social mobilization such images can have powerful impact, and attempts to suppress such images by power centers are efforts

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.democracynow.org/2016/1/12/why\\_is\\_ramsey\\_orta\\_man\\_who](http://www.democracynow.org/2016/1/12/why_is_ramsey_orta_man_who)

aimed at mitigating a catalyst for activism. Another examples that illustrates this point is the killing of 17 year-old African American Laquan McDonald in Chicago by white police officer Jason Van Dyke on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014, and the attempts by different levels of government to suppress the video. The Video was released on November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 13 months after the shooting took place. It shows officer Van Dyke shooting McDonald 16 times in approximately 30 seconds. Alderman Howard B. Brookins Jr. and Mayor Rahm Emanuel both cited an ongoing federal investigation as the reason why the video was not released. Despite the McDonald family not suing the city, it paid them \$5 million and fought hard to keep this video from going public. Publications such as the Wall Street Journal and The Chicago Tribune all filed a suit under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), to no avail. It was not until journalists as well as activists pressured the government to release the video, that the dashcam video was released. The power that these images have were realized by the power centers as police superintendent Garry McCarthy was fired, and Jason Van Dyke became the first Chicago police officer in three decades to faces charges of first-degree murder for an on-duty shooting<sup>10</sup>.

The case of Orta and McDonald shows that there is a shift towards suppressing the black body from view. The era of lynching in southern United States had an opposite intent. It was the intent to display the disfigured body for all to see in order to instill fear and intimidation among black population. Now it seem there is a larger commitment to discourage such images from being made visible. Symbolic images can have powerful consequences, but the medium used to advance this cause is the Internet, and although the trend known as cop-watching, where any individual can video record a police misconduct and publish it through online means can have

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<sup>10</sup>[http://www.democracynow.org/2015/11/25/chicago\\_police\\_officer\\_charged\\_with\\_murder](http://www.democracynow.org/2015/11/25/chicago_police_officer_charged_with_murder)



negative consequences just as it can have democratic outcomes. The increasing number of videos showcasing police brutality can have a diluted influence from the sheer volume of numbers. As the volume of these images increases through the Internet, the impact the video can have, is lost in the chasm of information (Schaefer & Steinmetz, 2014). The visibilization of police misconduct does challenge police impunity and serve as a tool for a more systematic criticism of law enforcement as it relates to its treatment of minorities in general and African Americans in particular. The challenge to activists seems to be finding a way to navigate through the vast abyss of information and videos, as well as creating a platform and discursive outline where the saturation of such images does not become trivial. In other words, to devise forms of discussing these images of slayed back bodies that does not simply focus on whatever the latest video showing police brutality against people of color, while forgetting previous bodies that fell victims of police brutality. The aim should be forming ways that explains current images in relation to images of the past. For example the images of Eric Garner death should be explained with systematic understanding of law enforcements but must also be connected to other images such as that of Walter Scott — who was an unarmed African American man who was shot in the back by officer Michael Slager in North Charleston, South Carolina — and many others. Such format of discussion lends itself to the production of a more refined understanding of the issue.

## Chapter 5

### Resistance by Any Other Name

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*“Man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible”*

*Max Weber*

Shortly after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in 2013, three African American women Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi began a hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media in order to raise awareness of racial killings of black males in the United States, and a connected focus on larger issues of racial profiling and other forms of institutionalized racism. It grew into a larger social movement that called into question the lack of police accountability, the degradation of black life, and the political and social structures that are complicit, if not direct and active participants, in the devaluation of black life in the United States. The movement is unique from the other social movements that precede it. First, unlike in the past, the methods of organization are done on a social media platform; as such it is able to have a long reach over young people throughout the country, and indeed among the world. Secondly, Black Lives Matter (BLM) activism deviates from past struggles pertaining to African Americans, in that it gears towards a more secular tone. The civil rights movement for instance was deeply connected to the traditions of the black church. Also organizations such as the Nation of Islam black activism combined activism with a religious affiliation of one form or another (Booker, 2014). And as such movements would place religious institutions as a deeply political space where spirituality and quest for social justice would assemble.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement on the other hand embraces secular platforms of social organization and mobilization. Instead of the church, an important arena where these social movements take place is, first online through social media, and second it is on college and

University campuses across the country. It is important to note that BLM is not the first social movement concerned with the plight of African Americans to embrace secular forms of resistance. Although highly influenced by the teaching of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, was a leftist secular group that did not focus on any religious elements. Another distinctive feature of BLM is its skeptical view of establishment politics. The BLM has regarded the two party system in the United States as being a very limited form of democracy that does not adequately address grievances of African Americans. BLM is also unique in that it has shown its capability to be a movement that can have an international embrace. Some BLM activists displayed their commitment to the plight of Palestinians under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as shown their concerns to the racism that Ethiopian Jews face inside Israel. The movement has also embraced movements that are concerned with the plight of indigenous peoples. BLM activists for instance travelled to North Dakota to join indigenous activists in Standing Rock Sioux Tribe as they resist the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. Moreover BLM has been a movement that has been embraced in Canada. BLMTO (Black Lives Matter Toronto) was sparked after the deaths of two black men, Andrew Loku and Jermaine Carby by police officers. The movement has made the attempt to contextualize these deaths, as having to do with larger disregard of black life from law enforcement, as well as systematized racism that takes place in the operation of law enforcement most epitomized by a police policy known as carding, which qualitatively does not differ very much from stop and frisk policy in the United States discussed earlier.

## Campus Activism

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In the last two years, college and University campuses around the United States have been the ground of many protests and activism in an attempt to addressing systematic racism on campus. Universities including Harvard, Yale, Brown, University of Missouri and University of Cincinnati, among many others have participated in various calls to action, and have made their administration aware of their lack of safety, as well as the manifestations of larger systemic racism on University grounds. Many of these demonstrations on University campuses took various forms in order to demonstrate their concerns. At Princeton University for instance black students stages a sit in at Princeton President Christopher Eisgruber's office, demanding the removal of former United States president Woodrow Wilson's name from one of the University's departments (Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs), due to the Wilson's legacies with regards to race. Wilson, who was both a faculty member, later president of Princeton University, had opposed the admission of black students, as well as praised the Ku Klux Klan. Students at Princeton University argued that the racist legacies of this president must be recognized and actions should be taken in order to reflect the progress that has been achieved in relation to race. Students also used this point to illustrate a salient point, that is, although progress has been made, the remnants of a racist society still make their presence known on the campus in various forms. And bringing attention to legacies of this particular figure was not done merely to remember Wilson's legacies but putting it in the context of contemporary curtailing of opportunities that take place. The University however, refused to omit Wilson's name despite student's demands.

Other University student activists have demanded much more substantive and institutional restructuring with the aim of addressing racism on campus. Recent protests and social mobilization on campuses across the United States have rightly been associated with larger BLM movement, and in this regard the events that took place at the University of Missouri carry heavy significance. Racially motivated incident on the grounds of the campus sparked protests among students of color who attend the University. Students of color at the University of Missouri who were members of a group called Concerned Student 1950, named for the year the first black graduate student was admitted to the University, stopped Tim Wolf's, the University president, car in a middle of a parade and demanded his answers concerning the racism that students face, at the inter-personal level — black students facing verbal attacks in the form racial epithets, and incidents like someone smearing a swastika on a wall with feces — as well as cases of racially motivated physical attacks. The protestors also asked the president to answer questions regarding the systemic racism that the University engages in, such as the lack of diversity among the student body and faculty. Wolf ignored the activists. Dissatisfied with his response, or lack thereof, Graduate student Jonathan Butler, who was a member of the group, went on a hunger strike on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015, and stated that he will continue to do so until Tim Wolf resigns. Shortly after Butler's and Concerned Student 1950 demand that Wolf resign, they were aided by the University of Missouri football team who declared that they would not participate in any official athletic duties until Wolf resigns. And by November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015 University of Missouri president Tim Wolf stepped down along with the chancellor, marking a significant victory for students of color in the University. The timing of Wolf's resignation is also significant. The student athletes abstaining to perform would cost the University millions of dollars, and the resignation of the president could be understood as the University's attempt to

mitigate the loss of income rather than a demonstration of their commitment for progressive racial stance.

The events surrounding the demonstrations and ouster of the president at the University of Missouri, and the larger unrest surrounding Universities and colleges in the United States, vis-à-vis racial issues, is illustrative in so far as it exposes the fallacy, indeed hypocrisy of colleges and Universities. By now it would be difficult to visit an admission page of any University's web site in U.S and Canada without also seeing a link or section on diversity and/or equality. Most schools articulate that they operate under certain set principles, which generate diversity of all forms, and offer opportunities to vulnerable sections of society. However, these protests and campus activism contradict this seemingly deep commitment to social justice that many universities have. It instead exposes the schools as offering little more than lip service, while abstaining from any genuine efforts to combats sites of concrete systemic and institutional racism.

Institutions of higher learning, like most other institutions in society, have been subject to changes pertaining to neoliberal principles. This means that colleges and Universities are adjusting the ways in which they operate in order to fit a more market oriented and business driven climate. Universities are expanding administrative duties and growing managerial control of faculty, while also reducing tenure and relying more heavily and adjunct faculty. And under such circumstances, colleges and Universities are more dependent on superficial commitment to diversity, and making symbolic gestures that address individualized issues. The case of the University of Missouri is again illustrative in this sense. Although student activists claimed victory in the fact that prominent members of the University's administration resign, the actions

do little to address the more substantive grievances that the students had. The resignations, however do explain the strategic tools used by University administrations across the board. That is, by focusing on the individual issues — in the case of University of Missouri, the president — the University is able to take actions that may have some symbolic value, while at the same time issues concerning larger operations of a University, such as safety on campus, and structural racism on campus as well as in society are overlooked or pacified by shallow gestures.

We should note that campus activism, which has intensified in recent months, is not merely an extension of the Black Lives Matter movement, but rather the racial justice component is one of many agendas that have been raised on campuses. Other issues include, but not limited to, climate change, gender inequality, class and LGBTQ rights. The challenge with campus activism, indeed with activism as a whole, seems to be the lack of recognition on the part of society to the coalescence that exist between the different agendas. Many element of the activism on campuses suggests that there is a broad consensus that issues of race, for instance, are closely linked to economic arrangements. For example, the protests at the University of Missouri made the point that student debt and tuition increase, are a closely interwoven network of subjugation and control that disproportionately target student of color. And other Black Lives Matter demonstrations on the streets as well as on campus made the connection between race and class clear. The individualized focus of the responses by University administrations as well as media coverage portrayed the movements as a one-dimensional phenomenon that is concerned with individual cases. At The University of Missouri, for instance, the administration devoted more attention to the racist incidents and threat to student of color, and took action that focused on eliminating prominent members of the administration. With this parochial emphasis on

individuals, the students' more pressing demands for lower tuition, and grievances concerning student debt are left devoid of attention.

Student activism should be taken seriously, as it both reflects the general social climate and it is also a good indication of how larger social movements take shape. Movements, like the civil rights movements, were significantly influenced, in both tactics as well as principles, by student activism. Examples include the February 1960 Greensboro sit-ins, where four black students from North Carolina A&T entered Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina, and sat down at its "whites only" lunch counter. The sit-ins, in combination with other non-violent forms of protests, eventually forced Woolworths to remove its discriminatory policies. The fact that the non-violent philosophies were implemented with other civil rights demonstration is not a coincidence, but the larger social movement that was gaining momentum in the sixties was building on the activism that many young students had developed. In contemporary struggles for racial justice, similar patterns can be detected. The Black Lives Matter movement, which began as a result of general rage and anger at the killing of African American men, is able to take a more refined and productive route due to the involvement of student activism. This isn't to say that that popular struggles on the streets aren't nuanced, but it does seem that with Black Lives Matter demonstrations, there are instances where protests emerge in the wake of the most recent racial killings of unarmed black men, and there are also instances where a movement is being built with the fundamental focus on institutions and systems of subjugation. Student activism seems to be the starting point where issues of general rage meet focused institutional analyses. For instance a Black Lives Matter Activist-align group in Columbia University named Students Against Mass Incarceration demanded that the University to drop its investment in private



prisons (Somashekhar, 2015). This is merely one example, but many others can be seen across both US and Canada, where Black Lives Matter student activist groups or other groups aligned with it are making the active effort to connect the frequent killing of African American men with the institutional makeup of society which are the context that breeds tragic results.

Student activists have come under criticism by pundits and other media sources as merely privileged youths lashing out against authority. One of the loudest criticisms is that they are merely policing language, and as such pose a serious threat to free speech. The phrase “politically correct” is one that has been used to launch attacks at the activists. In a December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015 edition of the New York Times for instance, an article describes students’ complaints regarding the campus-dining hall at Oberlin College. They believed that the food options ought to be more diverse. They also voice their concerns at what they perceived as cultural appropriation. The students argued that what passed for Vietnamese or Japanese food, or other foods from the non-western world did not meet the standards. Although this is not a concern of epic proportions, events such as this are given attention for ideological reasons. By constantly portraying the students as hypersensitive about what seem minor issues; a larger narrative is built in which larger campus protests are talked about. And the narrative simply reiterates the point that college students’ concerns are either of no importance or threatening free speech. So when students for instance voice their concerns about hate speech, counterforces are able to divert the issues as having to do with freedom of expression. The irony however, is that many forces within government and universities are the ones taking action that are in violent contradiction with universities supposed prodigious commitment to free speech.

As mentioned earlier, many universities are beginning to use less tenure and more adjunct faculty. Even more so, universities regularly apply punitive measures against faculty that express unpopular opinions. Take for example Steven Salaita. Salaita was an assistant professor at Virginia Tech, and later accepted a conditional offer for a tenure-track position from the University of Illinois. And after a series of tweets that were critical of Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2014, the offer was withheld. Salaita pursued a lawsuit, and eventually settled with the University. Wheaton's College, a Christian evangelical liberal arts college, was also involved in similar controversy when political science professor Larycia Hawkins posted messages that expressed solidarity against Muslims and spoke out against islamophobia. She also wore a Hijab as a symbolic gesture of solidarity. The University responded by suspending Hawkins. Later both the school and Hawkins issued a press release that stated that they have come to a confidential agreement to part ways. This two example of Salaita and Hawkins express a growing trend in which faculty are subject to punitive measures when they express opinions that are at odds with the political climate of the day. This combined with larger interests in denying faculty tenure and limiting job opportunities for qualified professors — while at the same time expanding administrative jobs, salary and roles — institutions of higher learning seem to be at the front lines in the attacks against free speech, not students.

One may be tempted to treat student activism as a result of rebellious youth that is divorced from the “real world”. But it seems pertinent to recognize that many student activisms that occur on campuses do not happen in a vacuum; rather they are part and parcel of larger social movements that shape society. Social movements have always relied on students' energy, passion and dedication as a platform to launch successful resistance. When it comes to recent

Black Lives Matter activism, student activism plays a significant role. Students in many universities across the United States show an understanding of how structural racism function and the adverse effect it has on their particular experience, as well as society as a whole. Students have shown the intellect and conviction necessary to turn a social unrest predicated on blind rage and despair, and design a movement that takes into account various sources of structural racism. The Universities on the other hand, despite their advertisement of tolerance and diversity, have taken steps to limit the impact of activism on campus. And many financial and ideological pressures have made institutions of higher learning as a mere social project less concerned with education, and more compelled to produces consumers in a market driven world.

This tension is one of the major obstacles that student activists face, because despite the persuasion of their argument and commitment to a cause, they are still nevertheless active member in a fundamentally flawed institution. The demand for more scholars of color and diverse student body ought to be embraced. However this must be merely a stepping block, more African American professors does not equal diversity outside of the superficial without also challenging long standing commitment in many university faculties to Eurocentric curriculums. The importance of student activism cannot be overstated. At the same time, some of the activism's goals leave more to be desired. It seems students' desire for more diversity and inclusion, albeit admirable, does not attack some of the fundamental obstacles that produce a homogeneous student body. As student activism grows in this young movement, it should seriously consider the question of diversity as meaning more than the presence of minorities on campus, but also diversifying the content of education itself, whereby diversity of people in complimented by diversity of ideas. Additionally, the principle that stresses education as a means

rather an end must be resisted, for student activism will in the future, have limited capacity if it merely plays a minor role in a neoliberal act.

### **Abandoning Establishment Politics**

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One of the memorable tactics that was used by Black Lives Matter activists was interrupting politician and confronting them on their stance on institutional racism. Republican and Democratic nominees had their speeches and town halls meetings interrupted by protestors who took the platform to state their grievances and the urgency of the problems facing black America. The Republican Party events were a much less friendly atmosphere where protestors, in some instances were subject to violence. Such actions might be misconstrued as BLM activists relying on electoral politics to further the interests of the movement. However, one of BLM's distinct elements is its pessimism of both Democratic and Republican party establishment, and its view that addressing police brutality and institutional racism must look beyond such platforms. Not the least because mainstream politics—including both parties—as a whole have been complacent at best, and active participants at worst, in the ongoing attack against black bodies. The abandonment of establishment politics is one of the features of the movement that separate it from past struggles. The civil rights movement, although began as a grassroots mobilization, it nevertheless had to rely on mainstream political actors to win victories like the Voting Rights Acts. BLM abstained from endorsing any candidate in the current presidential election, the reasoning being that the two party system is a flawed and diluted democratic experience. Voting from a choice of two parties, which lack any substantive difference outside of their rhetoric, is a form of democracy that has shown itself to be ineffective in the lives of people of color. The abandoning of such limited forms of democratic participation, and focusing on a

movement building that seeks to acquire bigger vision of democratic imagination, forms one of the important features of the movement.

Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, two black public figures who have been embedded in the Democratic Party, received less than friendly greetings with Ferguson demonstrators. TV host and Democrat supporter, Al Sharpton was met with boos from the crowd as he stressed the importance of voting and advised the demonstrators that they should not be on the street but should gear their focus on the various local and federal elections that are approaching. Such proclamations illuminate the difference that arises from the older generations, which still seems to hope in the electoral politics as a source for change. Although BLM stresses the need to look beyond the two party system and electoral politics, they nevertheless made an impact in the ways in which candidates from both parties ran their campaigns. Prior to demonstrators interrupting their campaign events, both Democratic front runners Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders refrained from addressing the concerns of BLM in any specific fashion, but due to the popularity of the movement, the intervention of activists, and the still ongoing cases of police brutality against people of color, they have been forced to face the issues and make it part of their campaign platforms. This however, might lead to nefarious appropriations, as it runs the risk of having a campaign that uses a popular movement in order to push the political interests of establishment candidates. And the now Democratic presidential candidate, Hilary Clinton seems committed to such political maneuvering. The Republican Party has also included the BLM in their platform. As it was evident by the speeches at the Republican National Convention, as well as other events, they regard the BLM as “terrorist”, and proclaimed “blue lives matter” stressing the value of police officers, and view BLM as a threat to law and order. The 2016 Republican

campaign ran on many racists platform, and the incitement of law and order rhetoric was taken, nearly verbatim, from the Nixon and Reagan campaigns. The incitement of law and order in the current campaign mirrors the similar tactics that use non-racial term to communicate a racist agenda.

The role of the Clintons in the expansion of mass incarceration, and the impact it had on African Americans, largely lacked attention in the early stages of the 2016 presidential primaries. This would change due to BLM activists. In August of 2015, Hilary Clinton was confronted by group of activist in New Hampshire. One of the activist stated “You and your family have been personally and politically responsible for policies that have caused health and human services disasters in impoverished communities of color through the domestic and international War on Drugs that you championed” (as cited in Murch, 2016). Hilary Clinton justified her push for such policies by arguing that rising rate of crime in communities of color was the root cause. What the rhetoric was concealing is Clinton’s blame of mass incarceration on people of color themselves. What she forgets to mention is that most people that are imprisoned in the era of mass incarceration were people with non-violent drug charges. Most statistics show that both black and white Americans consume illegal drugs at the nearly the same levels (Alexander, 2010), the vast majority of those arrested are poor black males. And such fact is not compatible with Clinton’s reasoning. But both she and her husband, former President Bill Clinton, continue to stand by their devastating policies by merely using the crime argument repeatedly. This crucial legacy of the Clintons has received much needed public debate, and it is due to Black Lives Matter activism. Despite this however, the Clintons have always and continue to have support from African American constituents.

The BLM activism towards holding Clinton accountable has managed to force her campaign to adapt a strategy that takes the recent killing into account. What results is an exploitation of tragedy for a political purpose. During the 2016 Democratic National Convention, where Hilary Clinton clinched the nomination for president, a group of women who called themselves “Mother of the Movement” took the stage. This group was made up of mothers who have lost their children through gun violence or police violence. Some of the members include Geneva Reed-Veal, the mother of Sandra Bland, who was found hanged her jail cell. She was arrested after being pulled over for a traffic violation. Other members of “Mother of the Movement” include Sybrina Fulton, Trayvon Martin’s mother. In their speech they voiced their support for Clinton as the next president, and also stressed the dangers of gun violence and the need for communities and police officers to cooperate. They also urged that criminal justice reform is a way to address racism in the United States. This gesture on the part of the Clinton campaign to include the concerns of BLM is problematic in two ways. First, mixing of police brutality that emergence from a long historical legacy of white supremacy and random gun violence. Gun violence in the United States is a very serious issue, and ought to garner large attention. Nevertheless synthesizing police brutality against African Americans with gun violence ignores the nuances of race and policing in the United States, and provides a one size fits all solution to two different problems. The second problematic element of “Mother of the Movement” endorsement of Clinton is their lack of attention to the devastating legacies of the Clintons in relation to African Americans. Surely it would seem that Clinton is more preferable than any Republican candidate, this however ought not to abstain her from criticisms. There are no legitimate grounds to question the motivation of the “Mothers of the Movement”, however

Clinton's embrace of the group may contain ulterior motives, for it may be understood as an attempt at channeling the popularity of BLM for the purposes of political appeal.

The group "Mother of the Movement", does not encompass the entirety of BLM, however there seems to be some small element of the BLM network that seems attracted to establishment politics. It was somewhat of a surprise when one of the most visible faces in the BLM protests, DeRay McKesson Ran for mayor in Baltimore where there had been intense demonstrations following the death of Freddy Grey. McKesson would go on to lose the election. But nevertheless commitment to staying independent of establishment forces, on the part of BLM network, does show sign of being challenged. As wealthy individuals and organizations attempt to gain financial hold of the movement, from the Ford foundation to wealthy Democrat donor George Soros<sup>11</sup>, there seems to be an ominous development as entities that are closely tied to the Democratic establishment attempt to gain access to the BLM network. Such attempts are of pernicious nature because they threaten the independence of the movement. If the movement was to develop a financial dependence on such sources, it will inevitably be subject to the whims and vicissitudes of the Democratic establishment. The eagerness of wealthy donors to embrace BLM is a political strategy, which aims to appropriate the popularity of the movement into a political constituency that will support Democratic nominees on various levels. When elected they, in-turn, serve the interests of large financial organization and wealthy individuals like Soros. Thus far there does not seem to be evidence that BLM is fully bought, but one should be cautious of the developing interest on the part of wealthy sources, for they might be more interested in the BLM's political potential rather than the issues it raises.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/11/major-donors-consider-funding-black-lives-matter-215814>



The desire to stay independent of establishment politics on the part of BLM is indeed an important one. But it also recognizes that electoral and establishment politics are realities, which must be addressed. Its aim is to broaden the scope of political participation as meaning more than the ballot. It is also on the streets that change occurs. BLM has expressed no loyalty to any candidate or party in the current race, but it is not telling citizens not to vote, but rather understand that either party will be content in the continuity of the status quo. It is up to the citizens to compel their elective representatives to do the bidding on the people's behalf. And this does not get accomplished by merely voting every four years, but is done through applying pressures on politician and institutions to address serious issues. This seems to be a fundamental element of all activism as a whole, and it is true of BLM. The issues of racism and police brutality precede the inception of BLM. In fact it is something that is deeply ingrained in the American democratic experience. And reversing the historical trajectory that has resulted in the death of Till, Martin, Brown, Rice, Garner, and many others, is going to require far more than the ballot box. It necessitates the acknowledgment of history, institutional analysis, and modes of resistance that take into account both history and the nature of racism in its discursive as well as systematic frameworks. BLM, even in the early stages, seems committed to outlining the nature of black oppression by connecting the systemic with the historical. And wealthy donors tied to establishment politics could threaten this very foundation by attempting to turn BLM as a political tool that gets persons into office rather than a political force that holds people in office accountable.

## Beyond The United States

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The BlackLivesMatter movement is expanding its scope, in terms of space as well as concerns, far beyond the United States. The movement is showing signs that concerns for police brutality and institutional racism is linked to environmental issues, class, gender, etc. The movement can be seen in various places with varying degrees of intensity including Britain, Brazil and Canada. And the BLM network in the United States has in turn; displayed concerns for the peoples that it perceives are oppressed. For instance the coalition of BLM groups in the United States released a platform which, among many issues, delivers a scathing condemnation of Israel in relation to its treatment of Palestinians, and called its actions “genocidal” and stated that the country is an “apartheid” state. The platform was equally damning of U.S role in Israel’s policy. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the arguments or characterization of BLM’s stance on Israel, it is nevertheless evident that BLM is movement that is no longer confined to the concerns and people of the United States. Toronto is one of places where the movement has been embraced. Although BlackLivesMatter Toronto (BLMTO) shares the name and overlapping concerns with its American counter part, mainly the behavior of police towards people of color, BLMTO has developed its own idiosyncrasies, and is fashioning an identity distinguishable from other manifestations of BLM.

BLMTO is sparked largely by the deaths of individuals including Andrew Loku, a forty five year-old Sudanese father of five, with a history of mental illness, who was shot dead by Toronto police on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and Jermaine Carby, who was gunned down after a traffic stop in Brampton, Ontario. BLMTO identifies the loss of these men of color in Toronto, as well as the lack of criminal accountability against the officers responsible, as a direct result of a particular fashion of policing and broader set of social policy that leaves people of color vulnerable to such

fatal encounters. Canada, just like the United States, is a white colonial project largely predicated on violence against Indigenous peoples, the legacies of which are still painfully apparent today. And like U.S it has embraced the institution of slavery since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Though cotton was not imperative in the function of slavery in Canada, most slaves did serve as domestic servants. Moreover they were commodities that could be sold and bought to other French colonies in the Caribbean. And throughout Canadian history, we can easily find policies of segregation and legal discrimination against black people. Broadly speaking the history of Canada, in relation to black people, although not identical, share similar parallels to that of the United States. And the contemporary social settings in Canada do have the effect of marginalizing the black population specifically when it comes to criminal justice system. Canada's War on Drugs for instance, much like the American campaign, has targeted black citizens, and is punitive in its design. The "war" has had a deleterious impact on black bodies through incarceration. Indeed it seems that, Canada has its own set of problems that mirror much of what's going on in the U.S.

In Toronto, the behavior of law enforcement towards people of color echoes much of what's been discussed in the context of the U.S. For instance the practice known as carding where Toronto police are allowed to arbitrarily stop, question and document individuals, resonate stop and frisk, not only in its implementation but also in its effect. Cardings are usually implemented in low-income sections of Toronto, and police are likely to encounter black residents who are less socially mobile (Rankin & Winsa, 2013). Beyond carding, arrests for non-violent drug crimes are disproportionately focused towards black people, although research suggests that white Canadians are more likely to be involved in illicit drug activity (Khenti,

2014). Hence when BLMTTO staged a two-week occupation on the steps in Toronto Police headquarters, the concern was far beyond the individuals killed by police, rather it was a form of political and social intervention that sought to question the long silence on the issue of systematic racism in Canada, and Toronto in particular. Moreover BLMTTO is also challenging the characteristically Canadian myth of a utopian multicultural society. Although much scholarship exists that cast a heavy doubt to government's beneficial claims of a multiculturalism policy, BLMTTO activism has strongly illustrated that rhetoric of multiculturalism vis-à-vis Toronto merely conceals the reality that people of color, which occupy spaces located outside the predominantly white core of the city, have less access to resources, and are confined to the periphery of society.

BLMTTO significance extends beyond the Canadian boundaries. The argument and insights that Toronto activists are bringing forward to the larger BLM network enhances the movement. In the American context, African American is an identity shaped by nearly 400 years of subjugation that includes the institution of slavery, Jim Crow, mass incarceration, etc. The Canadian context is much different, for there is not unitary 'African Canadian' identity, rather black persons in Canada are more likely to identify by the roots of their parents or ancestors, this dynamic opens up the opportunity to understand blackness as a complicated, diasporic, and eclectic experience with many parts. Moreover, such understanding of blackness, and indeed racism, produces a structure of resistance that is able to link other forms of systematic exclusions. For instance, in the United States, the struggle for racial justice, as it pertains to criminal justice and African Americans, is not always associated with the alarming growth of islamophobia in the country. Surely, the facet of racism towards Muslim bodies is not identical to that of African Americans. Islamophobia in the United States has deep roots in its foreign

policy interests, and have always been connected with the Middle East and its people. The domestic elements of islamophobia grow out of the fear, driven by multiple sources of propaganda, that links Muslims to terrorism. And this characterization of entire people as dangerous criminals is parallel to the War on Drugs that identified black bodies as possessing intrinsic proclivities to crime. Despite the many coloration that exist between islamophobia and systemic racism, the BLM movement in the United States, has not always merge the need to resist islamophobia (although recent events show promise). With regards to BLMTO, it seems there is a foundational commitment with making a connection with systemic racism against black people with the institutional marginalization of Muslims. And an understanding that forces of islamophobia and anti-black racism are not mutually exclusive, but can act in tandem in the marginalization of society's most vulnerable.

The reaction to BLMTO by mainstream media outlets has demonstrated its willingness combine rhetoric of racism and islamophobia in order to trivialize the protests. As the protests were underway and showed no signs of slowing, it appeared that the media cared less about the protests and more about a tweet that one of the co-founders had posted on social media. Back in February 2016, Yusra Khogali posted "Plz Allah give me strength not to cuss/kill these men and white folks out here today. Plz plz plz". The media coverage of this tweet derailed any opportunity to have a nuanced and serious discussion on the nature of systemic racism in Toronto. Instead the focus shifted to portraying Khogali as a dangerous person who posed serious threat to the lives of white people. The media coverage used the fact that she was black and Muslim in order to derail the larger points of the movement, and such coverage was, as expected, filled with both racist and islamophobic stereotypes. Statements like "Black lives

matter ... but the lives of ‘men and white folks’ do not”<sup>12</sup> can be seen on leading Toronto news sources. The identification of BLM as a terrorist group posing a serious threat to white people’s life, has been used in combination with the fallacious argument encapsulated by the phrase ‘all lives matter’, in order to delegitimize the movement. These discursive tools were in display as news outlets focused less on the concerns of BLMTO, and more on a tweet that was made months before the protests took place. The Canadian media, especially as it pertains to this one case, showcased its subservience to power with a disservice to the public in the form of ideologically filtered coverage, which limited any serious discussion of the grievances expressed by BLMTO demonstrations.

Though it is still a young movement BLMTO has already shown itself to be empowering source for many marginalized community. It is a movement that is broadening its scope to include activism involving environmental concerns, indigenous rights, and LGBTQ2. As it continues to expand its range of issues, it is possible that the movement develops into a resistance model with grand potentials. BLMTO and BLM in general have had less than significant impact in terms bills and legislatures, but changes towards progressive social policies tend to be a combination of both discursive and infrastructural. Meaning that changing the means of understanding social structure is as important as passing laws. For example the abolishing of slavery in the United States, despite popular depiction, was not merely the result of Abraham Lincoln’s opposition. Rather it had more to do with the efforts of abolitionists like Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, Harriet Jacobs, William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, Wendell Phillips, and many others who were committed to recognizing the humanity of African American.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.citynews.ca/2016/04/05/black-lives-matter-co-founder-tweets-about-killing-men-and-white-folks/>

This general effort at making a discursive intervention, as well as political activism would ultimately lead to the emancipation proclamation of 1863. BLM and BLMTO also ought to be understood as both political and discursive challenges to the status quo. And thus far, what they lack in political victories in terms of policy and laws passed, they compensate in change of dialogue among the general population with respect to race and policing. And as the movement grows and becomes more heterogeneous, there may be fears that it will lose its coherency, but it is also possible that it might challenge several foundational structures of society with a movement that is committed to making connection without suppressing the differences.

## Conclusion

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Race in the United States is one of the most problematic contours in the American democratic experience. From the age of slavery to current state of domestic affairs, institutions have adapted rigid set of behaviors that continue to perpetuate racial inequality. And this premise provides the background whereby the devaluation of black lives is the norm. Recent cases of police killings of unarmed black men in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Charlotte, North Carolina are a manifestation of an American democratic model that has been shaped by centuries of black oppression, and do not deviate very far from the case studies discussed in this thesis. Out of the ashes of the slain black lives however, a new form of democratic awakening in the United States has emerged. The one positive thing that one can say about the deaths of Brown, Martin and many others, is that they did not die in vain. Instead they have sparked, perhaps revived, an awakening that can have the potential to make a change. Though it is too early to tell, Black Lives Matter as well as other forms of social mobilization has made an impact to nature of political dialogue, whereby political establishment are responding to the political pressures of these social movements. The nature of social discourse has also shifted due to activism. Concepts like ‘white

privilege', 'institutional racism' and 'cultural appropriation' are no longer terms confined within recondite academic lexicon, but rather they are entering the conscious of mainstream audience. Music from artists like artists like Beyoncé, Kendrick Lamar, J-Cole, which take a bold stance to the conducts of police in relation to African Americans, demonstrates the expansion of ideas that activists in the Black Lives matter movement have cultivated. The stance that San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick took, refusing to stand for the American national anthem as a way to protest the condition of people of color and the unaccountable structure of policing, is further proof that the discourse surrounding the shooting of unarmed black men by police officers is changing. If history is any indication, the path towards progress starts with a shift in discourse.



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