

#AllLivesMatter as Post-Racial Rhetorical Strategy

Mark Orbe*

#BlackLivesMatter was created following the acquittal of the man who killed Trayvon Martin; the movement's call to action is against the "virulent anti-Black racism that permeates our society." Shortly after #BlackLivesMatter became a nationally recognized symbol, it was re-configured, co-opted, and/or replaced by some with the more inclusive and racially neutral alternative, #AllLivesMatter. This analysis utilizes the core elements associated with a critical race theoretical frame to argue that #AllLivesMatter is akin with larger rhetorical devices—like the notion of a color-blind society—that are used to promote post-racism, something that was not possible with other political slogans during earlier civil rights struggles.

Keywords: #AllLivesMatter, #BlackLivesMatter, colorblindness, critical race theory, post-racial, race, white privilege

In the first verse of the Academy Award-winning song, *Glory*, rapper Common asserts: "Justice is juxtapositionin' us / Justice for all just ain't specific enough." These powerful lyrics—featured in the 2015 film *Selma*—capture the essence of a rhetorical struggle between those that advocate for the existence of a post-racial U.S. society and those that vehemently deny its existence.¹ In 2012, #BlackLivesMatter was created following the acquittal of the man who killed Trayvon Martin; the movement's call to action is against the "virulent anti-Black racism that permeates our society."² Shortly after #BlackLivesMatter became a nationally recognized symbol, it was re-configured, co-opted, and/or replaced by some with the more inclusive and racially neutral alternative, #AllLivesMatter.³

This analysis utilizes the core elements associated with a critical race theoretical frame to highlight how post-racial fantasies render the legitimacy of race-specific assertions as null and void.⁴ In particular, I argue that #AllLivesMatter is akin with larger rhetorical devices—like the notion of a color-blind society—that are used to promote post-racism, something that was not possible with other political slogans during earlier civil rights struggles.⁵ In order to frame this argument, I first offer a brief description of the Black Lives Matter movement. Then, I articulate how critical race theory serves as a key foundation for my rhetorical critique of #AllLivesMatter.

* Mark Orbe (Ph.D., Ohio University) is Professor of Communication at Western Michigan University. He can be reached for comment on this essay at orbe@wmich.edu.

¹ Mark Orbe, *Communication Realities in a "Post-racial" Society: What the U.S. Public Really Thinks about Barack Obama* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 216-217.

² "About the Black Lives Matter Network," Black Lives Matter, <http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>.

³ 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.

⁴ See Mari J. Matsuda, Charles R. Lawrence III, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlè Williams Crenshaw, eds., *Words that Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment* (San Francisco, CA: Westview Press, 1993).

⁵ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and Racial Inequality in Contemporary America*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 55; Kent Ono, "Postracism: A Theory of the "Post" – as Political Strategy," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 34 (2010): 228-229.

#BlackLivesMatter

Following the 2013 George Zimmerman’s acquittal of the death of Trayvon Martin, #BlackLivesMatter emerged as a social media call to action for people of all racial and cultural backgrounds interested in protesting “the obvious truth that the criminalization of Blackness is entertained as just and acceptable.”⁶ The movement associated with the hashtag continued to gain momentum in 2014 and 2015 as it was used to create a collective consciousness of a number of issues facing African Americans, including racial profiling, police brutality, the militarization of policing in black communities, as well as mass incarceration.⁷ The organization’s website includes an abundance of information, including the following objective statement:

#BlackLivesMatter is working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. We affirm our contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression. We have put our sweat equity and love for Black people into creating a political project – taking the hashtag off of social media and into the streets. The call for Black lives to matter is a rallying cry for ALL Black lives striving for liberation.⁸

The movement has been criticized through national media outlets that characterize it as rebellious, irrational, leaderless, and unfocused—and, consequently fleeting.⁹ While some objectives of #BlackLivesMatter are quite broad (“ending mass incarceration, de-militarizing the police, and securing full employment”), others are more specific (“specific legislative efforts, congressional hearings, and indictments of police officers that have shot and killed unarmed black men”).¹⁰ According to Kang, “The movement does shy away from specific policy prescriptions. Instead, the work seems to be aimed at an abrupt, wide-scale change in consciousness, channeling the grief and anger that these police killings engender around the country.”¹¹

Dozens of Black Lives Matter chapters exist across the U.S. and abroad; these grass-roots organizations have been instrumental in staging over a thousand demonstrations worldwide.¹² These protests take a variety of forms including assemblies, rallies, vigils, marches, and die-ins. The central theme here is that individuals united behind the purpose of #BlackLivesMatter are making political declarations, most often publically to mourn the loss of African American lives—a form of human existence that historically has been situated as less significant than that of other races. Such demonstrations are crucially important. As Yancy and Butler articulate, when the collective grieve the loss of individuals whose lives are considered ungrievable they are making political statement that these lost lives are not acceptable losses.¹³

⁶ Black Millennials, “What You Mean by #AllLivesMatter,” Black Millennials, December 1, 2014, <http://blackmillennials.com/2014/12/01/what-you-mean-by-alllivesmatter/comment-page-1/>.

⁷ Michael Segalov, “We Spoke to the Activist Behind #BlackLivesMatter about Racism in Britain and America,” *Vice*, February 2, 2015, <http://www.vice.com/read/patrisse-cullors-interview-michael-segalov-188>.

⁸ “About the Black Lives Matter Network.”

⁹ Leah Hunt-Hendrix, “The Media vs. The Movement: 3 Ways The ‘New York Times’ Completely Misunderstands #BlackLivesMatter and Movements in General,” *Huffington Post*, January 22, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/leah-hunthendrix/three-ways-the-nytimes-co_b_6510530.html.

¹⁰ Hunt-Hendrix, “The Media vs. The Movement.”

¹¹ Jay Caspian Kang, “Our Demand is Simple: Stop Killing Us.” *MSN News*, May 4, 2015, <http://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/%E2%80%98our-demand-is-simple-stop-killing-us%E2%80%99/ar-BBj9Yxb>

¹² “At Least 1134 Black Lives Matter Demonstrations Have Been Held in the Last 513 Days,” *Elephrame*, December 7, 2015, <https://elephrame.com/textbook/protests>.

¹³ Yancy and Butler, “What’s Wrong With ‘All Lives Matter?’”

Described by some as “the most formidable American protest movement of the 21st century to date,” the effectiveness of #BlackLivesMatter has relied on the strengths of social media: “the swift morally blunt consensus that can be created by hashtags; the personal connection that a charismatic online persona can make with followers; the broad networks that allow for easy distribution of documentary photos and videos – with an effort to quickly mobilize protests in each new city where a police shooting occurs.”¹⁴ In this regard, #BlackLivesMatter represents the new form of online activism; something that has allowed names such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Tony Robinson, Walter Scott, and Freddie Gray to become recognized within one collective stream of consciousness despite that their lives ended thousands of miles and weeks/months/years apart. As such, the movement demonstrates how Twitter has become a site of a revolution and a conduit for the protest rhetoric of activists.¹⁵ In 2014, #BlackLivesMatter was recognized by The American Dialect Society as the word of the year.¹⁶

From its inception, #BlackLivesMatter was rooted in the lived experiences of people of African descent in the U.S., especially those who actively resist their own dehumanization. In addition, the movement sought to advance the lives of all African Americans while simultaneously singling out those whose lives have been traditionally marginalized with Black liberation movements. According to the information provided on the website, Black Lives Matter “affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folk, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum.”¹⁷ This is an important rhetorical distinction, as it demonstrates how the movement negotiates the dialectical tension of how black lives matter exists alongside a continuum of similarity←→difference and privilege←→advantage.¹⁸ On a larger scale, it is this very issue that is at the core of the fierce debates regarding the use of #AllLivesMatter as a more inclusive form of #BlackLivesMatter. In order to contextualize the arguments in this essay, I turn to critical race theory as a salient theoretical frame.

Critical Race Theory

The origins of critical race theory can be traced back to the late 1970s and early 1980s.¹⁹ During this time, civil rights activists were seeing many of the gains achieved during the 1960s disappearing.²⁰ Initially, scholars in critical legal studies questioned the impact of the dominant values of equal opportunity and justice for all in a context of racial inequalities. Over the past two decades, communication scholars have drawn on this established theoretical framework to inform their research on race, ethnicity, and communication.²¹ Critical race theory, given #BlackLivesMatter as contemporary form of civil rights activism, provides an invaluable foundation for this rhetorical analysis.

¹⁴ Kang, “Our Demand is Simple.”

¹⁵ Kang, “Our Demand is Simple.”

¹⁶ R.L.G., “Johnson: Words of The Year: #BlackLivesMatter,” *The Economist*. January 15, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2015/01/johnson-words-year-0>.

¹⁷ “About the Black Lives Matter Network.”

¹⁸ Judith Martin and Thomas Nakayama, “Thinking Dialectically About Culture and Communication,” *Communication Theory*, 9 (1999): 1-25.

¹⁹ Kimberlè Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, eds., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed That Movement* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

²⁰ Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado and Crenshaw, *Words that Wound*.

²¹ Rachel A. Griffin, “Critical Race Theory as a Means to Deconstruct, Recover, and Evolve in Communication Studies,” *Communication Law Review*, 10 (2000): 1-9.

At the core of critical race theory are six key elements.²² First, it begins with recognition that racism is an integral part of the United States. Critical race theorists do not debate whether racism can ever be totally eliminated; instead they focus on challenging existing structures that reinforce racial oppression. Second, critical race theory “rejects dominant legal and social claims of neutrality, objectivity, and color blindness.”²³ Laws, policies, slogans, and other rhetorical devices promoted as “race-neutral” are criticized. Critical race theoretical work embraces the subjectivity that comes with the lived experiences of people of color; as such their work is seen as explicitly political. The third core element rejects analyses of contemporary racial relations void of any historical context that frames current realities. Accordingly, they believe that any attempts to understand race in the 21st century are only possible through an awareness of the history of race in the United States.

The fourth key element of critical race theory focuses on the experiential knowledge that is generated from various cultural standpoints. In other words, the theory values perspectives grounded through the racialized collective experiences of those groups that have historically been marginalized in the U.S. The fifth key element speaks to the interdisciplinary and synergistic nature of critical race theory. The ideas of this theory are borrowed from several traditions, including feminism, Marxism, critical/cultural studies, and postmodernism.²⁴ The sixth and final key element highlights the social activism associated with the theory: In no uncertain terms, the objective of critical race theory is the elimination of racial oppression. A focus on race, however, does not prohibit seeking an understanding of how racism is closely tied to other oppressions based on gender and gender identity, socioeconomic status, abilities, spirituality, and sexual orientation. Within this context, #BlackLivesMatter is best understood as critical race theory in action.

Critical race scholars have argued that the rhetoric of race has paid too much attention to elite courtrooms while ignoring how social justice issues are interpreted by lay persons. As such, this form of theorizing is regarded as both pragmatic and idealized in its attempt to address the immediate needs of those individuals whose lives exist on the margins of society. New foci of critical race scholarship have emerged over the years, including the use of narratives, personal stories, poems, and fiction.²⁵ The debate between the effectiveness of #AllLivesMatter versus #BlackLivesMatter fosters another area of growth for critical race theorists. It represents an extension of the work of communication scholars who have utilized the ideals of critical race theory to advance rhetorical theory. Specifically, Hasian and Delgado have advocated for “racialized critical rhetorical theorizing” which promotes assessment of “the ways in which public and legal notions of race influence the ways in which we create histories, cultural memories, narratives, myths, and other discursive units.”²⁶ Political rhetoric, like #AllLivesMatter, is a form of public discourse that contains a number of subnarrative and texts.²⁷ While the hashtag appears neutrally affirming—on face value and within its implications—it must be situated within a larger frame that includes historical, social, cultural, and contextual understandings.²⁸ Consequently, this

²² Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado and Crenshaw, *Words that Wound*.

²³ Mark Orbe and Tina Harris, *Interracial Communication: Theory Into Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015), 154.

²⁴ Orbe and Harris, *Interracial Communication*.

²⁵ Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado and Crenshaw, *Words that Wound*.

²⁶ Marouf Hasian and Fernando Delgado, “The Trials and Tribulations of Racialized Critical Rhetorical Theory: Understanding the Rhetorical Ambiguities of Proposition 187,” *Communication Theory*, 8 (1998): 247.

²⁷ Hasian and Delgado, “The Trials and Tribulations,” 257.

²⁸ Hasian and Delgado, “The Trials and Tribulations,” 258.

analysis draws from the key components of critical race theory generally, and racialized critical rhetorical theorizing specifically, to “gain an appreciation of the ways that purportedly neutral discussions of race often mask racial categories, experiences, and values.”²⁹

#AllLivesMatter, Post-Racism, and White Privilege

This section represents the heart of the essay; the objective is two-fold. First, I will explicate the rhetorical power of post-racism and describe colorblindness as a post-racial strategy. Second, I will situate #AllLivesMatter as a strategic form of post-racial rhetoric and illustrate the ways in which rhetors who use the hashtag do so through a prism steeped in white privilege. I conclude the rhetorical analysis by arguing for the necessity of #BlackLivesMatter as a form of counter post-racial discourse.

Post-Racial Rhetoric

The election of Barack Obama as the 44nd U.S. President is the single most important accomplishment associated with the emergence of post-racial rhetoric in the United States.³⁰ Although it’s absurd to think that one event could “automatically and instantaneously end racism,”³¹ Obama’s election appeared to some as the culmination of decades of progress for people of color and the mark of a post-racial state. Consequently, from the perspective of some whites—including young people who do not have the collective memory of racial injustice³²—contemporary lives in the U.S. are being played on a level playing field in terms of race.³³ According to some critical race scholars,³⁴ post-racial rhetoric can be understood as a form of “historical amnesia”³⁵ whereby the intergenerational effects of centuries of racism are forgotten.

Race-neutral discourses—such as self-descriptions of being color-blind—are rhetorical strategies of post-racism.³⁶ “I don’t see color” is a common form of race-neutral discourse. Another example is the often heard “It doesn’t matter if a person is black, white, red, yellow, green, purple, or polka-dot.” This rhetoric defines racial identities through the color of one’s skin, which for many is the defining marker of race. The logic associated with this rhetoric is straightforward and seemingly irrefutable: If a person doesn’t see race, then they cannot be racist. For many Whites, advocating for a race-neutral, color-blind world is a practical strategy toward an admirable goal: the elimination of racism.³⁷ While the end goal is laudable, what oftentimes remains unspoken (and unchallenged) are the ways in which color-blind rhetoric fails to recognize and address continued forms of racial discrimination and institutionalized racism. Thus, perceptions of the U.S. as a post-racial society are best understood as a reflection of a lived experience steeped in white privilege.³⁸

²⁹ Hasian and Delgado, “The Trials and Tribulations,” 264.

³⁰ Ono, “Postracism”; Orbe, *Communication Realities in a “Post-racial” Society*, 91.

³¹ Ono, “Postracism,” 228.

³² Orbe, *Communication Realities in a “Post-racial” Society*, 91-108.

³³ Mary D. Vavrus, “Unhitching From the “Post” (Of Postfeminism). *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34 (2010): 225.

³⁴ Ono, “Postracism,” 231.

³⁵ Hasian and Delgado, “The Trials and Tribulations,” 257.

³⁶ Ono, “Postracism,” 230.

³⁷ Orbe, *Communication Realities in a “Post-racial” Society*, 146.

³⁸ Orbe, *Communication Realities in a “Post-racial” Society*, 147.

On face value, colorblind approaches appear to be politically neutral, yet according to Husband, they actually work to exacerbate racial oppression.³⁹ This and similar approaches represent a liberal assumption of neutrality which fosters a “lack of understanding of the historical, systemic influences that race has on contemporary lived experience.”⁴⁰ When white privilege is not acknowledged, individuals develop what Freire calls a “magical” or false consciousness of race and racism.⁴¹ When individuals do not work to understand diverse lived experiences beyond that which is generated by their own cultural location, the logical conclusion is that no social action is warranted because since race is not an issue for people who identify as white then the same must be the same for all members of society.⁴² Consequently, racial neutral rhetoric—while seemingly positive, affirming, and forward-thinking—implicitly reinforces the unearned benefits that come with white privilege.

One of the most troubling consequences of post-racial discourse is the way in which it works to silence individuals who seek to challenge racism.⁴³ For instance, when a person of color requests that Whites consider the saliency of race in any given context, they are criticized for “playing the race card”—bringing up race in a contemporary time frame where racism no longer exists. The power of the rhetorical discourse of color-blindness, in the context of post-racism, manifests when the person of color themselves are accused of being racists as they to confront racism.⁴⁴ Recognizing the underpinnings of post-racial discourse is crucial to understanding the resistance to #AllLivesMatter, yet it is a rhetorical frame that has largely gone unarticulated.

#AllLivesMatter as Post-Racial Rhetoric

In most instances, #AllLivesMatter emerges as a response to Twitter posts that include the hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter. Some Whites describe the more universally inclusive alternative as a form of solidarity and a declaration against police brutality of people of all races.⁴⁵ Within social media exchanges, these individuals argue that by singling out African Americans specifically, rhetors are creating racial separation and promoting divisiveness. Moreover, advocating for #AllLivesMatter as a universal affirmation, void of race, is situated within racial neutrality that is consistent with post-racism.

As established earlier, having a race-neutral approach to questions such as “which lives matter?” negates the historical and current-day realities whereby African American lives are not deemed as equally valuable. The fact that all lives matter should be a given, but to truly embrace the essence of this mantra we must “foreground those lives that are not mattering now, to mark that exclusion, and militate against it.”⁴⁶ According to Landrum,

The fact that “All Lives Matter” is being used to *argue against* the idea that Black lives matter is proof that (1) People spreading that slogan don’t really believe Black lives matter, at least not equally, and (2) It’s therefore not true that all lives do matter equally in their eyes. The state-

³⁹ Terry Husband, Jr., “‘I Don’t See Color’: Challenging Assumptions About Discussing Race with Young Children,” *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 39 (2011): 365.

⁴⁰ Hasian and Delgado, “The Trials and Tribulations,” 250.

⁴¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1972).

⁴² Husband, “‘I Don’t See Color,’” 365.

⁴³ Catherine Squires, “Running Through the Trenches: Or, an Introduction to the Undead Culture Wars and Dead Serious Identity Politics,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 31 (2010): 212.

⁴⁴ Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 55.

⁴⁵ Black Millennials, “What You Mean by #AllLivesMatter.”

⁴⁶ Yancy and Butler, “What’s Wrong With ‘All Lives Matter?’”

ment's use belies itself. If all lives matter, then black lives matter, so why the argument? Why the comeback? The comeback proves that statement false, and proves it for what it is – a response born of fear and racism. Consistent with critical race theory, a historical context is crucial here.⁴⁷

#AllLivesMatter negates the well-documented reality that the United States constitution defined people of African descent as property. As evidenced by an intense political contestation and compromise—something that reflected dominant social and cultural ideologies—Black lives were valued as only a portion (factually, three-fifths) of white lives.⁴⁸ In this context, “some lives mattered more, were more human, more worthy, more deserving of life and freedom.”⁴⁹ This is the historical context from which the present-day reality is framed. How do we know that black lives still do not matter as much as white lives? We can look to the disproportionate number of U.S. Americans of color who are detained, in prison, and on death row. We can critique subsequent institutional efforts, and unbalanced media attention, when African American and European American women and children are reported missing. We can observe increasingly apparent health disparities based on race and the lack of critical research, internal reform, and public advocacy.⁵⁰ These are just a few contexts that represent a social norm that effectively communicates that black lives do not matter. In no uncertain terms, the idea that African American lives are viewed as less valuable than their white counterparts has “built up over time, through daily practices, modes of address, through the organization of schools, work, prison, law and media.”⁵¹

Situating #AllLivesMatter as a post-racial strategy facilitates a recognition of how it represents an extension of colorblindness that refutes the core purpose of #BlackLivesMatter.⁵² From a critical racialized rhetorical theorizing frame, it can be seen as a hollow attempt to neutralize the fact that certain forms of injustices and brutality target people of color almost exclusively. #AllLivesMatter, in this regard, can be understood as a means to reshape a narrative so that one's colorblindness can remain intact. As Yancy and Butler explain, “When some people rejoining 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 important to name the lives that have not mattered, and are struggling to matter in the way they deserve.”⁵³ This is a crucially important point, one that appears throughout the website dedicated to Black Lives Matter. According to the website, founders of the movement clearly state: “Telling us that all lives matter is redundant. We know that already. But, just know, police violence and brutality disproportionately affects my people. Justice is not applied equally, laws are not applied equally and neither is our outrage.”

Concluding Thoughts: #BlackLivesMatter as Rhetorical Necessity

This rhetorical analysis utilizes critical race theory to critique #AllLivesMatter as a problematic response to #BlackLivesMatter. In short, I identify #AllLivesMatter as a rhetorical technique

⁴⁷ Cynthia Landrum, “Deconstructing the ‘All Lives Matter’ Response,” *thelivelytradition*, November 25, 2014, <http://www.tomschade.com/2014/11/deconstructing-all-lives-matter-response.html>.

⁴⁸ Orbe and Harris, *Interracial Communication*, 44.

⁴⁹ Yancy and Butler, “What’s Wrong With ‘All Lives Matter?’”

⁵⁰ Mary Bassett, “#BlackLivesMatter – A Challenge to the Medical and Public Health Communities,” *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 52 (2015): 1-3; Black Millennials, “What You Mean by #AllLivesMatter.”

⁵¹ Yancy and Butler, “What’s Wrong With ‘All Lives Matter?’”

⁵² Black Millennials, “What You Mean by #AllLivesMatter.”

⁵³ Yancy and Butler, “What’s Wrong With ‘All Lives Matter?’”

consistent with colorblind discourse—all of which exists within a society falsely proclaiming its post-racial existence. Clearly, all lives matter is laudable as an ideological principle; however, in practice, all lives seemingly are not valued to the same extent. This is the issue at the core of #BlackLivesMatter, a rhetorical strategy that is explicitly racialized. Within this essay, I argue that #AllLivesMatter is also racialized, albeit more implicitly because of the cloak of white privilege. In the end, the insights generated through a critical analysis of this contemporary form of racialized discourse demonstrates the problematic nature of post-racism, and the consequences that come with rhetoric that reinforces a privileged dominant discourse.

Historically, rhetoric highlighting the importance of recognizing the humanity and value of African American lives has always existed against the backdrop of anti-Black racism. The most common examples took the form of language, naming, and labels which over time continued to promote self-definition, agency, and empowerment.⁵⁴ During the civil rights movement, Black men carried signs asserting “I am a man.” African Americans of all ages claimed “Black Power” and proclaimed that “Black is Beautiful.” This discourse was important as a form of social activism in a time when anti-Black racism was acknowledged (to some extent) by most U.S. Americans. Did we see many responses that stated that “White is Beautiful” or European American men holding signs that boldly stated the obvious? Some isolated examples might have existed, however, they were not offered in the spirit of universal commonality but within white supremacist ideologies (e.g., White Power, White is Beautiful). At the time, most U.S. citizens recognized the stark racial realities that necessitated pro-Black statements as counter protests to the status quo. However, in post-racial U.S. society, #AllLivesMatter exists as a preferred replacement to #BlackLivesMatter because the specificity of race is overpowered by the saliency of perceived human universality.

The necessity of #BlackLivesMatter as a form of protest discourse continues to be highlighted by social justice activists within social media. In fact, the emergence of #AllLivesMatter appears as evidence for the necessity of the movement itself. According to some critics, the more race-neutral alternative is “an affront to Black heritage, people, and culture and does nothing but take away from the potent truth that the Black existence deserves ample recognition.”⁵⁵ According to Yancy and Butler,

One reason... ‘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, but also a chant that links the history of slavery, of debt peonage, segregation, and a prison system geared toward the containment, 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 a flash because some officer perceives a threat.⁵⁶

Yancy and Butler highlight an important issue within this controversy: What is the meta-message implied by #BlackLivesMatter? According to Yancy, it is “a statement that should be obviously true but apparently is not? . . . [W]hat we see is that some lives matter more than others, that some lives matter so much that they need to be protected at all costs, and that other lives matter less, or not at all.”⁵⁷ Within this contextual frame, #AllLivesMatter, according to Nick Mont-

⁵⁴ Orbe and Harris, *Interracial Communication*, 115.

⁵⁵ Black Millennials, “What You Mean by #AllLivesMatter.”

⁵⁶ Yancy and Butler, “What’s Wrong With ‘All Lives Matter?’”

⁵⁷ Yancy and Butler, “What’s Wrong With ‘All Lives Matter?’”

gomery, “is used to dismiss and distract from the struggles of black people.”⁵⁸ This post-racial form of rhetoric implicitly erases the specific forms of oppression that are bound up in anti-Black racism. He goes on to assert, “‘All lives matter’ is being chanted and tweeted in a context where the people being murdered are Black, and they’re being murdered because of anti-Black racism.”⁵⁹

#BlackLivesMatter founder Alicia Garza has criticized various mainstream adaptations of the hashtag in light of what she describes as a repudiation of the very spirit behind the movement. She has made her criticism of #AllLivesMatter crystal clear. According to Garza, “changing Black Lives Matter to All Lives Matter is a demonstration of how we don’t actually understand structural racism in this country.”⁶⁰ Landrum connects this issue with post-racial articulations that minimize the current inequalities that exist and instead make proclamations of social equality that do not exist. She goes on to assert, “If one truly believes that all lives matter, then what’s important right now is to proclaim loudly that Black lives matter.”⁶¹ In a subsequent Twitter post, Garza concisely concludes: “If you really believe that all lives matter, you will fight like hell for Black lives.”⁶² This is a sentiment that is reflected in the core elements of critical race theory: Race-neutral discourse, like #AllLivesMatter, presumably reflects a mantra highlighting objectivity, equality, and color-blindness. Yet, such discourse when articulated in contexts where anti-Black racism continues to exist reinforces racial inequalities. That’s why on the surface, #AllLivesMatter can easily be embraced as a worthy universal mantra. However, in the racialized reality of contemporary U.S. society,

#BlackLivesMatter as a rhetorical device is necessary to highlight existing disparities based on race. In this context, it isn’t used as a strategy for separation and division but as a crucial educational tool toward greater social justice. Ultimately, the lesson is quite simple for a country attempting to eliminate racial oppression: “Justice for all just ain’t specific enough.”

⁵⁸ Black Millennials, “What You Mean by #AllLivesMatter.”

⁵⁹ Black Millennials, “What You Mean by #AllLivesMatter.”

⁶⁰ Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement by Alicia Garza,” *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014, <http://thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>.

⁶¹ Landrum, “Deconstructing the ‘All Lives Matter’ Response.”

⁶² Black Lives Matter, Twitter post, December 6, 2014, 3:17 a.m. <https://twitter.com/blklivesmatter/status/541159362610212866>.