

#BlackLivesMatter: Epistemic Positioning, Challenges, and Possibilities

Catherine L. Langford*
Montené Speight**

The social media campaign #BlackLivesMatter presents an ideology counter to the historical and contemporary framing of African Americans that strips them of social value. The hashtag attempts to alter the epistemic paradigm that exists in American discursive and material actions by drawing attention to the habitual violence against Blacks in America while infusing a positive message about the individual and communal worth of Black lives. Black citizens are not aggressive, criminal, or inconvenient in the rhetorical construction of #BlackLivesMatter; Black lives should be celebrated and protected. Although multiple counter movements have arisen in an effort to invalidate the social critiques #BlackLivesMatter present, they are not successful. The hashtag teaches auditors the Black persons have a positive presence, that violence against the Black body is news, that white privilege exists, and that colorblind rhetoric does not help bring about equality or justice.

Keywords: #BlackLivesMatter, Epistemology, Movement, Social Media, Violence

Black Lives Matter has come to signify a new era of black power, black resistance and black resilience. For black folks, this is our renaissance.

Alicia Garza, #BlackLivesMatter Co-Founder¹

The #BlackLivesMatter movement began following the July 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman for the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. Pattrisse Cullors planted the seed for the movement when she reposted a friend's Facebook status with the hashtag.² That friend was Alicia Garza, who posted, "Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter," following the Zimmerman acquittal.³ After she reposted her friend's message, Cullors asked Garza if she would like to participate in a social media campaign. Garza agreed, and the two women invited Opal Tometi to join their efforts. The three women asked friends to share stories about how #BlackLivesMatter on Tumblr and Twitter accounts they created.⁴ Cullors, Garza, and Tometi also began using the hashtag in their other activism efforts.

* Catherine L. Langford (Ph.D., The Pennsylvania State University) is an Associate Professor at Texas Tech University. She can be reached at katie.langford@ttu.edu.

** Montené Speight has a B.A. in Political Science from Texas Tech University. She can be reached at Mroye05@yahoo.com.

¹ As quoted in Tre'vell Anderson, "2015 BET Experience: Black Lives Matter Takes Center Stage," June 28, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/posts/la-et-ms-black-lives-matter-2015-bet-experience-20150627-story.html>.

² Alisa Robinson, "Black Lives Matter: The Evolution of a Movement," *Occupy*, March 16, 2015, <http://www.occupy.com/article/black-lives-matter-evolution-movement>.

³ Jamilah King, "#BLACKLIVESMATTER: THE EVOLUTION OF AN ICONIC HASHTAG," *Occupy*, February 17, 2015, <http://www.occupy.com/article/blacklivesmatter-evolution-iconic-hashtag>.

⁴ As reported by King, "#BLACKLIVESMATTER."

More than a year later, following the death of Michael Brown in August of 2014, the hashtag began trending, gaining momentum after a string of violent acts by police against Black men. Black Twitter, described by Apryl Williams and Doris Domoszlai as “a networked cultural identity,”⁵ drew attention to the event, critiqued police violence against African Americans and media portrayals of African Americans, and galvanized a civic justice movement. With approximately one in four Twitter users identifying as African American,⁶ tweets utilizing hashtags such as #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, #HandsUpDontShoot, #MikeBrown, #BlackLivesMatter, and #Ferguson went viral.⁷

Social media’s response to violence against African Americans attempts to challenge White perceptions of Black Americans. Critical race scholars teach us that the scripting of the Black body through slavery, black codes, Jim Crow, lynchings, poverty, and shootings coaches White society that Black lives do not matter. Previous forms of official discrimination (e.g., segregation and lynchings) have been re-scripted into other forms of material violence against Black Americans (e.g., police shootings). As critical scholars work to explicate how the repeated and public violence against Black bodies teaches society writ large how the Black body is devalued within our communities and construed as disposable,⁸ additional scholarship needs to explain how negative stereotypes of Black individuals can be addressed and countered. Mediated protests such as #BlackLivesMatter create a rhetorical space to challenge and to re-envision the Black body within American society.

Although social media has drawn attention to the chronic violence against African Americans—an important first step—current public discourse does not offer a proposal to end the bloodshed. Calls for “Justice for Mike Brown,” for example, form reactive responses, not prescriptive plans. Mediated protests, including hashtags, Instagram photos, and videos, juxtapose actions and ideology, drawing discursive and nonverbal attention to police transgressions. Social media also constitutes virtual communities, uniting supporters of #BlackLivesMatter, as well as critics of the movement. Social media keeps advocates and allies informed, as well as create a quick and easy vehicle through which to keep activists informed. Most importantly to this essay, however, is how social media creates rhetorical possibilities for material change.

In this essay we argue that the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag provides a rhetorical space to re-script Black bodies. We begin by discussing how the hashtag can be considered a grassroots movement. We next discuss counter movements that seek to invalidate the #BlackLivesMatter movement. We conclude by considering what we learn from the movement.

⁵ Apryl Williams and Doris Domoszlai, “#BlackTwitter: A Networked Cultural Identity,” *Harmony Institute*, August 6, 2013, <http://harmony-institute.org/therippleeffect/2013/08/06/blacktwitter-a-networked-cultural-identity/>.

⁶ Aaron Smith, “African Americans and Technology Use: A Demographic Portrait,” *Pew Research Center*, January 6, 2014, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/01/06/african-americans-and-technology-use/>.

⁷ See Howard Koplowitz, “#IfTheyGunnedMeDown: Mike Brown Shooting Spurs Powerful Twitter Hashtag On Black Youths’ Portrayal in Media,” *International Business Times*, August 11, 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.com/iftheygunnedmedown-mike-brown-shooting-spurs-powerful-twitter-hashtag-black-youths-1654926>. See also Samantha Storey, “Outrage Over Teenager’s Death Erupts on Social Media,” *New York Times*, August 11, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/12/us/mike-brown-shooting-social-media.html>.

⁸ Ronald L. Jackson, II, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006).

#BlackLivesMatter as a Movement

Within a time span of a couple of years, #BlackLivesMatter evolved from a hashtag into a movement. As a slogan, #BlackLivesMatter can be used in a wide variety of contexts and in a variety of ways. Activists proclaim it in chants, signs, videos, photos, and graffiti. Celebrities use it, mainstream media covers it, and churches call their congregants to participate in it. Language specialists even recognize the phrase as a movement. When they use the hashtag, people identify with the movement and critique social and institutional practices. When they engage in direct action under the banner of the hashtag, people agitate in their local communities for social and political change.

Activists organize protests, demonstrations, die-ins, teach-ins, and other acts of resistance in the name of #BlackLivesMatter, opposing the treatment of African Americans by law enforcement. In August of 2014 activists arranged a Black Lives Matter ride to Ferguson to support protest efforts by the local community.⁹ Ferguson protests were just the beginning for activists, however, with protestors participating in close to 900 #BlackLivesMatter marches, protests, and demonstrations worldwide between July 2014 and June 2015.¹⁰ Although most have been general demonstrations, others have been in honor of specific persons killed by police. For example, on December 13, 2014 protesters staged a die-in during a march in Chicago and on December 20, 2014 thousands of protesters filled the Mall of America.¹¹ In January of 2015, a group of clergy members staged a die-in in a Capitol Hill building cafeteria, exclaiming “Black Lives Matter” before falling to the floor.¹² Although most protests have sought communal recognition of movement concerns, others have been directed toward educating communities. During teach-ins at universities and colleges throughout the 2014-2015 academic year, some campuses discussed how to move forward following Ferguson,¹³ others considered how disciplines and curriculum could address diversity issues,¹⁴ and yet others deliberated about strategies to advance social justice for Black Americans.¹⁵ #BlackLivesMatter activists do not limit their activism to their own cause, but participate in sympathy strikes regarding a wide variety of concerns that impact Black communities. For example, #BlackLivesMatter supporters took part in the April 15, 2015 fast food strike seeking increased pay for fast food workers¹⁶ and medical school students

⁹ Darnell L. Moore and Patrisse Cullors, “5 Ways to Never Forget Ferguson—and Deliver Real Justice for Michael Brown,” *The Guardian*, September 4, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/04/never-forget-ferguson-justice-for-michael-brown>.

¹⁰ Alisa Robinson, “At Least 898 Black Lives Matter Demonstrations Have Been Held in the Last 326 Days,” *Elephrame*, June 2, 2015, <https://elephrame.com/textbook/protests>.

¹¹ “‘Black Lives Matter’ Protests,” *CNN*, February 4, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/12/13/us/gallery/black-lives-matter-protests/index.html>.

¹² Wesley Lowery, “‘Black Lives Matter’ Protestors Stage ‘Die-in’ in Capitol Hill Cafeteria,” *The Washington Post*, January 21, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2015/01/21/black-lives-matter-protesters-stage-die-in-in-capitol-hill-cafeteria/>.

¹³ See “A Teach-in: Moving from Fear to Flourishing After Ferguson,” Lutheran Theological Seminary, December 16, 2014, <http://lts.edu/BlackLivesMatter>.

¹⁴ Jim Norrena, “Black Lives Matter Teach-In Highlights CCA’s Commitment to Diversity,” California College of the Arts, March 12, 2015, <https://www.cca.edu/news/2015/03/12/black-lives-matter-teach-highlights-ccas-commitment-diversity>.

¹⁵ “Black Lives Matter Teach-In,” Oxford’s Wadham College, March 4, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/events/722021934583337>.

¹⁶ Steven Greenhouse, “Movement to Increase McDonald’s Minimum Wage Broadens Its Tactics,” *The New York Times*, March 30, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/31/business/movement-to-increase-mcdonalds-minimum-wage-broadens-its-tactics.html?_r=0.

organized a “White Coats for Black Lives” day.¹⁷ Activists used the slogan in acts of vandalism as well. Following the mass killing of worshippers at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina on June 17, 2015, protesters sprayed “Black Lies Matter” in all caps on monuments commemorating Confederate leaders and soldiers in half a dozen states.¹⁸ As a slogan, #BlackLivesMatter is flexible enough to be deployed in different contexts and by different individuals.

Celebrities—primarily musicians and athletes—use #BlackLivesMatter both directly and indirectly as a form of political protest or to identify with the Black community. Musicians Kanye West, Prince, and Jay Z and Beyoncé have used the phrase or been associated with the movement. West tweeted, “600,000 people rallied for justice on Dec. 13th #blacklivesmatter,” in December 2014 to 11 million of his followers.¹⁹ Within three days West’s tweet was favorited almost 33,000 times and re-tweeted more than 22,000 times.²⁰ During the Grammy Awards Prince declared, “Albums still matter. Like books and black lives, they still matter.”²¹ Although Jay Z and Beyoncé have not said anything about the movement, news sources report them to have donated “tens of thousands” of dollars to the movement.²² Athletes have used the sport arena to support the movement. The University of California-Berkeley women’s basketball team showed up to play in homemade t-shirts with the names of Black victims of police brutality on the front and #BlackLivesMatter on the back.²³ Even when athletes do not identify themselves with the #BlackLivesMatter movement overtly, their actions have been characterized as a part of it (e.g., Andrew Hawkins of the Cleveland Browns wearing a “Justice for Tamir Rice and John Crawford” t-shirt; member of the Oregon men’s basketball team offering the “hands up, don’t shoot” gesture; and NBA players including LeBron James, Kyrie Irving, and Kobe Bryant wearing “I Can’t Breathe” t-shirts).²⁴ Celebrities have pre-existing platforms from which to communicate the movement message—be that Twitter followings, awards shows, sports arenas, public interviews, or news reports. Unlike most uses of the phrase within the movement, celebrity use of the phrase does not call others into action but puts on public display their ideological commitment. Celebrities undergird the pathetic appeal of the movement with the ethos their credibility affords.

Although traditional Black media cannot respond with the speed and variety of responses that social media can, traditional Black media (including *Ebony* and *Vibe*) has covered the origin of the movement, current activism focus, and controversies surrounding the movement. Black media does not try to assume a nonbiased position, however. These outlets identify themselves as

¹⁷ Khury Petersen-Smith, “Black Lives Matter: A New Movement Takes Shape,” *International Socialist Review* 96 (Spring 2015), <http://isreview.org/issue/96/black-lives-matter>.

¹⁸ “‘Black Lives Matter’ Painted on Confederate Monuments in Several States,” *Alabama.com*, June 26, 2015, http://www.al.com/news/index.ssf/2015/06/black_lives_matter_painted_on.html.

¹⁹ BET-Staff, “Kanye West Supports Black Lives Matter Protests With Tweet,” *BET*, December 16, 2014, <http://www.bet.com/news/music/2014/12/16/kanye-west-supports-black-lives-matter-protests-with-tweet.html>.

²⁰ “Kanye West Breaks His Silence In Support of #BlackLivesMatter,” *Hypetrack*, December 16, 2014, <http://hypetrack.com/2014/12/kanye-west-breaks-his-silence-in-support-of-blacklivesmatter/>.

²¹ Nicole Massabrook, “Grammys 2015: Prince Mentions Black Lives Matters; Kanye West Goes On Stage During Beck’s Album of the Year Speech,” *International Business Times*, February 8, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/grammys-2015-prince-mentions-black-lives-matter-kanye-west-goes-stage-during-becks-1809468>.

²² Iyana Robertson, “Turns Out Jay Z And Beyonce Have Done More For The #BlackLivesMatter Movement Than You Think,” *Vibe*, May 17, 2015, <http://www.vibe.com/2015/05/jay-z-beyonce-money-protesters-baltimore-ferguson/>.

²³ Sam Laird, “Black Lives Matter: Athlete’s Powerful Statements Still Going Strong,” *Mashable*, December 15, 2014, <http://mashable.com/2014/12/15/black-lives-matter-athletes/>.

²⁴ See Laird, “Black Lives Matter.”

consubstantial with the movement. Most notably, *Essence* magazine made history by blacking out their February 2015 cover—for the first time in the publication’s 45-year history. Within its pages, the editors asked different Black leaders the question: “Where do we go from here?” Their responses look forward, reflecting recognition that movement activity must be maintained to effect material change. Sunny Hostin contends, “We move forward as a society by having these very uncomfortable conversations we are having now in our country about race and bias. But that is only the first step—changing minds and perception. We must also change the law.”²⁵ Editor-in-Chief Vanessa K. De Luca ended her editorial by encouraging, “Let’s repeat this refrain again and again. Until we are heard. Until it sinks in. Until we all believe.”²⁶ Their responses also look back, reflecting the root cause of the movement. Co-founder Patrisse Cullors explains, “But the hashtag itself arose out of a place of grief and sorrow, and as a declaration for all Black lives, all Black people. We weren’t seeking sympathy or approval from White people. We were wanting us to look at each other as a whole community and say, ‘We Matter.’”²⁷ Traditional Black media uses text and image to reflect the needs and interests of the Black community.

Black churches and allies across the United States joined the movement, declaring December 14, 2014 Black Lives Matter Sunday, using church premises for vigils and prayer services, and preaching sermons about racial inequality from the pulpit. On this day ministers and congregants wore black clothing to show solidarity, mourned lost lives, and prayed for the lives of Black males in their congregations and communities.²⁸ Black Lives Matters Sunday came about when Bishop Charles E. Blake, Sr. of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) called for believers to observe the day, declaring in a new release, “We must find a way, through God’s help, to continue the work of emphatically telling everyone that will listen that, ‘Black Lives Matter!’”²⁹ Other Black churches, including the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, quickly joined COGIC. Within the sacred space of the Black church, participants join their racial, political, and spiritual identities. The secular and the sacred unite as sacred garments proclaim social messages, as religious individuals prayerfully take to the streets, as actions inform prayer, and as prayer seeks to alter material reality. Churches began holding vigils and prayer meetings as a part of the Black Lives Matter movement.³⁰ Vigils and prayer meetings allow lay individuals to join religious leaders in their petitions for racial justice as congregants take an active role in protest and prayer. Prayer vigils combine the sacred and the secular, through use of religious space for political messages or by inviting the Divine to intervene in the lives of believers. Examples of the former are Embury Chapel AME Reverend Brandee Mimitzraiem donning a vestment that declares, “Black Lives Matter”³¹ and members of First

²⁵ Sunny Hostin, “Where Do We Go From Here? Essay by Sunny Hostin,” *Essence*, February 2015, <http://www.essence.com/2015/02/04/where-do-we-go-here-essay-sunny-hostin>.

²⁶ Vanessa K. DeLuca, “A Historic ESSENCE Cover and The Path Forward,” *Essence*, January 5, 2015, <http://www.essence.com/2015/01/06/historic-essence-cover-and-path-forward>.

²⁷ Patrisse Cullors, “Where Do We Go From Here? Essay by Patrisse Cullors,” *Essence*, February 2015, <http://www.essence.com/2015/01/06/where-do-we-go-here-essay-patrisse-cullors>.

²⁸ Michelle Boorstein, “Churches Ask Congregants to Wear Black on #blacklivesmatter Sunday,” *The Washington Post*, December 9, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/local/wp/2014/12/09/churches-ask-congregants-to-wear-black-on-blacklivesmatter-sunday/>.

²⁹ “Black Lives Matter Sunday,” *Church of God in Christ (COGIC)*, December 5, 2014, <http://www.cogic.org/blog/uncategorized/blacklivesmatter-sunday/>.

³⁰ “Black Lives Matter,” *Unitarian Universalist Association*, n.d., <http://www.uua.org/worship/collections/black-lives-matter>.

³¹ JaNae Francis, “Prayer Vigil Participants Pray for Overcoming Hate Crimes,” *Standard Examiner*, June 20, 2015, <http://www.standard.net/Local/2015/06/19/Prayer-vigil-participants-pray-for-overcoming-hate-crimes>.

Unitarian Church in Louisville, Kentucky holding up Black Lives Matter signs outside of their church on June 28, 2015.³² An example of the latter is Mission Hills United Church of Christ, San Diego's "Hands Up In Prayer" Candlelight Vigil "in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter Movement," during which time vigil participants "will take our prayers to the streets."³³ Within the act of protest and prayer, supplicants become consubstantial with one another.

#BlackLivesMatter has assumed such significance in such a short period of time that members of the American Dialect Society voted the hashtag the Word of the Year. In his coverage of the selection, *The Economist* writer R.L.G. argues #BlackLivesMatter is not a word; it is a clause that presents an entire sentence.³⁴ In other words, the hashtag assumes connotative meaning different than the denotative meaning. According to a representative of the ADS, the phrase is "a rallying cry and vehicle for expressing protest, fueled by social media."³⁵ R.L.G. also recognizes users' deployment of the hashtag as a noun, claiming, "The meta-message, then, is 'this is to be read as part of a wider discussion on this #topic.'"³⁶ #BlackLivesMatter, therefore, not only is a label that identifies discrimination, harassment, and violence against African Americans but also calls for the American public to rethink the value of Black Americans in society at large.

In a little over the span of a year, #BlackLivesMatter evolved from the identification of racist acts into a clarion call for justice. Social justice activists use the phrase to bring attention to institutional violence and discrimination against African Americans. Celebrities identify themselves with the movement and communicate its message. Traditional Black media recounts the aims and struggles of the movement. The Black church, traditionally the center of civil rights activism in America, uses sacred spaces to advance secular ends. And language specialists recognize the importance of the phrase not only to members of the Black community, but to the well being of the nation as a whole. Evidence of movement significance is found also in counter movements that seek to challenge the message of #BlackLivesMatter.

Counter Movements

Movements counter to the #BlackLivesMatter movement play upon the phrase, including #AllLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter, and #WhiteLivesMatter. These movements engage in a politics of erasure, shifting public focus from violence and discrimination against Black lives in an effort to re-center Whiteness. Each of these hashtags co-opts the #BlackLivesMatter movement by negating the Black race in favor of all persons, police officers, and White people. The first ignores the importance of race, the second rejects race in favor of institutionalized force, and the third decries reverse discrimination.

#AllLivesMatter attempts to neutralize the critique #BlackLivesMatter offers about discrimination and violence based upon racial identity. People who use the hashtag frequently do so alone or in conjunction with a slew of racial identifications. #AllLivesMatter functions rhetori-

³² Chris Kenning, "Black Lives Matter Vigil at First Unitarian Church," *The Courier-Journal*, June 28, 2015, <http://www.courier-journal.com/picture-gallery/news/local/2015/06/28/gallery--black-lives-matter-vigil-at-first-unitarian-church/29433873/>.

³³ "Hands Up In Prayer," Mission Hills UCC, n.d., <http://www.eastcountymagazine.org/sites/eastcountymagazine.org/files/2014/November/Handsupinprayer.png>.

³⁴ R.L.G., "#BlackLivesMatter," *The Economist*, January 15, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2015/01/johnson-words-year-0>.

³⁵ "2014 Word of the Year is '#blacklivesmatter,'" *American Dialect*, January 9, 2015, <http://www.americandialect.org/2014-word-of-the-year-is-blacklivesmatter>.

³⁶ R.L.G., "BlackLivesMatter."

cally to reject Black identity as a distinguishing feature important for consideration. In an interview with a *New York Times* journalist, Judith Butler argues, “When some people rejoin with ‘All Lives Matter’ they misunderstand the problem, but not because their message is untrue. It is true that all lives matter, but it is equally true that not all lives are understood to matter which is precisely why it is most important to name the lives that have not mattered, and are struggling to matter in the way they deserve.”³⁷ #BlackLivesMatter co-founder Cullors pushes the rhetorical work of the counter hashtag beyond a misunderstanding (as Butler identifies it) to a slightly veiled form of racism. During the annual BET Experience from June 25-28, 2015, Cullors and Garza discussed the significance of #BlackLivesMatter in contrast to #AllLivesMatter. Cullors and others find the counter hashtag to be superfluous. “If all lives mattered, then we wouldn’t have to say black lives matter,” Culler declares.³⁸ *Huffington Post* writer Julia Craven agrees, “Telling us that all lives matter is redundant. We know that already.”³⁹ Whether an innocent misunderstanding or an intentional form of prejudice, #AllLivesMatter denies Black persons agency by ignoring the racial feature according to which they are discriminated.

#BlueLivesMatter attempts to reestablish institutionalized hierarchical systems by asserting that law enforcement officials are under attack from movement activists. The hashtag was first introduced in November 2014 by radio personality Barry Gadbois when he tweeted, “Cops have a right to defend themselves and an obligation to protect you. #BlueLivesMatter #Ferguson.”⁴⁰ Utilized more than 120,000 times within four months, the popularity of the hashtag spiked dramatically after the late December shooting of the two NYC police officers.⁴¹ Commentators disagree as to the purpose of the hashtag. *BBC News* claims advocates employ the hashtag most frequently to criticize the president and the attorney general or to show support for law enforcement officers.⁴² In contrast, editor of *The Daily Dot* Eric Geller’s survey of social media’s use of the hashtag leads him to identify four objectives of #BlueLivesMatter users: first, to increase respect for police officers; second, to end anti-police-brutality protests; third, to call for the resignation of Bill de Blasio; and forth, to advocate the firing of Al Sharpton from MSNBC.⁴³ Most importantly, however, is the rhetorical function of the #BlueLivesMatter hashtag. “Embedded in the #BlueLivesMatter campaign is the narrative that the #BlackLivesMatter movement is denigrating and endangering police officers with its rhetoric, further deteriorating the public’s respect for the police,” Geller argues.⁴⁴ Following the death of two police officers in December 2014, New York Patrolman’s Benevolent Association President Patrick Lynch indicated that #BlackLivesMatter protesters had something to do with their deaths. “There’s blood on many hands tonight—those incited violence on the street under the of protests, that tried to tear down what New York City police officers did every day,” opined Lynch.⁴⁵ The #BlueLivesMatter campaign asserts a dangerous proposition: movements to protect civil rights and civil liberties

³⁷ George Yancy and Judith Butler, “What’s Wrong With ‘All Lives Matter?’” *New York Times*, January 12, 2015, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/whats-wrong-with-all-lives-matter/?_r=0.

³⁸ Anderson, “2015 BET Experience.”

³⁹ Julia Craven, “Please Stop Telling Me That All Lives Matter,” *The Huffington Post*, November 25, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/julia-craven/please-stop-telling-me-th_b_6223072.html.

⁴⁰ BBC Trending, “‘Blue Lives Matter’ Trends After Officers Shot,” *BBC News*, March 12, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-31853299>.

⁴¹ BBC Trending, “‘Blue Lives Matter.’”

⁴² BBC Trending, “‘Blue Lives Matter.’”

⁴³ Eric Geller, “The Rise of the Pro-Police #BlueLivesMatter Movement,” *The Daily Dot*, December 22, 2014, <http://www.dailydot.com/politics/blue-lives-matter-twitter-hashtag/>.

⁴⁴ Geller, “The Rise of the Pro-Police #BlueLivesMatter Movement.”

⁴⁵ Petersen-Smith, “Black Lives Matter.”

threaten institutional structure and jeopardize law enforcement lives. The movement presents the idea that the two are mutually exclusive; if someone believes that Black lives matter, then they also believe law enforcement lives do not matter. Adherence to one negates the other.

#WhiteLivesMatter attempts to re-center White privilege in a straightforward fashion by extolling the White race and denigrating the Black race. Although Nakayama and Krizek tell us that “white” remains “invisible as it continues to influence the identity of those both within and without its domain,” as it occupies “a largely unarticulated position,”⁴⁶ the #WhiteLivesMatter does not allow the values of whiteness to remain invisible or unarticulated. Commentary on social media, at counter protests, and on flyers distributed in residential areas, proclaims White Americans need to pay attention to events, stand up for themselves, value their own lives, and realize that the news media will not cover discriminatory acts against White individuals.

The use of #WhiteLivesMatter on Twitter rearticulates the negative stereotypes of African Americans presented in media. Black citizens are characterized as “thugs,” “racists,” unintelligent, and “terrorists.”⁴⁷ White citizens are “under attack,” “oppressed,” and should be proud of their “people” and their heritage.⁴⁸ The media are “hypocrites” for covering up crimes against White individuals by Black perpetrators.⁴⁹ Most of these appeals rely upon the false dilemma fallacy, contending that one group is good and the other is bad, or that to advance the rights for one group means that you do not value the rights of another. Following an incident in which #WhiteLivesMatter flyers were distributed to personal residences in Connecticut, for example, one blogger posted, “Black lives matter, and White lives don’t. The sentiment has been noted,” and, “Black lives matter. No one else’s lives matter. If you dare to ask why this is or disagree in any way, you are evil.”⁵⁰ Advancing charges of reverse discrimination attempts to cancel out the validity of #BlackLivesMatter by accusing members of the Black community of engaging in the same discriminatory behavior they protest. Attempts to annul the legitimacy of the #BlackLivesMatter movement is advanced also by mocking it. Following the shooting of Richard Matt, an escaped convict, tweets posted that #WhiteLivesMatter and called for riots—flipping the script of the Black community’s external manifestation of injustice into a shallow destruction of private and commercial property.

These counter movements are just three examples of rhetorical plays on the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Others include:

#HispanicLivesMatter, #LatinoLivesMatter, #BrownLivesMatter, #AsianLivesMatter,
 #FetusLivesMatter, #BabyLivesMatter, #UnbornLivesMatter, #EveryoneMatters,
 #PoliceLivesMatter, #SouthernLivesMatter, #AmericanLivesMatter, #ChristianLivesMatter,
 #LGBTLivesMatter, #MuslimLivesMatter

These are only a few. Not all riff on the hashtag in an effort to erase race, reify institutional violence, or declare reverse discrimination. Many plays upon the hashtag advance racial rights, pro-life beliefs, and people of different identities. The ones discussed above, however, seek to invali-

⁴⁶ Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, “Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81 (1995): 291.

⁴⁷ See “#WhiteLivesMatter,” *Twitter*, <https://twitter.com/hashtag/whitelivesmatter?lang=en>.

⁴⁸ See “#WhiteLivesMatter.”

⁴⁹ See “#WhiteLivesMatter.”

⁵⁰ Andrew Anglin, “‘White Lives Matter’ Flyers Cause Outrage, Because All Whites Deserve to Die,” *The Daily Stormer*, May 9, 2015, <http://www.dailystormer.com/white-lives-matter-flyers-cause-outrage-because-all-whites-deserve-to-die/>.

date the #BlackLivesMatter movement by re-centering whiteness. Whether by triumphing the value of all life, asserting the importance of the police, or decrying reverse discrimination, the rhetorical consequences of each is the same: to ignore, and thus to invalidate, the grievances of African Americans. The use and proliferation of alternate hashtags attempts to shift the focus from #BlackLivesMatter to maintain whiteness as a centralizing epistemology because no one critique can be sustained long enough to challenge it.

The existence of alternative hashtags provides evidence of the iconic status of #BlackLivesMatter. #BlackLivesMatter cannot be ignored; it can only be emulated. Although critics may try to devalue the hashtag, their efforts do not succeed, as the rhetorical power of Black Twitter keeps the conversation about how the Black body is scripted ongoing. The repeated use of #BlackLivesMatter creates a discursive space for alternative ways to read the Black body.

The Possibility of a New Epistemology

We are left with the question: What does #BlackLivesMatter teach us? On one level, the hashtag can be taken at face value: Black lives matter—or, put another way, historically discriminated against persons are significant. Critical theory encourages us to look for additional explanations, however—and by doing so we reveal an epistemological logic of #BlackLivesMatter that moves from granting Black individuals presence to creating a rhetorical space to re-script the Black body as valuable. First, Black individuals have a positive presence—they are not invisible or portrayed as a negative stereotype. Second, violence against the Black body is news—the violence against this marginalized community cannot be ignored. Third, white privilege is unmasked by calling attention to the violence and marginalization perpetuated against Black individuals. Fourth, colorblind rhetoric, which argues that we live in a post-racial society, advances the civil rights and civil liberties of African Americans.

Positive Presence

#BlackLivesMatter gives the Black body presence by bringing into public purview the form of the Black individual, construed as more than a body. In his discussion of presence, Perelman tells us that certain elements of ideas are emphasized or deemphasized.⁵¹ Emphasized is the significance of Black lives; deemphasized is negative stereotypes of Black individuals. Within #BlackLivesMatter, Black men are not thieves, gangsters, or irresponsible baby daddies and Black women are not welfare mothers or prostitutes. The replacement of stereotypes with “lives” shifts the assemblage of people from concrete classifications to broad identification, as a new Black identity is not offered within the hashtag. The rhetorical void does not reclassify Black bodies, but rather re-scripts Black persons as having significance. “Lives” go beyond mere physicality to mean a material existence as well as all that is construed by that existence: emotions, families, hopes and dreams, spirituality, etcetera. #BlackLivesMatter explains on their website:

When we say Black Lives Matter, we are broadening the conversation around state violence to include all of the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state. We are talking about the ways in which Black lives are deprived of our basic human rights

⁵¹ Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver, trans. (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1969).

and dignity . . . #BlackLivesMatter is working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically and intentionally targeted for demise.⁵²

#BlackLivesMatter addresses the needs of the Black community, including the cessation of police violence and vigilante law enforcement against them, the systemic poverty in which Black women live, and the marginalization of different groups within the Black identity. More specifically, the movement calls Black individuals from a state of powerlessness to a place of voice and from the denial of rights to the guarantee of civil protections.

Newsworthy Event

Rather than the violence perpetrated being viewed as normal and unremarkable, in the era of #BlackLivesMatter, the violence against Black individuals becomes a newsworthy event. In the age of social media, harassment, beatings, chokings, tasings, and shootings of Black citizens do not occur without garnering attention. In the age of cheap technology, when citizen reporters can capture acts of police brutality in photographs or on video and post them to the Internet, violent acts cannot be hidden. Once caught on film, these images can go viral. Social media has the power to drive the coverage of traditional media and as *Black Twitter* organizes around an instance of violence, discrimination, or harassment, tweets trend. As tweets trend, they are picked up and covered by mainstream media.

Newsworthy events encourage conversation. #BlackLivesMatter keeps harms perpetuated against Black bodies within the public consciousness. In a society dominated by whiteness, Black men are lynched, the unarmed Black teenager can be shot and killed, the Black mug shot used for target practice, and the Black citizen left in poverty or confined to jail cells. When events occur, lay individuals use the hashtag, marking the event as important to the conversation about race.

White Privilege Unmasked

The hashtag unmasks the social construction of White privilege because acts of violence and discrimination against the Black body are framed as a social wrong. When whiteness cannot operate according to its “functional invisibility,”⁵³ everyday acts of aggression are called into question. For example, two days after President Barack Obama’s 2015 State of the Union Address, the #BlackLivesMatter organization published their 2015 State of the Black Union message, entitled, “The Shadow of Crisis has NOT Passed,”⁵⁴ reporting how violence, poverty, and discrimination affect the Black community. The demands for racial reform include an end to police brutality, mass incarceration, and the military industrial complex, as well as provisions for wage employment, public education, and racial justice agendas. Although #BlackLivesMatter does not go so far as to challenge White supremacy, it is a call, nevertheless, to recognize forces of whiteness at work and to advance blackness. In an ideal world, Cone tells us, “Blacks are free to share in the liberation of others by making the world more receptive to blackness.”⁵⁵

⁵² “About,” #BlackLivesMatter, accessed May 14, 2015, <http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>.

⁵³ Nakayama and Krizek, “Whiteness.”

⁵⁴ “State of the Black Union,” #BlackLivesMatter, accessed May 14, 2015, <http://blacklivesmatter.com/state-of-the-black-union/>.

⁵⁵ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970), 139.

Colorblind Rhetoric Does Not Effect Change

The rhetorical economy of Black Lives Matters does not allow for colorblind rhetoric. Rather, it obtains force by relying upon color consciousness. Hillary Clinton's statement advancing the idea that "All Lives Matter" illuminates this point. In a speech at the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice & Human Rights in December 2014, Clinton declared, "yes, black lives matter,"⁵⁶ but negated her support of the movement six months later when she relayed a conversation she had had once with her mother. In a speech about race, Clinton shared, "I asked her [Clinton's mother], 'What kept you going?' Her answer was very simple. Kindness along the way from someone who believed she mattered. All lives matter."⁵⁷ In response to Clinton's assertion, Tamara Keith and Amita Kelly of *NPR* reported Pastor Renita Lamkin assert, "I need to hear my president say that the lives of my children matter. That my little black children matter. Because right now our society does not say that they matter. Black lives matter. That's what she needs to say."⁵⁸ For members of the African American community, the declaration that "all lives matter" really means White lives matter, silencing the needs of the Black community once again.

Conclusions

In order to re-script the Black body within White consciousness, new characterizations of Black masculinity, Black femininity, and Black communities need to be offered. But before such suggestions can be accepted, however, the substance of the Black body needs to be valued—to be seen as good, desirable, and significant. Although other Black-positive movements have tried—and failed—to alter White consciousness, a recent movement known as #BlackLivesMatter offers significant possibility for rhetorical change.

In an interview with a *New York Times* journalist, Judith Butler considers the meaning of #BlackLivesMatter. According to Butler:

One reason the chant "Black Lives Matter" is so important is that it states the obvious but the obvious has not yet been historically realized. So it is a statement of outrage and a demand for equality, for the right to live free of constraint, neutralization and degradation of black lives, but also a police system that more and more easily and often can take away a black life in the flash all because some officer perceives a threat.⁵⁹

By rejecting a negative or disregarded identity, as well as by bringing attention to the violence, harassment, and discrimination perpetrated against Black Americans, #BlackLivesMatter creates space for new Black identities to be constructed. The hashtag has evolved from an expression of support to an anthem for a movement. Although the hashtag does not provide a specific identity construction, it continues work begun by other epistemological efforts to re-script the Black body. #BlackLivesMatter goes beyond the celebrity athlete, pop culture star, government appoin-

⁵⁶ Jill Colvin, "What Did Hillary Clinton Say About the Torture Report," *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 17, 2014, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Latest-News-Wires/2014/1217/What-did-Hillary-Clinton-say-about-the-torture-report>.

⁵⁷ Tamara Keith and Amita Kelly, "Hillary Clinton's 3-Word Misstep: 'All Lives Matter,'" *NPR*, June 24, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2015/06/24/417112956/hillary-clintons-three-word-gaffe-all-lives-matter>.

⁵⁸ Keith and Kelly, "Hillary Clinton's 3-Word Misstep."

⁵⁹ Yancy and Butler, "What's Wrong With 'All Lives Matter'?"

tee, military leader, or newscaster—all of whom are tokens of Black identity—to include everyday Black Americans who experience institutional, social, and legal discrimination on a daily basis.