



Black in Time: How #BlackLivesMatter Reorients the Human¹

Louis M. MARAJ²

Abstract:

This essay discusses how Black Lives Matter activists make meaning in relation to history, temporality, and anti-Blackness in the Western world. It analyzes the modalities through which these activists frame resistance, paying particular attention to the movement's attempts to, in the words of co-founder Alicia Garza, "(re)build the Black liberation movement" (2014) through Black feminist epistemologies. By looking at how the movement pushes against antiBlackness intersectionally through in-person and digital and protests and in popular culture, we might come to understand why it has garnered global significance in reshaping past conceptions of what it means to be "human."

Keywords: Black Lives Matter; protest; Black feminism; anti-Black racism; police brutality; temporality.

O Negro no Tempo: Como o #VidasNegrasImportam Reorienta o Humano

Resumo:

A palestra discute como os ativistas do movimento "Vidas Negras Importam" constroem significado em relação à história, temporalidade e anti-negritude no mundo Ocidental. Analisa, também, as modalidades pelas quais esses ativistas enquadram a resistência, dando atenção especial às tentativas do movimento de, nas palavras da cofundadora Alicia Garza, "(re) construir o movimento de libertação Negra" (2014), por meio de epistemologias feministas negras. Observando como o movimento se choca contra a anti-negritude interseccionalmente por meio de protestos digitais e pessoais, e na cultura popular, podemos chegar a entender por que ele acumulou significância global na reformulação de concepções anteriores sobre o que significa, de fato, ser humano

Palavras-chave: Vidas Negras Importam; protesto; Feminismo negro; racismo anti-negro; brutalidade policial; temporalidade.

Negra en el tiempo: cómo #LasVidasDeLosNegrosSonImportantes reorienta a la humana

Resumen:

Este ensayo analiza cómo los activistas de Las Vidas De Los Negros Son Importantes dan sentido a la historia, la temporalidad y el racismo anti-negro en el mundo occidental. Analiza las modalidades a través de las cuales estos activistas enmarcan la resistencia, prestando especial atención a los intentos del movimiento de, en palabras de la cofundadora Alicia Garza, "(re) construir el movimiento de liberación negra" (2014) a través de epistemologías feministas negras. Al observar cómo el movimiento empuja contra la negritud de manera interseccional a través

¹ A previous version of this paper was presented for the XIII National Meeting on the History of the Media Brazil [Associação Brasileira de Pesquisadores de História da Mídia] at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora, Minas Gerais, Brazil on August 18, 2021 at 7:30pm Brasilia Time.

² Assistant Professor in the School of Journalism, Writing, and Media at University of British Columbia, Vancouver. Author of *Black or Right: Anti/Racist Campus Rhetorics*. Co-founder of Digital Black Lit and Composition (DBLAC). E-mail: louis.maraj@gmail.com





de protestas en persona y digitales y en la cultura popular, podríamos llegar a comprender por qué ha ganado importancia global al remodelar concepciones pasadas de lo que significa ser "humano".

Palabras clave: Las vidas de los negros son importantes; protesta; Feminismo negro; racismo anti-negro; brutalidad policial; temporalidad.

Preamble

The phrase “Black in Time” in this essay’s title places emphasis on particular moments in the history of the Black Lives Matter movement, how various media forms shape and shaped that history and, consequently, how the movement thus made and makes political meaning. By speaking to these events, this study invests attention in thinking about the ways #BlackLivesMatter communicates its ideologies in dynamic ways through time to help us see outside of what we typically understand as “humanity” or “human being.” To do so, it delves into pivotal junctures in the continuing development of the Black Lives Matter movement while offering broader engagement with temporally evolving conceptions of Black identity, Black representation, and Black communication practices.

Introduction

As news about the vigilante murder of Trayvon Martin began circulating on social media and then traditional news media outlets in 2012, it felt like déjà vu, like we had been there before. Martin, a 17-year old African American boy from Miami Gardens, Florida, USA, was fatally shot by George Zimmerman, a white Hispanic American man. Zimmerman believed the boy was “suspicious” and his recorded phone call to the police pinned that belief to how Martin looked and how he dressed. Zimmerman’s fatal attack, described by him and his defense lawyers as “self-defense,” triggered an incredibly public response on social media. Within a month of the shooting, Trayvon Martin’s name was used on Twitter over two million times (ROBLES, 2012). “Justice for Trayvon” saw many donning hooded sweatshirts or “hoodies” at in-person protests and in online seflies—and the hashtag “I am Trayvon Martin” become a popular mode of identification with racial justice. Even United States (US) President Barack Obama claimed identification with Martin.





While many Black people in the US and around the globe sought identification with the dead boy in this way, some questioned the empty performance of protesting with a selfie. Indeed, as visual culture expert Nicole Fleetwood (2015, p. 23) contends,

Digital media make it easy to substitute and circulate oneself in place of the subject of racial violence, and the hooded selfie became a popular way to claim progressive politics with minimal efforts. The millions of portrait protests and statements taking on Martin's identity are a discomfiting form of substitution. Simply put, none of the hooded protestors is Trayvon Martin.

However, Martin's death would become a catalyst for what would become #BlackLivesMatter and eventually the Black Lives Matter Global Network. The identification with one victim of white supremacist violence would be mobilized into identification with many more to come.

When Zimmerman was acquitted for Martin's murder in July 2013, three Black queer feminist activists, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, coined the hashtag "Black Lives Matter" in response. They became, in some ways, figureheads for the movement and publicly declared its philosophies and ideologies. The shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, USA in 2014 led to an even larger public protest and #BlackLivesMatter quickly turned into a global force. The "Ferguson Uprising," as it is now called, was the site of violent clashes between protestors and police and military forces but also a moment when Black Lives Matter would be defined in relation to past racial justice movements and its ideologies made clear.

In this article, I will first lay out this ideology, specifically explaining how Black Lives Matter attempts to break from previous movements for racial justice in the US and elsewhere and how it deploys media in ways different from those previous movements. I will then explain the movement's decentralized politics, meaning-making structures, and media use. The third section will discuss the impacts of this decentralized structure, describing how it has led to the misuse of Black Lives Matter for capitalist gain and confusion about who the movement is for. My final section, then, will contend that despite misuse Black Lives Matter, through its decentralized politics, teaches us about the plurality of Blackness and urges us to think about humanity and "the human" differently.





Re-visioning Black Resistance: #BlackLivesMatter Disjunctures

“This is not the Civil Rights movement. This is the oppressed people’s movement,” proclaimed Tory Russell of “Hands Up United,” a Black Lives Matter protestor who was interviewed by (US) Public Broadcasting Service’s “Newshour” in 2014 about the Ferguson protests (PBS NEWSHOUR, 2014). They echo the words of Tef Poe, a hip-hop artist and activist, at the “Ferguson October” forum that year who declared “this ain’t your grandparents’ civil rights movement” (TAYLOR, 2016, p. 161). As Black feminist political scientist and activist Cathy Cohen highlights, these younger activists push against the idea that Black Lives Matter represents a more updated version of the US Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Philosophically, the activists suggest breaks from the structures, ideologies, and media relations of that prior movement.

Alicia Garza, one of the co-founders of the Black Lives Matter hashtag, shares more on these departures in her “Herstory of the Black Lives Matter Movement,” first published online in 2014. Garza (2014, no page) writes that Black Lives Matter is a “tactic to (re)build the Black Liberation movement,” by [centering] “those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements.” She declares that “it goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities...keeping straight cis[-gender] Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all” (GARZA, 2014, no page). Indeed, the centralized nature of the US Civil Rights movement meant that those with the most sociopolitical power—educated Black men like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for instance—were seen as the leaders of that cause and their work was celebrated, while much work toward social change by Black women, Black disabled people, and Black queer people went unnoticed. Black Lives Matter, on the other hand, strives to make visible the labor of all those in the movement, highlighting the political power of its various sub-organizations, chapters, and identity formations.

Moreover, Black Lives Matter, unlike the US Civil Rights movement, does not expressly desire for any particular end-goal or change in the law. While the US Civil Rights movement focused on attaining the right to vote for African Americans, Black Lives Matter “is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to society,





our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression” (GARZA, 2014, no page). This ideological orientation means that the work of Black liberation does not rely on governments, rules and regulations, or seeking justice for any particular entity of the movement. Because it does not expressly aim to change any law or set of laws alone, Black Lives Matter finds itself distributed across national, ethnic, religious, and other such boundaries. Since the movement also views anti-Blackness and anti-Black racism as systematic and wide-ranging, it understands police brutality as only the tip of the iceberg—the symptom of a disease which manifests itself elsewhere in criminal justice systems, Western education systems, gender and sexual normativity, discrimination against people with disabilities, environmental racism, health and health-care disparities, and other social ills. The movement’s various localized chapters and branches therefore mobilize resistance against a number of social issues affecting different populations of Black peoples.

Black Lives Matter’s relationships to media and media systems are also markedly different from previous Black liberation movements. As media historians show, the Civil Rights movement often relied on mainstream media—on television and print news coverage—to publicize and circulate their messages to white audiences (BODROGHKOZY, 2012; GOODWIN, 2019). Although the important work of the Black press in the US in the 1950s and 60s should not be discounted, reaching these white audiences via larger public news outlets proved fundamental to advocating for changes in local and federal laws in the United States. The same television and newspaper industries would, however, go on to paint the Black liberation efforts of the 1970s and 80s as militaristic and violent, while continuing to fuel social stereotypes of Black people as hyper-sexual, opportunistic, lazy, and criminal. Because Black Lives Matter arose in the age of the internet, that movement has been able—to some extent—to send and circulate grassroots and often ignored messages to large and global publics. Although wealthy white people and corporate interests control the internet and social media giants like Twitter and Facebook, social media virality allows Black activists to spread narratives that might otherwise not be covered in mainstream media.





#BlackLivesMatter's Decentralized Politics: Foundations in Black Feminist Thought

It is our duty to fight for our freedom.
It is our duty to win.
We must love each other and support each other.
We have nothing to lose but our chains. (SHAKUR, 1973, no page)

This statement comes from Assata Shakur, a Black revolutionary to some, a wanted criminal to the US Federal Bureau of Investigation. Shakur, a former member of the Black Liberation Army, challenged global white supremacy and the heteropatriarchal structures of Black liberation organizations. The above lines, which focus on the interconnected obligations of a collective fight for justice can be heard widely at Black Lives Matter demonstrations. The use of Shakur's words in this way emblemizes the Black feminist foundations of the Black Lives Matter movement that disavows what is known as "respectability politics." In repeating this series of declarations originally made by a Black woman deemed a criminal by the US state, Black Lives Matter protestors reject the ethos of such a designation and emphasize Black women as knowledge-agents. As Black feminist historian Barbara Ransby (2018, p. 3) explains, the movement rejects "the hierarchical and hetero-patriarchal politics of respectability," meaning that to be offered humanity relies on one to conform to white standards of being human where one must be "respectable": polite, "proper"-speaking, law-abiding, and "properly" dressed to be viewed as worthy of life.

Often, when Black people fall victim to state government apparatuses—anywhere in the world—their character comes under scrutiny and media and public discourses suggest their humanity as "less-than." Alleged "evidence" of their criminality, like Trayvon Martin's digital footprint which included tweets about rappers and rants against his high school and its teachers, are mobilized by publics to implicate victims as somehow deserving of the fate that befalls them. Michael Brown refused police officer Darren Wilson's order to walk on the sidewalk on August 9, 2014, which led to his premature death. Yet news outlets and social-media posts circulated footage of Brown allegedly stealing from a convenience store earlier that day to criminalize Brown as deserving of death. These examples correlate with the frequent police raids in poor, Black communities across the globe where the so-called "targeting" of drug dealers leave many dead. These raids occur often in areas like Laventille in my homeland of Trinidad and Tobago or in communities like Jacarezinho, where on May 6, 2021, twenty-five





people were left dead in that district of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (MILHORANCE AND LONDOÑO, 2021).

But Black Lives Matter insists that there need not be “a correlation between ‘sainthood’ and Black citizenship” (RANSBY, 2018, p. 149). The 2014 death of Michael Brown on a Ferguson street prompted “an important shift in the discourse about who is or is not a sympathetic victim of injustice. Brown did not have to be a church-going, law-abiding, proper-speaking embodiment of respectability in order for his life to matter, protestors insisted.” (RANSBY, 2018, p. 149). And that insistence, of course, emerged from a refusal to the devaluation of Black life—a devaluation that predates Black Lives Matter. As Black feminist theorist Christina Sharpe argues, we live in the wake, the afterlives of Transatlantic slavery, where Black death remains always both immanent and imminent. More recently, however, as Ransby (2018 p. 13) shows in her history of the Black Lives Matter movement, the 1990s HIV/AIDS epidemic, Hurricane Katrina’s impacts in the US South in 2005, and the rise of mass incarceration in the 1990s and early 2000s contributed to the emergence of #BlackLivesMatter and the Movement for Black Lives. In 2020, the Coronavirus pandemic would converge with the movement to significantly impact its meanings, representations, and structures.

Those fighting against anti-Blackness—against mass incarceration, gendered and political violence, health disparities, and state irresponsibility—have been organizing and fighting for much longer. Black Lives Matter is the first major Black-led organization that centers Black feminist principles. But Black Lives Matter activists take their specific philosophical cues from Black feminist organizations from the 1970s onward like the Combahee River Collective (CRC), Black AIDS Mobilizations (BAM), the Black Radical Congress’ (BRC)’s feminist caucus, Critical Resistance (CR), and INCITE! Women of Color against Violence (RANSBY, 2018, p. 12-18). The Combahee River Collective in particular, offers a central idea to how the Black Lives Matter movement understands its fight for social justice. The idea that “When Black people get free, everybody gets free,” stated in Garza’s (2014, no page) “Herstory” of the movement underlines the radical racial politics of the Black Lives Matter movement. The idea comes from the Combahee River Collective Statement that insists that “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression”





(COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE, 1977/2017, p. 3). The understanding that various interlocking systems must be dismantled in order for freedom to come to all represents a central precept of the Black feminist concept of “intersectionality”—an important approach in how Black Lives Matter operates.

In the fight against these interlocking matrixes of domination, Black Lives Matter’s rejection of hierarchies and heteropatriarchy means that it also employs decentralized structural politics. The Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) represents a coalition of over fifty groups, including the Black Lives Matter Global Network. While Black Lives Matter is most visible in its push against police brutality, several chapters and branches of the M4BL address issues affecting other violences against Black peoples across the globe, such as abuses within the prison system, environmental racism, violence against trans and gender non-conforming people, the plights of Black undocumented immigrants and refugees, and issues affecting people with disabilities. Various chapters of Black Lives Matter operate on their own terms, as Black Lives Matter now acts as an umbrella connecting distributed political interests of Black peoples across the globe.

Black Lives Matter’s meaning-making structures mirror these political formations that seek to distribute power. Because of the movement’s rise through, and use of, social media, it creates and shares knowledge through fluid and dispersed means. Tweets, retweets, posts, and hashtags offer crowd-sourced and crowd-funded means to share information about systematic racism, police brutality, and other examples of, and messages about, anti-Blackness. Hashtags have become a powerful means to spread information without relying on traditional news media outlets or state apparatuses. In real time, grassroots activists can share videos, pictures, and textual accounts of injustices to large audiences via trending tags on social media. This was the case with #Ferguson in 2014, when in one week 3.6 million tweets documented and reflected on the death of Michael Brown in one week (BONILLA; ROSA, 2015). Tags like #ICantBreathe and #HandsUpDontShoot offer extensive historical accounts of Black Lives Matter-related events and content. They also share vital information during protests about counter-protestors, police presence, and tactics for surviving counter-protest and police violence at rallies.





The circulation of information on social media has spurred international relations between Black Lives Matter supporters on different continents and between Black Lives Matter and other social justice movements across the globe. From as early as 2014, “in South Africa and London there were solidarity actions that linked the injustices faced by Black people [in those countries] with the struggles of the people of Ferguson” (RANSBY, 2018, p. 72). Messages on social media and delegations of people at Black Lives Matter protests held signs that showed the support of Palestine (RANSBY, 2018, p. 72). Black Lives Matter activists would advocate similarly for pro-Palestinian efforts in 2021. And, of course, the summer of 2020 saw massive worldwide Black Lives Matter protests across the globe following the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others in the US that year.

Social media also allowed for Black people to participate in sending protest messages related to in-person Black Lives Matter rallies but not explicitly about those in-person events. Hashtags like “#IfTheyGunnedMeDown” demonstrate how national and cable news media often used stereotypically criminalizing photos to tarnish the characters of Black victims of police violence, as social-media users juxtaposed two photographs of themselves to make statements about antiBlack racism. The tweet asked: “If I were gunned down, which images would the media use to portray me?” These digital protests by thousands of Black social-media users offered them a chance to participate in creating widespread messages of resistance that expose racist narratives about Black people in the US and beyond (HESFORD, 2105). They emphasize how, through media and media representations, #BlackLivesMatter as a decentralized collective makes dispersed and fluid Black meaning.

As I explain elsewhere these digitally-mediated representations show the rhetorical, meaning-making possibilities of Black Lives Matter for educational purposes (MARAJ, 2020). In a 2016 big-data study of the #BlackLivesMatter movement on Twitter, Deen Freelon, Charlton McIlwain, and Meredith Clark, likewise, emphasize the specific potentials of the hashtag for public teaching about social injustice. They found that one of “the primary goals of social media use among [their] interviewees” was “education,” along with the “amplification of marginalized voices” (FREELON; MCILWAIN; CLARK, 2016, p. 5). The decentralized and distributed structures of Black Lives Matter, consequently, suggests that the fight against antiBlack racism need not only be pursued by those who label themselves “activists.” Social





media opens up possibilities for anyone who sees themselves as a part of the Black Lives Matter cause or as allied with it to become involved in its protest structures. Sharing information online, as low-stakes and as simple as it might seem, then, offers one way to “love each other and support each other” through interconnectivity.

Impacts of decentralized structure

But as much as the decentralized power structures and communicative mechanisms of the Black Lives Matter movement offer chances for radical love and support in the pursuit of localized and global social justice initiatives, so too do they provide chances for opportunism and capitalist exploitation. With no theoretical “leader” or face of the Black Lives Matter movement to be held accountable or steer the movement, various entities have taken advantage of the ubiquity of Black Lives Matter for capitalist gain, while Black poor folks continue to be especially targeted by the police. Black people, and Black people from the Global South in particular, have also suffered disproportionately from the spread of the COVID-19 virus. As the movement became more and more recognizable in 2020 during the pandemic, it has also become (more) profitable for some. Two particular cases stand out as particularly problematic: first, the significant monetary gains made by the three women who started the Black Lives Matter hashtag, Garza, Tometi, and Cullors and the fame (and subsequent profit) gained by US “social media influencer-activist celebrities” like Shaun King, DeRay McKeeseon, and Tamika Mallory.

In late 2020, however, grassroots activists both inside and outside of Black Lives Matter started calling attention to this exploitation and have taken steps to combat it. For instance, Garza and Cullors benefited from the publication of best-selling books, while all three women deliver talks for high speaker fees, while “the [Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation] became the principal beneficiary of millions of dollars in individual and corporate philanthropy” (FORD, 2020, no page) with donations coming in from around the world. The distribution of this foundation’s funds is left at the discretion of the three women and thus these funds have been used for their favored projects. Several local chapters, activists, and many on social media believe that the three women disproportionately benefit from the movement. Thus, ten chapters have demanded that the foundation and its recently created internal systems for





accountability (Black Lives Matter Political Action Committee and BLM Grassroots) “be made financially and politically accountable” (FORD, 2020, no page). Chapters in Philadelphia; Washington, D.C.; Chicago; Hudson Valley, New York; Oklahoma City; Indianapolis; Denver; Vancouver, Washington; San Diego, California; and New Jersey issued the “Statement from the Frontlines of the Black Lives Matter Movement” calling for financial and political equity within the movement (BLM10, 2021).

As social media influencers, celebrities, and musicians make public declarations that “Black Lives Matter” in 2020 and onward, many believe that they too stand to benefit much more financially from these statements than activists doing the work on the ground and even the parents and families of victims of police brutality. One particular performance ignited debate on this issue in early 2021. The Grammy Award show performance of US rapper Lil Baby illustrates how the Black Lives Matter movement has been taken up by, and represented in, popular culture and the reaction to it shows why some might be uncomfortable with these representations. During the performance, Tamika Mallory, a prominent US social media influencer activist, declares in a spoken word poem:

It’s a state of emergency. It’s been a hell of a year—hell for over 400 years. My people, it’s time we stand; it’s time we demand the freedom that this land promises. President Biden, we demand justice, equity, policy, and everything else that freedom encompasses, and to accomplish this, we don’t need allies, we need accomplices. It’s bigger than black and white. This is not a trend. This is our plan: until freedom! Until freedom! Until freedom! (LIL BABY 4PF OFFICIAL, 2021, no page).

Following this performance in March 2021, Samaria Rice accused Mallory of profiting off the movement while the parents of victims of police brutality face financial hardships and sometimes homelessness. Samaria is the mother of Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old African American -boy who was shot and killed by Cleveland, Ohio police in 2014 while playing with a toy gun. The accusation by Samaria Rice led many to believe that fractures in the movement continue to grow, while others believe messages like Mallory’s and Lil Baby’s present powerful means to shed light on antiBlackness and hold governments accountable.

Similarly, the widespread use of the phrase and hashtag “Black Lives Matter” by corporate entities in summer 2020 following massive global protests prompt questions as to whether these companies actively contribute to social justice efforts or are simply selling their





wares. When several football teams and individual footballers in Europe began wearing “Black Lives Matter” and related messages on their uniforms, taking knees, and raising fists at the restart of premier league play following the initial wave of the COVID pandemic, fans and others embraced these moves as solidarity and support for the message ringing loudly around the world following George Floyd and Breonna Taylor protests. With larger institutional bodies like the US’s National Basketball Association featuring “Black Lives Matter” emblazoned on their courts alongside their corporate logo, the social justice message felt somewhat strange to some. When the US’s National Football League promoted materials sending the “Black Lives Matter” message though, it felt like too little too late. The same league had blackballed Colin Kaepernick in 2016 for protesting against police brutality by taking a reverent knee during the US national anthem. With these appropriations by large institutional and corporate bodies and particularly by multinational corporations like Amazon, many were left to question if Black lives only mattered once again because they could be used for profit.

These seemingly contradictory messages sent when money mixes with social justice rhetoric resemble what some might think of as conflicting messages and philosophically-divergent factions within the Black Lives Matter movement itself. One particular example that emphasizes these perceived disjunctures might be seen in the protest chants, initiatives, and stances of various parties within the movement in relation to the law and criminal justice system following the murder of George Floyd: some seek justice in through legal systems, while others believe in disbanding those systems altogether.

Evidencing the former, at rallies in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA, where Floyd was killed, protestors donned banners and painted graffiti that read “Arrest All 4”—referring to the four police officers who were involved in Floyd’s murder, since only officer Derek Chauvin had initially been charged. This message mirrors one shown in a photograph of a protest poster in Seoul, South Korea that states “Reform the police; Vote in state and local elections; #BLACKLIVESMATTER” (STROTHER 2020, no page). Such rhetoric communicates a philosophical orientation by this subset of Black Lives Matter that envisions the very justice systems that perpetrate antiBlackness as addressing antiBlack murder: if all four of Floyd’s killers are jailed then some justice might be found. Likewise, in the poster from South Korea, the idea that reform remains possible with voting in elections means that some justice might be





sought through systems of government and democratic processes. Other similar plans involve the passing of government legislation. The “Breathe Act,” outlined at breatheact.org/ for instance, places the responsibility of defunding the police and “a *new* vision of public safety” on the same government systems that perpetrate systemic racism and antiBlack violence with plans to “hold political leaders to their promises and enhance the self-determination of all Black communities” (M4BL, 2020). These types of plans thus rely on reformation of current political and legal structures.

On the other hand, in the US and elsewhere protesters chanted, held signs, and sent messages that said, “Defund the Police” and “Abolish the Police.” The rhetoric of both taking resources away from, and bringing an end to, state and national policing relies not on assimilating into the current structures of the policing system but on a complete divorce with police as a means of state control. Others in the movement have gotten behind efforts laying out plans for alternatives to policing and prison systems like “#8toabolition,” which starts with defunding the police but gradually reimagines a different future—with some steps of the plan reliant on government intervention, others not. Outlined at 8toabolition.com/, the plan’s steps include: “1. defund the police; 2. demilitarize communities; 3. remove police from schools; 4. free people from jails and prisons; 5. repeal laws that criminalize survival; 6. invest in community self-governance; 7. provide safe housing for everyone; 8. invest in care, not cops” (#8TOABOLITION, 2020, no page). Importantly, although this plan is authored by activists across the US, they describe themselves as “people who are Black, Latinx, Asian, Arab, Muslim, white, trans, queer, migrant, disabled, sex working, caregiving, and working-class” and provide documentation for the plan in English, Korean, Vietnamese, Spanish, Mandarin, Russian, Tamil, and American Sign Language (via video) (#8TOABOLITION, 2020, no page). The agenda itself, the identities of its coalition of authors, and its presentations in various languages all gesture at the varied, intersecting ways in which police brutality rests within complex systems of anti-Blackness and racism and promote the idea that dismantling white supremacy means addressing its symptoms across various arenas and institutions—though, importantly, the proposition begins with defunding the police.

One might be confused as to why the Black Lives Matter movement and related activists send seemingly conflicting messages. What does “Black Lives Matter” stand for when all these





messages are being sent by various factions—sometimes with the same people or groups taking seemingly conflicting stances at the same time—corporations openly declare the slogan, and social media activists make careers off of the tragedies of poor Black families and their dead loved ones? Why would we have renewed faith in racist, white supremacist, and anti-Black systems to fix themselves? How can one reform an oppressive criminal justice system while at the same time abolishing it?

I want to end this essay by suggesting that some, but not all, of these seemingly disparate messages, philosophies, and stances represent not contradictions but pluralities. These pluralities emerge specifically because of the decentralized structures, communication strategies, and political philosophies of the Black Lives Matter movement. And while some might seek to profit from its decentralized structure, those who believe in justice in the movement feel empowered enough to question such motives.

Conclusion

Differences can be beautiful, in the way that Blackness—which scholars note has been historically and socio-politically cultured as “difference in extremity” (MBEMBE, 2013)—can be beautiful. If the Black Lives Matter movement’s pluralities, its expressions, and philosophies teach us something about culture, it might be that radical beauty might come out of the Black death that seems so routine, mundane, and indiscriminate across the globe. On social media platforms, hashtags like “#BlackGirlMagic” and “#BlackBoyJoy” set out to reframe the affects associated with Blackness in a world where images of Black death regularly play on repeat. Whether we seek reformation or abolition, we hope to make inroads into oppressive systems in whatever way we can because we must: “we have nothing to lose but our chains.” The various representations of Blackness seen in “#IfTheyGunnedMeDown,” which—while critiquing the news media for funding racial stereotypes—demonstrate that Blackness cannot be reduced to one style, one affect, one gesture, or one stereotype. Because hashtags can continually be added to and constantly transformed and re-transformed, their capacities for making fluid meaning offers us ways to think about the dynamic fluidities of Blackness that Black Lives Matter has brought to light.



The hashtag as a medium of information—like the multiple protest signs, gestures, performances, philosophies, and local and global expressions of the Black Lives Matter movement—shows that Blackness and Black power cannot “be” one static thing despite constant attempts to codify and commodify it since the invention of race in the European Middle Ages. Through time, through rifts, disagreements, and the oh so constant violence of existing on earth, difference offers us means to come together and understand each other across language, nation states, ethnicities, and cultures. These established “truths of power,” genres of being human, as Black feminist theorist Sylvia Wynter (2004; 2007) calls them, that govern our existence—race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality etc.—must be constantly destabilized. And the pluralities of voices, philosophies, stances, peoples, and cultures that come together toward dreaming more just futures must stop them from being forces for domination and violence. Black lives must matter abundantly and fluidly—they must challenge the very idea of one central way to be “human”: proper, correct, and normatively “right.” By perhaps ridding ourselves of the idea that differences in expression, gesture, language, dress, and racial being should be controlled and shaped into singular notions of unified human form/s, we might get closer to understanding political critique and the embracement of difference as radical love. Doing so could perhaps get us to places, worlds, and/or planets where we can breathe, free of the threat of a police officer’s knee to our necks.

References

#8TOABOLITION. How. **#8toAbolition.com**, 2020. Disponível em: <https://www.8toabolition.com/>. Acesso em: 1 maio 2021.

BLM10. Tell No Lies. **Blacklivesmatterstatement.com**, 2021. Disponível em: <https://www.blmchapterstatement.com/>. Acesso em: 1 maio 2021.

BODROGHKOZY, Aniko. **Equal Time**: Television and the Civil Rights Movement. Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2012.

BONILLA, Yarimar; ROSA, Jonathan. #Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States. **American Ethnologist**, v. 42 n. 1. p. 4–17, 2015.

COHEN, Cathy. Whose Black Lives Matter? The Politics of Black Love and Violence. WGSS [OSU]. **YouTube.com**, Mar. 6, 2015. Disponível em: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfO4AViCgZ8&t=306s>. Acesso em: 1 maio 2021.

COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE. The Combahee River Collective Statement. *In*: TAYLOR, Keeanga-Yamahtta (ed). **How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective**. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 1977/2017. p. 15-28.

FLEETWOOD, Nicole R. **On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination**. Rutgers University Press, 2015.

FORD, Glen. BLM Chapters Demand “Accountability” from Trio that Cashed in on the Movement. **Black Agenda Report**, 3 Dec. 2020. Disponível em: <https://www.blackagendareport.com/blm-chapters-demand-accountability-trio-cashed-movement>. Acesso em: 1 set. 2021.

GARZA, Alicia. A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement by Alicia Garza. **Feminist Wire**, Oct. 7, 2014. Disponível em: <https://thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>. Acesso em: 1 set. 2021.

GOODWIN, Sage. The Civil Rights Movement and the Media. **Communication**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

HESFORD, Wendy S. Surviving Recognition and Racial In/justice. **Philosophy and Rhetoric** v. 48, n. 4, p. 536–560, 2015.

LIL BABY OFFICIAL 4PF. 2021. Lil Baby – “The Bigger Picture” (Live From The 63rd GRAMMYs ® / 2021). **YouTube.com**, Mar. 15, 2021. Disponível em: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zK3PQ_KY_0s. Acesso em: 1 set. 2021.

MARAJ, Louis. **Black or Right: Anti/Racist Campus Rhetorics**. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2020.

MBEMBE, Achille. **Critique of Black Reason**. Translated by DUBOIS, Laurent. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.

MILHORANCE, Flávia; LONDOÑO, Ernesto. Police Operation in Rio de Janeiro Leaves at Least 25 Dead. **The New York Times**, 6 May 2021. Disponível em: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/06/world/americas/brazil-rio-police-shootout.html>. Acesso em: 15 maio 2021.

M4BL (Movement for Black Lives). **The Breathe Act**, 2020. Disponível em: <https://breatheact.org/>. Acesso em: 1 maio 2021.



PBS NEWSHOUR. Why Do You March? Young Protestors Explain What Drives Them. **PBS NewsHour**, 8 Dec. 2014. Disponível em:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JfC_pfsqLqw&feature=youtu.be. Acesso em: 1 set. 2021.

RANSBY, Barbara. **Making All Black Lives Matter**: Reimagining Freedom in the 21st Century. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018.

ROBLES, Frances S. What is known, what isn't on Trayvon Martin's death. **Miami Herald**, 31 Mar. 2012. Disponível em:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20130718121422/http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/03/31/v-fullstory/2725442/what-is-known-what-isnt-about.html>. Acesso em: 1 set. 2021.

SHAKUR, Assata. To My People. July 4, 1973. **The Talking Drum**, 1973/2005. Disponível em: <http://www.thetalkingdrum.com/tmp.html>. Acesso em: 2 abr. 2021.

SHARPE, Christina. **In the Wake**: On Blackness and Being. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.

STROTHER, Jason. America's BLM protests find solidarity in South Korea. **The World**, 8 June 2020. Disponível em: <https://www.pri.org/stories/2020-06-08/america-s-blm-protests-find-solidarity-south-korea>. Acesso em: 1 set. 2021.

TAYLOR, Keeanga-Yamahtta. **From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation**. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016.

WYNTER, Sylvia. A Black Studies Manifesto. **Forum N.H.I.**: Knowledge for the 21st Century. v. 1, n. 1, p. 3-11, 1994.

WYNTER, Sylvia. 2007. On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory and Reimprisoned Ourselves in the Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Desetre: Black Studies toward the Human Project. In: GORDON, Jane; GORDON Lewis (ed.). **A Companion to African-American Studies**. London: Blackwell, 2007. p. 107-118.

Autor convidado.

