

# The Hoodie and Other Protest Strategies Following the Death of Trayvon Martin: Conflicting Discourses of Social Change and White Privilege

Kristen Ann Hungerford\*

*In the weeks following the death of Trayvon Martin, millions of people of all races and ages took to the streets and online to participate in the “I am Trayvon Martin” and “Million Hoodie March” protests. In support of Martin, many protestors donned hoodies, made signs, marched, rallied and/or protested with solidarity images on social media networks. In this essay, I examine how protestors identified with Martin and how race, as an identity category, factors into these different forms of protest rhetoric. There can be multiple readings of these protests, including the use of the hoodie as providing a powerful symbol for social change. This analysis acknowledges such a reading, but ultimately argues that the rhetoric employed by the protestors does not represent unanimity/collectivity towards social change. Specifically, through the use of critical memory black Americans utilize the hoodie and other protest symbols in direct and, at times, uncivil ways to demonstrate racial injustices that they or others have experienced or one day could experience. However, when worn by white protestors the wearing of the hoodie inadvertently provides a counter-productive rhetoric that diverts attention away from conversations of social change and instead unknowingly extends the notion of white privilege. Thus, these protests that began by Black Americans to further reiterate racial injustices are now largely embedded in unintentional colorblind ideologies.*

**Keywords:** Critical Memory, Incivility, Protest Rhetoric, Race, Symbols, Trayvon Martin, Whiteness

On February 26, 2012, after purchasing an iced tea and a bag of Skittles from a convenience store, seventeen year old Trayvon Martin walked back to his father’s fiancé’s home in a gated community in Florida when neighborhood crime watch volunteer George Zimmerman shot and killed him. In the call to 911, Zimmerman claimed that as Martin walked home in the rain on his cell phone with his hooded sweatshirt over his head, he was acting “real suspicious...like he’s up to no good, or he’s on drugs or something.”<sup>1</sup> Following this call, Zimmerman disobeyed the 911 dispatcher’s orders and continued to follow Martin which resulted in a disputed physical fight between them and would eventually lead to Martin’s death.

In the aftermath of the shooting, media placed emphasis on the shooting as potentially being committed due to racial profiling. Specifically, as predominately Black Americans began protesting the non-arrest of Zimmerman, race came to the forefront of mainstream news reports. Protestors argued that the shooting, along with the Florida’s self defense “Stand Your Ground” law, was loaded with racist motives and biases and also provided Zimmerman, a half White/half Pe-

---

\* Kristen Ann Hungerford is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of Memphis. She can be reached for comment on this essay at khngrfrd@memphis.edu.

<sup>1</sup> Greg Botelho, “What Happened the Night Trayvon Martin Died,” *CNN*, May 23, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/05/18/justice/florida-teen-shooting-details/index.html>.

ruvian man, with a sense of white-privilege.<sup>2</sup> In the initial protests that took place in Florida, protestors did not wear hoodies. However, as media reports of the shooting became widespread, protests rapidly grew into the millions, taking place in many cities, schools, and churches across the United States and on social media. Both street and online protests—designated as the “Million Hoodie March” or “I am Trayvon Martin”—heavily utilized the hoodie, which became “the symbol of the Trayvon Martin Tragedy.”<sup>3</sup>

With the hoodie at the forefront of this analysis, I examine how it and other forms of protest rhetoric advocated “Justice for Trayvon Martin.”<sup>4</sup> Through the use of these protest symbols, I further examine how protesters identified with Martin and how race, as an identity category, functions in these different forms of rhetoric. I argue that while the participation of many ethnic groups joining in racial protests can be momentous, this study finds that protest rhetoric is most effective when persons who have lived experiences of marginalization, in this case particularly black men, demonstrate and don symbols of racial injustice.

This study observes different readings of the rhetorical functions and possibilities of wearing the hoodie, as is evident by black and white protesters. First, the hoodie can be viewed as a potent symbol of protest, especially when worn by black men who have or are at greater risk to experience racial injustice, especially profiling. From this reading, black Americans’ use of the hoodie and other protest symbols provide uncivil and direct ways of demonstrating racial injustices that they or others experienced or one day could experience. In doing so, black protesters, especially black men, invoke critical memory<sup>5</sup> to reinforce how their racialized lived experiences of injustices have or may potentially place them in fearful, vulnerable positions at the hands of those in authority.

In contrast, a reading of white protesters’ use of the hoodie reveals a counter-productive rhetoric that inadvertently diverts attention away from conversations of social change. I argue that by white protesters wearing hoodies, it unknowingly mocks and extends the notion of white privilege. Only in cases when white protestors acknowledge their white privilege and disassociate themselves from Martin and the hoodie, do they work to reveal the colorblind and post-race ideologies embedded in other white protestor’s rhetoric. Lastly, a critique of both white and black protest rhetoric reveals some contradictions in the ways in which discourses simultaneously reinforce readings of both hegemony and counter-hegemony regarding racial equality.

### **Race Relations in “Post-Race” Times**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Americans are confronted with a paradox concerning race and race relations. As Ralina Joseph argues, “Despite the racialized and gendered nature of all aspects of American

---

<sup>2</sup> Cavan Sieczkowski, “Trayvon Martin Case: Hoodies, Trademarks And More Fallout After Teen’s Shooting Death,” *International Business Times*, March 28, 2012, <http://www.ibtimes.com/articles/320731/20120328/trayvon-martin-case-hoodies-trademark-shooting-death.htm?page=2>.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Rosenbaum, “Trayvon Martin Furor Expands to School Walkouts, Petition,” ABC News, March, 23, 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2012/03/trayvon-martin-furor-expands-to-school-walkouts-petition>.

<sup>4</sup> CashvilleShawty, “Justice for Trayvon,” *Pinterest*, <https://www.pinterest.com/cashvilleshawty/justice-for-trayvon/>.

<sup>5</sup> The use of critical memory recalls past, current, and potential future tragedies and absurdities of racism while persistently arguing for social change. See Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Critical Memory: Public Spheres, African American Writing, and Black Fathers and Sons in America* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001); Thomas Sabatini, “Whitewashing the Past: The Racial Blindspot in ‘White Ethnic’ Memories of the Youngstown Steel District,” in *Public Memory, Race, and Ethnicity*, ed. G. Mitchell Reyes, 50-69 (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010).

life,” including legislation, media coverage, and social norms, “twenty-first-century U.S. culture is replete with the idea that we are beyond, past, or ‘post-’ notions of race-, gender-, and sexuality-based discrimination.”<sup>6</sup> This logic is further validated by dialogical discourses that make connections between a first time elected bi-racial American president and the new millennium—referred to as “post-race in the Obama age.” As scholars continue to rethink post-race in the Obama age, they contemplate the connections between an American culture saturated in racially discriminated pasts—including legislation and victims of lived experiences—with a seemingly “new,” “post” ideological standard of communication regarding race in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> Scholars have argued that from either perspective of viewing society as racist or post-race, American culture is inherently ingrained in a system of racist ideologies.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, as Joseph argues, “‘post-race’ is an ideology that cannot escape racialization, complete with controlling images or racialized stereotypes.”<sup>9</sup> Because white American culture has always defined and controlled racial stereotypes/images in invisible ways, a silent whiteness works to perpetuate post-race ideologies.<sup>10</sup> In the case of the hoodie, white privilege has worked to define this piece of clothing attire in seemingly racialized ways via law, cultural norms, and media.

### Connoting the Hoodie in American Culture

According to Joseph, “In the US race has always been dependent upon the visual”<sup>11</sup>; thus, any type of attire or enactment of an appearance or decorum, including wearing a hoodie, could signify racist or privileged connotations depending on how it is defined and by whom and how it is perpetuated and normalized throughout culture. Specifically, through the appropriation of the hoodie as a type of cultural decorum in the U.S., it has been largely associated in derogatory ways. According to how ABC news, for example, discussed the hoodie in the shooting of Martin, it is no more than a sweatshirt or jacket with a hood on it.<sup>12</sup> Yet, gendered, racist, classist, and ageist discriminations have historically taken precedence over the actual definition of a hoodie. Because of its root word—hood—negative associations have been made with the word hoodlum,

<sup>6</sup> Ralina L. Joseph, “Tyra Banks is Fat”: Reading (Post-) Racism and (Post-) Feminism in the New Millennium,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 26 (2009): 238; See also Michael G. Lacy and Mary E. Triage, eds., *Race and Hegemonic Struggle in the United States: Pop Culture, Politics, and Protest* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014); Johnson D. Thornton, “Psych’s Comedic Tale of Black-White Friendship and the Light-Hearted Affect of “Post-Race” America,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 28 (2011): 424- 449.

<sup>7</sup> See Jasmine Nicole Cobb, “No We Can’t!: Postracialism and the Popular Appearance of a Rhetorical Fiction,” *Communication Studies*, 62 (2011): 406-421; Rachel E. Dubrofsky, “The Bachelor: Whiteness in the Harem,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23 (2006): 39-56; Amy Adele Hasinoff, “Fashioning Race for the Free Market on America’s Next Top Model,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 25 (2008): 324-343; Lacy and Triage, *Race and Hegemonic Struggle in the United States*; Christel N. Temple, “Communicating Race and Culture in the Twenty-First Century: Discourse and the Post-Racial/Post-Cultural Challenge,” *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 5 (2010): 45-63; Eric King Watts, “A Moment of Blackness – And Zombies,” in *Race and Hegemonic Struggle in the United States: Pop Culture, Politics, and Protest*, ed. Michael G. Lacy and Mary E. Triage, ix-xii (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

<sup>9</sup> Joseph, “Tyra Banks is Fat,” 239-240.

<sup>10</sup> Carrie Crenshaw, “Resisting Whiteness’ Rhetorical Silence,” *Western Journal of Communication*, 61 (1997): 253-278.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph, “Tyra Banks is Fat,” 238.

<sup>12</sup> Rosenbaum, “Trayvon Martin Furor.”

which references a person engaged in violence/crimes. The hoodie is also perceived to be more threatening when an individual wears it with the hood part over their head and, more so ideologically, when worn by a non-white male, especially black men between the ages of preteen to young adult.

In terms of laws regarding wearing hoodies, there are no federal or state mandates that ban the wearing of hoodies in certain places. However, different types of stores and businesses do have policies/regulations regarding employee and customer attire, including customers not being allowed to enter some businesses while they are wearing the hood part of the sweatshirt, as part of the store's "hat off" policies. Also, some high schools, both public and private, have outlawed hoodies from current dress codes.<sup>13</sup> These laws prohibited some students from wearing hoodies while trying to participate in Trayvon Martin school-ground protests.<sup>14</sup>

Popular culture also reinforces a derogatory understanding of the hoodie. For example, the word hood has become recognized as a symbol of hip hop culture. With some rap music, musicians tell stories about growing up in the "hood" while often donning hoodies. In particular, music videos often also show male children and other dancers emulating the persona of gangster rappers/hip hop musicians by dancing in hoodies, sometimes in the setting of run-down looking neighborhoods. Beyond hip hop culture, film has also negatively associated the word hoodlum by depicting male villain characters who wear dark hoods as violent and evil, such as the villain leaders in the *Star Wars* series.

The media also framed the hoodie in negative ways following Martin's death. For example, Fox News commentator Geraldo Rivera made two statements about the case, indicating that Trayvon Martin's apparel was somehow to blame for his death. He stated, "The hoodie is as much responsible for Trayvon Martin's death as George Zimmerman was."<sup>15</sup> Clarifying his statement, Rivera later added: "Trayvon Martin, God bless him, an innocent kid, a wonderful kid, a box of Skittles in his hand didn't deserve to die, but I'll bet you money if he didn't have that hoodie on that nutty neighborhood watch guy wouldn't have responded in that violent and aggressive way"<sup>16</sup> These and many other examples demonstrate how the hoodie has become a negative symbol that is largely racialized in American culture.

### **Performances of Protest**

While examining this protest rhetoric in regards to race, we will strive to understand how the hoodie functions as a type of performance.<sup>17</sup> This study finds that performances of the hoodie differ depending on the race of the protestor. First, by black protestors embodying the hoodie, it

<sup>13</sup>Michelle Cheplic, "Why Schools are Banning Hoodies," *families.com*, 2015, <http://education.families.com/blog/why-schools-are-banning-hoodies>

<sup>14</sup>Caitlin Duffy, "Students Chime In on National Debate," *The Advertiser News*, April 3, 2012, <http://www.advertisernewssouth.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20120403/NEWS01/120409980/0/MILESTONES05/Students-chime-in-on-national-debate>.

<sup>15</sup>Peter Grier, "Trayvon Martin Case: Is Hoodie a Symbol of Menace or Desire for Justice?" *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 26, 2012, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Justice/2012/0326/Trayvon-Martin-case-Is-hoodie-a-symbol-of-menace-or-desire-for-justice-video>.

<sup>16</sup>Grier, "Trayvon Martin Case." After Rivera's comments reached the public, Rivera's son posted a tweet on Twitter that he was ashamed of his father's comments. Rivera's son stated that he wears hoodies and baggy clothes and that his father tries to warn him of the extra dangers he may be warranting as a part Latino male teenager wearing such attire.

<sup>17</sup>Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

represents a type of civic performance which rests on refuting notions of post-race by linking historically racist imagery, in this case the hoodie, with emotional connections. This performance allows other black Americans to identify with the hoodie as not only a symbol of Martin's death, but to be connected to larger structural issues of racism, including racial profiling and "Stand Your Ground" laws. Second, when the hoodie is embodied by white protestors, the emotional connection is lacking as white Americans cannot identify with such racial discriminations. In most cases, white people wearing hoodies only reinforces their historical position of white privilege.

### **"Walking While Black": Uncivil Use of the Hoodie and Other Protest Strategies**

*This is not about a hoodie. This isn't about a style of dress. This is about what you have to go through as a black man in America. - Rob Smith<sup>18</sup>*

Following Martin's death, gallop polls conducted by *USA Today* surveyed 3,006 adults—2,334 non-Hispanic whites and 242 blacks—regarding their opinions concerning the aftermath of the shooting.<sup>19</sup> Calling it the "starkest differences," the poll found that 73% of blacks believed that George Zimmerman would have been arrested if Martin was white, while only 33% of whites agreed. The majority of whites polled—52%—said race made no difference in the case.<sup>20</sup> In analyzing these polls, political science professor Vincent Hutchings notes significantly profound differences in the worldviews of black and white Americans.<sup>21</sup> Specifically, Hutchings emphasizes that black Americans have been "historically and arguably continuously discriminated against," thus Martin's death can be interpreted as part of a historical narrative of injustice.<sup>22</sup> In addition, Kenneth McIver believes that both the shooting and Zimmerman's non-arrest exemplify overt racism, specifically presumed racial stereotypes of black males as "up to no good, that they need to be watched."<sup>23</sup> Hence, black protestors variously emphasized this understanding of racial injustice in their protest strategies following Martin's death.

The hoodie itself provides a powerful tool of protest when worn by black protestors and has been utilized in "uncivil" ways. For example, when black men don hoodies to bring awareness to racial profiling, the hoodie has the potential to represent an image that defies the realm of decorum. Such an act of defiance is exemplified through the actions of House of Representatives member Bobby Rush—a black man and former Black Panther member—who was removed from the House chamber when speaking about the Martin shooting while wearing a hoodie. After removing his proper, "civilized" suit, Rush revealed the decorum of a gray hoodie, which he placed over his head, along with a pair of sunglasses while he spoke, to show solidarity with protestors. Following the hood being placed on his head, Gregg Harper, a white, House of Representatives member, immediately called for the ejection of Rush. Harper claimed that Rush had violated "Clause 5 of Rule 17 of House rules that forbids hats from being worn in the chamber

<sup>18</sup> "I am Trayvon Martin Video #1," *YouTube*, March 25, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75VgFoklOZU>.

<sup>19</sup> Yamiche Alcindor, "Poll Shows Racial Divide on Views of Trayvon Martin Case," *USA Today*, April 6, 2012, <http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/story/2012-04-05/trayvon-martin-poll/54047512/1>.

<sup>20</sup> Alcindor, "Poll Shows Racial Divide," para. 1.

<sup>21</sup> In Alcindor, "Poll Shows Racial Divide." See also Lacy and Triage, *Race and Hegemonic Struggle in the United States*.

<sup>22</sup> Alcindor, "Poll Shows Racial Divide," para. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Alcindor, "Poll Shows Racial Divide," para. 8.

when the House is in session.”<sup>24</sup> In this instance, Rush symbolized incivility as he kept speaking for almost a minute unsanctioned while Harper kept hitting his gavel more intensely signaling Rush to stop speaking. After more than a minute of not abiding by his orders, Harper repeated, “the member is no longer recognized” and stated that “the chair will ask the sergeant of arms to enforce the prohibition on décor.”<sup>25</sup> Lastly, Harper concluded that the chair states that “members need to remove their hoods or leave the floor.”<sup>26</sup> Afterwards, in an interview Rush responded, “Sometimes decorum has to take a back seat, especially when it comes to justice.”<sup>27</sup>

This protest situation represents contradictions regarding the forces of hegemonic authority and an oppressed voice of resistance. In this situation, House of Representatives members were in session to openly listen to one another’s position on social issues. In these scenarios, members are supposed to remain civil and patriotic as they voice their opinions. This type of civil and patriotic discourse aligns with what Bone, Griffin, and Scholz refer to as invitational rhetoric.<sup>28</sup> Conceptually, Bone, Griffin, and Scholz theorize that the oppressed and the oppressor openly form a respectful common-ground, in other words identification, towards one another in a civil manner. Thus, only in a civilized manner can people bring their diverse viewpoints to the table. Refuting this concept, Lozano-Reich and Cloud call for the use of “an *uncivil* tongue to challenge oppressive discourses.”<sup>29</sup> When it comes to voicing/protesting social injustices, they believe that the oppressed cannot meet the oppressor in a civilized manner.

As Lozano-Reich and Cloud further assert, “Protestors inherently do not operate within the realm of decorum.”<sup>30</sup> In the example of Bobby Rush, the oppressive system of political/legal decorum forced him—his voice and his body—to quickly become controlled and silenced. It did not provide a space for open and diverse sharing of viewpoints regarding the injustices of the shootings of young black men nor could his demonstration fully highlight the role that the image of the hoodie plays in visioning race-related discrimination. However, by disrupting the formality of the House of Representatives session and continuing his deemed “inappropriate” protest with his unwarranted attire, Rush was able to demonstrate how the hoodie is viewed as an improper, uncivilized form of decorum and reinforces that especially when worn by black men, this action can lead to reprimanding.

Overall, Rush’s protest went beyond simply exhibiting a government leader not following proper conduct while in a formal House session. As Rush is disciplined for acting in an uncivilized manner, he demonstrates that the hoodie is not considered to be a proper piece of decorum in a formal setting, especially in this forum which is largely dominated by white leaders and lawmakers. Because of the prominent role and authority of white government leaders and lawmakers, the treatment of Rush’s protest also reinforces how the decorum mandated in a formal

---

<sup>24</sup> McClatchy-Tribune News Service, “Rep. Bobby Rush of Illinois Ejected from House Chamber for Donning Hoodie,” *Cleveland.com*, March 28, 2012, [http://www.cleveland.com/nation/index.ssf/2012/03/rep\\_bobby\\_rush\\_of\\_illinois\\_eje.html](http://www.cleveland.com/nation/index.ssf/2012/03/rep_bobby_rush_of_illinois_eje.html).

<sup>25</sup> PBS News Hour, “Rep. Bobby Rush Kicked off House Floor for Wearing Hoodie in Support of Trayvon Martin,” *YouTube*, March 28, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KrMb-ZbngsY>.

<sup>26</sup> PBS News Hour, “Rep. Bobby Rush Kicked off House Floor.”

<sup>27</sup> McClatchy-Tribune News Service, “Rep. Bobby Rush of Illinois Ejected.”

<sup>28</sup> Jennifer Emerling Bone, Cindy L. Griffin, and T. M. Linda Scholz, “Beyond Traditional Conceptualizations of Rhetoric: Invitational Rhetoric and a Move Toward Civility,” *Western Journal of Communication*, 72 (2008): 434-462.

<sup>29</sup> Nina M. Lozano-Reich and Dana L. Cloud, “The Uncivil Tongue: Invitational Rhetoric and the Problem of Inequality,” *Western Journal of Communication*, 73 (2009): 221.

<sup>30</sup> Lozano-Reich and Cloud, “The Uncivil Tongue,” 224.

House session works to preserve whiteness.<sup>31</sup> Through Rush's protest and Harper's firm and immediate reaction, it is evident that the hoodie represents a symbol that disrupts the historic rules founded by white government leaders regarding decorum. More so, the hoodie, standing as a symbol of what Watts describes as a "recurring traumatic condition" in race relations, works to refute the existence of post-racism; through this condition, emerging racial injustices continue to be highlighted while simultaneously endangering "(white) world" ideologies regarding race.<sup>32</sup> The treatment of Rush ultimately reinforces that the hoodie worn over the head is inappropriate, uncivil, and disrespectful to the white codes of government decorum, and through its connections to racial profiling, the symbolism of the hoodie poses a threat to the soundness of post-racism. In sum, this protest reinforced and may have also reminded black protestors that they must continue to use both uncivil discourses and direct actions for upheaval toward social change, as Tiece suggests.<sup>33</sup>

In other protests, black protestors exhibit pathos by emphasizing the severity and associated fear of encountering potential situations involving racial injustices. In both street and online protests with many protestors wearing hoodies, black men, women, and children all emphasized the fear they have had for themselves or their loved ones being involved in race-related discriminations. In the "I am Trayvon Martin" protests, the most widely used phrases of fear and vulnerability included: "I am Trayvon Martin"; "Am I or Do I Look Suspicious?," "Am I Next?," and similarly "Who's child is next?" In using the slogan "I am Trayvon Martin" in both street and online protests, predominately black protestors chanted or held up signs containing this statement, sometimes accompanied by a picture of themselves with what they have thus far accomplished as an adult or a photo of a loved one, especially their children, who they fear could be the next black child to be killed simply because of their race. Likewise in online protests, black children shared photos with this same statement, but some photos contained more information about the child's future professional ambitions. In these examples, the rhetoric reinforces that black children have the same ambitions and dreams as white children do; however, in reiterating Martin's death, their rhetoric reinforces that racial bias and discrimination could potentially prevent them from achieving their goals.

These protests enact a critical memory that is two-fold: first, it exhibits the accomplishments or ambitions of black Americans while implicitly emphasizing the tragic loss of black life—"of what could have been"; and second, it expresses emotions regarding people's fears of losing their loved ones. In so doing, these protests remind black Americans of their ongoing struggle for racial justice while remembering to retain strength towards achieving their ambitions and accomplishments. Coupled together, this rhetoric reinforces that black Americans should continue to fight for racial justice and reiterates to white Americans the falseness of post-racism.

In another protest example, journalist Rob Smith, a black man, discusses his experience of racial profiling while attending Syracuse University. In a YouTube video, Smith accounts for his experience of profiling while walking back to his dorm after attending a job interview.<sup>34</sup> He dis-

---

<sup>31</sup> Mary E. Tiece, "The Mother Tongue as 'Back Talk': Resisting Racism in Congressional Hearings," in *Race and Hegemonic Struggle in the United States: Pop Culture, Politics, and Protest*, ed. Michael G. Lacy and Mary E. Tiece, 93-110 (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014).

<sup>32</sup> Watts, "A Moment of Blackness," xi.

<sup>33</sup> Tiece, "The Mother Tongue as 'Back Talk'"; Mary E. Tiece, *Tell It Like It Is: Women in the National Welfare Rights Movement* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2013); Mary E. Tiece, "Credible Workers and Deserving Mothers: Crafting the 'Mother Tongue' in Welfare Rights Activism, 1967-1972," *Communication Studies*, 63 (2012): 1-17.

<sup>34</sup> "I am Trayvon Martin Video #1."

cusses how he was happily leaving a successful job interview around nightfall when it began to rain. He put on his hoodie to protect himself and kept walking behind an older white woman, as he describes, on campus. The woman starts walking faster until she stops and stares at Smith. Pointing her fingers at him she very defensively yelled, “Don’t you follow behind me...don’t you do this...this is scary... Ask your mother, ask your sister, ask your grandmother...you don’t do that. You don’t follow behind women like that.”<sup>35</sup> The woman then made sure that Smith stood in front of her as they walked and she very quickly proceeded to her car nearby. At first Smith did not read too much into his unpleasant encounter with this woman whom he first assumed was “really crazy, really scared, whatever.”<sup>36</sup> Then upon reflection, Smith realized that he is:

A black man in America. I guess I’m physically imposing...because this woman was threatened by me purely because I was some black man walking behind her with a hoodie. And it didn’t matter that I was a student at Syracuse University. It didn’t matter that I was coming from a job interview. It didn’t matter that at that point I’d never spent a day in jail in my life. It didn’t matter that I’m an Iraq war veteran that fought for my country. It didn’t matter that I risked my life for the freedoms of somebody like her. What mattered was that I was black. I was male. I was a threat and she needed to deal with that threat...it’s not something that makes me feel good afterwards.<sup>37</sup>

He then continues to discuss more instances of racial profiling when he walks in the city.

In the above examples, including Rush’s protest, black men provide personal examples of outrage regarding their experiences or fears based on their race and gender. These stories reflect a critical memory of inadequacy and danger that is created by whiteness, especially that of a cultural fear of black men. In so doing, Baker observes how black critical memory provides a rhetorical “back talk”<sup>38</sup> that “refuses to relinquish its racial roots.”<sup>39</sup> It commits to the necessary action of pushing the black man’s voice beyond the captive, confining, and irrelevant or untruthful nature that whiteness as historically assigned to him. According to Baker, in American society black men’s narratives in public culture have been historically banned, disregarded, or unacknowledged<sup>40</sup>; thus, by so many black male protestors donning hoodies and discussing ways they have feared, fallen victim to, and/or continue to work against oppressive racist systems, they revive a collective voice which post-racism works to deny. These black protestors are ensuring that their current struggles and history are not a figment of their imaginations or buried recollections only of the past.

### **Hooded Whiteness**

Throughout the country, many white Americans also became outraged by the shooting of Martin and joined street, school, and online protests. Yet, as discussed above, polled white Americans were much less likely than black Americans to believe that the shooting was the result of racial bias.<sup>41</sup> As is evident in most examples of white protests following the shooting, white protestors

---

<sup>35</sup> “I am Trayvon Martin Video #1.”

<sup>36</sup> “I am Trayvon Martin Video #1.”

<sup>37</sup> “I am Trayvon Martin Video #1.”

<sup>38</sup> Triece, “The Mother Tongue as ‘Back Talk.’”

<sup>39</sup> Baker, *Critical Memory*, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Baker, *Critical Memory*.

<sup>41</sup> Alcindor, “Poll Shows Racial Divide.”



largely clung to the arbitrary idea that Martin was followed and shot due to his “suspicious” looking attire—wearing the hoodie while walking in the dark—and made the element of his race largely irrelevant. As Crenshaw theorizes, critics “must locate interactions that implicate unspoken issues of race, discursive spaces where the power of whiteness is invoked but its explicit terminology is not.”<sup>42</sup> I argue that by white protestors wearing the hoodie and claiming to be Martin in the “I am Trayvon Martin” online protests, and the “Million Hoodie March” street protests, these discursive spaces are embedded with whiteness that needs to be exposed. In this section, I discuss strategies used by white protestors that adhere to this idea of the nonexistence of racial bias and those that counter this perspective and hold white Americans accountable for their racial privileges as protestors.

In responses to the shooting, white Americans may have taken more interest in advocating for justice for Martin because the shooting took place in a middle-class setting—a gated community most likely populated by white citizens. Whereas if the shooting had taken place in a housing project or other low-income/high crime neighborhood, white people may have not taken such interest in the story (or it most likely would have not even made national headlines). Hence, the privilege of being able to live in a secured community threatened by an unsafe environment for children to walk through may hit close to home for white parents and their children.

Furthermore, the idea that such a security can be breached based on someone’s appearance, mainly wearing the hoodie, may have ignited outrage by white Americans. In theorizing the idea of white privilege in this situation, Hutchings asserts that white Americans “don’t want to think that unarmed teenagers would get profiled and killed because it would call into question their unearned positions of power.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, for white Americans to find solidarity with black Americans, white protestors must deny the history of overt racism in the United States and view all people through a colorblind lens in which racial differences/injustices are no longer apparent in contemporary society.

Like black parents, white parents also took a prominent role in these protests, but their rhetoric largely signals positions of white privilege. White parents communicated awareness of the issue with their children, dressing them in hoodies and allowed their children to participate in marches and school protests. White parents also posted pictures on social media of their families in hoodies to promote solidarity with Martin’s family and black Americans. Part of one Facebook picture caption of a white mother, with her child and other white parents and their children dressed in hoodies read “We want them (Trayvon’s parents) to know that today, at this moment, we are all Trayvon.”<sup>44</sup> Many other white protestors echoed this same sentiment, identifying with Martin by donning hoodies, holding iced tea, Skittles, etc.

In black and white protestors’ examples of the shooting, the “starkest differences” emerge. For example, black parents expressed the fear they have for their children being racially profiled or facing other race-related discriminations. They also demonstrated the fear they have for themselves or shared personal experiences of racial discrimination. On the other hand, White protestors do not exhibit the same types of protest messages that express fear and vulnerability due to their own race. When a white person wears a hoodie they are less likely to “look suspicious,” and when white protestors hold signs that ask, “Do We Look Suspicious?” they most likely do not fit into the stereotypes of racial profiling. Furthermore, when a white woman protestor wearing a

<sup>42</sup> Crenshaw, “Resisting Whiteness’ Rhetorical Silence,” 253.

<sup>43</sup> Alcindor, “Poll Shows Racial Divide,” para. 5.

<sup>44</sup> Timeline Photos, *Facebook*, March 23, 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/BothSidesOfTheTruth/photos/a.233255616704646.71789.117060441657498/398995340130672/?type=3>.

hoodie holds a sign stating, “Don’t SHOOT Me, I’m just walking peacefully!” the soundness of post-racism is contained.<sup>45</sup> When white protestors use these slogans, their privilege allows them to focus on more general stereotypes of criminals, and, sometimes inadvertently, it works to negate conversations regarding racial profiling. Thus, post-racist ideologies prevail.

Conversely, some white protestors understand their position of white privilege and put forth counter-hegemonic strategies that expose whiteness. In using the protest slogan “Am I Next?” on posters, black protestors check marked the following items: iced tea, Skittles, hoodie, and being black, would be the reasons why they may be next to be killed. In countering this poster, several white protestors held up the same poster, but crossed out the box for being black. At the bottom of the poster, the white protestor wrote, “Maybe I’ll be spared.”<sup>46</sup> Or in another video following Zimmerman’s acquittal, a white woman acknowledges her privilege by stating that if she were killed, it would be likely that her shooter would be found guilty because she is “not Trayvon Martin.”<sup>47</sup> In doing so, white protestors acknowledged the privilege of their race in these situations.

The most popular slogan being using to expose whiteness was “I am not Trayvon Martin.” In a speech posted on YouTube given by a white, possibly female teenager or young adult, this person argues that white, middle class activists should not “pretend” to be Martin, Troy Davis, or other victims of racial injustice; rather, they should use their whiteness to enact change by exposing white privilege through discursive practices.<sup>48</sup> She believes that to move toward social change, white Americans need to advocate against cultural stereotypes and norms and bring these disparities to the forefront of everyday life.

Likewise, white protestors’ demonstrations mirror this counter-hegemonic position. In a street protest, one man held a sign that stated, “THEY NEVER STOP + FRISK OLD WHITE GUYS LIKE ME.” This protestor is shown walking with an American flag bandana covering his eyes, with one hand up giving the sign for peace.<sup>49</sup> By wearing an American flag bandana over his eyes, his demonstration signifies the colorblind ideologies that many white Americans hold when interpreting race relations/discriminations. Through his demonstrations, this man draws out the colorblindness of the situation by exposing his white privilege. In so doing, this man works to counter the hegemonic functions of most other white protests by acknowledging his racial privilege while claiming solidarity with Martin.

### **Continued Discourses of Social Change and White Privilege**

This analysis has attempted to examine the protest rhetoric following Martin’s death to assess how race played a role in the rhetorical strategies invoked by protestors. From a post-race lens, this study found that black and white protestors utilized rather different strategies for protest, with end results signaling oppositional discourses. However, as I will further explain, these find-

---

<sup>45</sup> “Conservative Columnist Fired for Article Giving ‘White Version’ of ‘the Talk,’” *The Griot*, April 8, 2012, <http://thegriot.com/2012/04/08/conservative-columnist-fired-for-article-giving-white-version-of-the-talk/>.

<sup>46</sup> CashvilleShawty, “Justice for Trayvon,” *Pinterest*, <https://www.pinterest.com/cashvilleshawty/justice-for-trayvon/>.

<sup>47</sup> “I am not Trayvon Martin,” *YouTube*, July 25, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQI3GLvef9g>.

<sup>48</sup> “I am not Trayvon Martin,” *YouTube*, March 31, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBRwIUJ8K7w>.

<sup>49</sup> Kellea Tibbs, “Media.think: Yes WE Can Do Non-Violent Protest! Images and Articles from Around the Web, #TrayvonMartin Million Hoodie March,” *Lifestyle30*, March 22, 2012, <https://lifestyle30.wordpress.com/2012/03/22/media-think-yes-we-can-do-non-violent-protest-images-and-articles-from-around-the-web-trayvonmartin-million-hoodie-march/>.

ings are not completely salient regarding the associations of the race of protestors with employed strategies.

Black protestors' rhetoric often relied upon critical memory to unite black Americans to rally together and to not forget the racial past, present, or potential future, while also using incivility at times to speak or act without permission to protest. In the examples of black men, women, and children sharing stories of racial profiling or associated fear of, incivility is also demonstrated by drawing attention to both historic and ongoing issues that whiteness works to conceal and that post-racism denies. In so doing, black protestors demonstrate the potency of black critical memory in enacting social change. For as Baker observes, "A memory that is critical not only hurts and outrages but also produces critique, strategic collaboration, intervention, and public-sphere institutions" by and for the equity and equality of black Americans specifically.<sup>50</sup>

White protestors either blatantly invoked hegemonic or counter-hegemonic acts or their protests implied a mixture of both types. White protestors who claimed they were "Trayvon Martin" and donned hoodies to stand in solidarity with Martin and other black Americans kept their white privilege silent, thus stabilizing post-racism. These protestors were unable to identify with the notion of "walking while black" or the traumas and tragedies felt by black Americans due to racial profiling and other discriminations.<sup>51</sup> However, occasionally, white protestors did acknowledge their whiteness and privileged status in counter-hegemonic acts. They explicitly noted how they "were not Trayvon Martin" and do not have to live in fear of being profiled like many black men protestors expressed in the "I am Trayvon Martin" and "Am I Next?" protests. In these instances, white protestors' rhetoric further aids in dismantling the oppressive nature of post-race ideologies.

In several examples, black and white protestors signify both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic acts, creating a contradiction in discourse advocating for racial justice. For example, in an "I am not Trayvon Martin" YouTube video mixed of protestors' messages, a diverse group of predominately non-black people express ways in which they are privileged by their race and/or gender. The messages in this video are intended to be counter-hegemonic. However, in a few segments of the video, two women of African descent contradict ideas of racism. Here, one black woman asserts that race was the central issue in this case, while another black woman claims that this situation is not about race, but a bag of Skittles and iced tea.<sup>52</sup> Contradicting one another, the first black woman acknowledges racism and then asks how its scars can be healed, while the second black woman negates the idea that Martin's death was the result of racism. Likewise, many black protestors' rhetoric, especially teens and young adults, focused on the politics of the hoodie itself and not the larger structural issues of racism. In focusing on the image of the hoodie itself as providing a more generalized form of discrimination that may not be race-related, post-racism is further supported. Lastly, in a protest example following Zimmerman's acquittal a white woman held a sign that stated that she was not Martin but stood with all the "Trayvons of the World!"<sup>53</sup> However, by wearing a hoodie with the words "unarmed civilian" written on it, her physical attire contradicted her acknowledgement of white privilege. While each of these protestors had positive intentions to rally for social change, the ideologies of

---

<sup>50</sup> Baker, "Critical Memory," 19.

<sup>51</sup> Aurin Squire, "Trayvon Martin and Walking While Black," *Racialicious*, April 3, 2012, <http://www.racialicious.com/2012/04/03/trayvon-martin-and-walking-while-black/>.

<sup>52</sup> "I am not Trayvon Martin" (July 25, 2013).

<sup>53</sup> I. Y. Lee, "Are We Trayvon Martin? Where Asian Americans Fall in our Broken Criminal Justice System," *Asian American Writers' Workshop*, August 6, 2013, <http://aaww.org/are-we-trayvon-martin/>.

post-racism still worked to contain their voices and perspectives. Hence, black critical memory provides the utmost essential tool to be utilized by black protestors, in particular, to unsettle social and racial hierarchies, and also, very importantly, to recollect and refocus a traumatic history that urges Americans toward social change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Finally, in finding evidence of conflicting discourses, there is an interesting hold that whiteness and racial privilege has on race-related protests in American society—in “post-race in the Obama age.” This hegemonic hold is no more evident than in the distinct differences between President Obama’s limited comments initially following the non-arrest of Zimmerman and then his elaborate speech regarding black men and racism presented after Zimmerman’s acquittal. In his initial comments, Obama barely addressed the shooting nor did he mention the words race or black. He only indirectly mentioned blackness and race by stating, “If I had a son, he would look like Trayvon.”<sup>54</sup> However, following Zimmerman’s acquittal and relevant to add, after being reelected, Obama spoke at length about the discriminations of black men being racially profiled. He stated:

You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago. And when you think about why, in the African American community at least, there’s a lot of pain around what happened here, I think it’s important to recognize that the African American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and a history that doesn’t go away.

There are very few African American men in this country who haven’t had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me. There are very few African American men who haven’t had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me—at least before I was a senator. There are very few African Americans who haven’t had the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. That happens often.<sup>55</sup>

In demonstrating black critical memory, Obama very eloquently summarizes the frustrations and realities felt by black Americans regarding race relations. In full, his speech goes on to present a comprehensive account of all the cultural elements which stabilize racism. Yet, it took Obama almost a year and a half after Martin’s death and following the announcement of the Zimmerman verdict for him to speak candidly for the first time as president regarding systemic and social issues of racial discrimination. Even President Obama, seemingly the most influential man in the U.S. while holding office, could not overt the inherent nature of post-racism when trying to enact social change. As such, protest rhetoric from everyday citizens may be the most potent in advocating for social justice.

---

<sup>54</sup> Barack Obama, “President Obama Statement on Trayvon Martin Case,” *CNN*, March 23, 2012, <http://whitehouse.blogs.cnn.com/2012/03/23/president-obama-statement-on-trayvon-martin-case/>.

<sup>55</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on Trayvon Martin,” *The White House*, July 19, 2013, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/19/remarks-president-trayvon-martin>.