IN MEMORIAM: THE ONLINE POLICING AND TRIVIALIZATION OF BLACK LIVES AND BLACK DEATHS

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ABSTRACT
The internet has proven itself an invaluable resource in providing information about the Black Lives Matter movement in real time. As people around the world make a commitment to anti-racism and equality, social media has become a tool for meaningful engagement with the issues and, for many, a platform on which to begin their journey of anti-racism. However, there are notable inconsistencies between people’s declared commitments to social justice on social media platforms and the content they share publicly. Following posts on Twitter and Instagram, I examine the moral policing which takes place in discussions about the Black Lives Matter movement. I argue that the typical forms of virtual policing operate through similar mechanisms of whiteness that are present in respectability politics, in which only those lives deemed worthy and “good” are valued. These conditions allow for room to debate on whether an individual victim of police brutality ultimately deserved to die or not, instead of meaningfully engaging with the systems that enabled a victim’s death. The conditionality of death paired with misogynoir—an intersection of racism and sexism that the BLM movement explicitly tries to disavow—has set the stage for the trivializing of Breonna Taylor’s passing: some turn her untimely demise into the punch line of a joke while others comment on it in a purely performative type of activism for the sake of their social media aesthetics. I argue that these individuals’ ease in piggybacking off of this movement for their own personal gain should be held up to critical scrutiny so that we can progress towards a community that benefits from meaningful solidarity and not empty performativity.

KEYWORDS
Black Lives Matter, Respectability Politics, Performative Activism, Social Media.

In anthropology, we are tasked with watching. Through our efforts to make space for unfamiliar cultural phenomena in the public sphere, cultural anthropologists are uniquely positioned to be vehicles for the expansion of people’s worldviews. I would like to believe that empathy drives the urge to give communities a space to speak, to tell us about how they find and convey meaning in a world that is often all too comfortable with their erasure.

Right now, as a Black woman, I am both an active viewer of this moment in time and the cultural phenomena being studied. As I engage with a virtual community and assess the actions of well meaning “allies,” I am experiencing a tension between hoping for better-informed solidarity and denouncing ill-concealed performative activism—all the while watching a movement, historic in size, span across continents (CNN 2020). Right now, the internet functions as an invaluable resource for those trying to stay abreast of protests, of Twitter threads about petitions against injustice, and of mutual aid funds that need support. It is providing a long-overdue reality check for countless people who never knew how white supremacy touched almost every facet of their lives. On these feeds, I am watching Black folks, myself included, campaign for nothing less than unequivocal equality. I am also watching non-Black people—high on the idea of showing solidarity with no clear idea of how to effectively do so—make that campaign conditional by ascribing value to the deaths of black folks based on their choices while alive, and ultimately using that conditionality as a mechanism for social
policing within a movement.

In the journey of unlearning, people often seek to disassociate themselves from the mechanisms that have enabled them or others to be oppressors (Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre). Unlearning is a process that takes time, takes energy, and takes a willingness to make mistakes. It also calls for a desire to think critically about your actions. White supremacy at its foundation is hierarchical and, using the Internet as a method of anthropological assessment, I see people disavow the ideology behind this violent system while keeping its structures in place. The performative activism espoused by people on social media and the social policing by people discomfited by the behavior of activists within the Black Lives Matter movement perpetuate the fundamental problem at hand—that my and other’s safe existence in our Black bodies is determined by how well we can adhere to a politics of respectability, one that is ultimately subject to approval based on a scale dependent on the closest possible proximity to conceptions of whiteness.

For years, Twitter has been the unpleasant broadcaster of the last moments of unarmed Black folks. With no warning, a clip of someone’s final seconds on this Earth will flash in front of me as I scroll. Instantly, I am devastated, I am enraged, and I am exhausted. And as I wait for the next inevitable incident of a life being cut short for no reason at all, I will picture my family, my friends, the people I hold closest to me in the same position—and I will have to come to terms with the fact that the terror I feel is not unreasonable.

Now, during this pandemic, when the New York Times was forced to sue the CDC in order to obtain information about people of color dying of COVID-19 complications at disproportionate rates, I am finally seeing people acknowledge that racial violence exists outside of interactions with the police (Oppel Jr. Et al, 2020). It exists in medical facilities, unemployment offices, government relief programs, and in the selfishness of folks who would put essential workers at risk by not wearing masks. According to the Economic Policy Institute, 50% of essential workers in food and agriculture and 53% in industrial, commercial, residential facilities and services are people of color. I am watching these same people be forced to understand that not even a pandemic will stop the over-policing of Black folks and it will not stop them dying when they are unarmed, when they are terrified, or when they are begging for their lives.

I am witnessing a world enraged. But I am also watching the world set standards about who deserves to die and who does not. Countless tweets describe Elijah McClain: a man who loved to dance and play his violin to soothe homeless cats, and who begged the police officers that murdered him to see his goodness and to account for his disability (@ohsnapitstabs June 23, 2020, Youtube 2019). He was ignored, and I watched the internet make claims that his inherent goodness meant that he did not deserve to die.

I watched Breonna Taylor be lauded as a public servant. I saw David McAtee be remembered as someone who shared his kindness with everyone, even the police force that killed him (Carman 2020). I watched people remember George Floyd as a pillar in his community, a man who wanted better for himself and for the people he loved (Ebrahimji 2020). And I reminded everyone in the networks I followed and subscribed to on my small platform in my corner of the Internet that their lives mattered no matter what they did with them. That their kindness should not be a necessary condition for their survival. That they did not deserve to die whether they bettered the world around them or kept to themselves.

Respectability politics mandates that groups of people must act a certain way because they reflect the community to which they belong and therefore must reject the negative stereotypes frequently associated with them (Harris 2003). The moralistic ideology of being a “good” member of society is part and parcel to a system of standards that marks a proximity to whiteness as ideal and determines all else less worthy. It is deeply concerning to see such mechanisms of social policing occur within a movement explicitly dedicated to dismantling them. Every tweet that ascribes value to the choices people have made in their lives so as to
determine their worth (as Black people) is the policing of a memory. It wedges open a space
where people can debate whether someone did or did not deserve to die instead of critically
engaging with the system that enabled their deaths. In doing so, the victim is blamed, and
the point is missed.

Media outlets have employed the same tactics to diminish the movement as a whole. Dr. Martin
Luther King, Jr. is regularly invoked on Twitter to police the way that Black people express
their rage in continuing protests (StevieJ321 July 20, 2020, Jon Garcia July 22, 2020). They
criticize the perceived violence and lawlessness of these protests, using moralistic shaming to
try and curb protestors into behaving in a way that makes observers feel more comfortable
and less threatened. That the looting and burning was done by a minority is irrelevant. That most of the violence was instigated by the police is often ignored (Ongweso Jr.
2020). The perception of minority groups as monoliths gives people the opportunity to
vilify the entirety of the Black Lives Matter movement and in turn imply that victims of
police brutality are to be blamed for their own deaths (Donald J. Trump May 29, 2020). If your
goal is to break away from white supremacy, logically you should not police people using a
system that they are trying to break away from. Reinforcing mechanisms of whiteness—even
as you disavow them—does not make them any less oppressive.

A fundamental part of embracing anti-racism work is leaning into the discomfort of
unlearning. Yet the injustices which impact the families of victims of police brutality continue
to be reduced to "the cleverest way to hide the message," ultimately allowing people to avoid
any meaningful engagement with the issues (All Things Considered 2020). The constant
creation of memes from instances of brutality is one such technique that trivializes issues
without addressing their causes. Injustices intersect with one other as oppression about
one facet of a person’s identity (racial) overlaps with another (gender), obvious in the case of
Breonna Taylor. There has been no indication that any of the officials with the power to
prosecute those responsible for Breonna Taylor’s murder will try to seek justice on her
behalf. The oft-retweeted phrase “arrest the cops who murdered Breonna Taylor” emerged
in an effort to remember her personally, to keep campaigning for her just legacy, and to
remind society that Black women are subject to both the brutality of racism and the violence
of the patriarchy. From this rallying cry came memes and offensive internet jokes. There are
astrology posts that are labeled “Your Summer Drink According to Your Horoscope” with
each drink reading “Arrest the cops who killed Breonna Taylor” (we are mitú 2020). There are
photographs of celebrities posing in idyllic scenes with captions reading “now that my
sideboob has gotten your attention...Breonna Taylor’s murders have not been arrested.
Demand justice” (Bramesco 2020, Watts 2020). Of all the Black people who have recently lost
their lives at the hands of white supremacy, it is no coincidence that the death that has
become a joke is that of Breonna Taylor’s. If the social policing of Black lives makes their
value conditional, misogynoir (tying Breonna’s gender to her racial identity) reduces the gravity
of her death to nothing more than a punch line. It is alarming that people in a movement must
be amused by a gross injustice to care about it.

Posting a highlight reel of your life on a social media platform has become a fundamentally
and amorally parasitic performance that leaches meaning from strangers’ pain and
reduces the gravity of a tremendous loss—just to boost your own carefully curated image. If
"meaning well" continues to be an excuse for disrespecting the memory of Black people,
under what circumstances will performative activists finally hold themselves accountable
and “do better” like they promise? When do victims of oppression have time to deal with
the trauma of watching the world debate the value of our existence when, once again, we
must bear the burden of course-correcting a movement full of individuals who make
no attempt to show meaningful solidarity or educate themselves?

Despite these concerns over the trivialization and instrumentalization of Black lives on
Twitter, I do not want to diminish what is, without a doubt, a transformational
moment. I do not undervalue the incredible successes that have already been achieved:
the Minneapolis Police Department has been defunded; across the country, municipalities are beginning to have critical conversations about exorbitant police budgets, their lack of oversight, and militarization; over 30 million dollars in donations received by the Minnesota Freedom Fund, an organization dedicated to criminal justice reform (All Things Considered 2020); corporate and celebrity performativity regularly being met with the sharp demand to "open your purse" (Feller 2020); and statues memorializing slave owners, colonizers, and violent men – who historians and politicians have reframed as heroes – have been toppling for weeks (New York Times). As critical as I am about the ways people are choosing to keep Breonna Taylor on their minds, I am also aware and proud that protestors are still taking to the streets to demand justice in her name more than 120 days after her death. I simply will not do a disservice to this movement and the people within it by not engaging with their faults.

It is so much more difficult to grow if we do not discuss the ramifications of decisions as they are being made. Large swathes of "activists" are refusing to think critically about what they post online and how it might impact others and the movement. In doing so, they ultimately perpetuate the cycles and systems of white supremacy and oppression they claim to oppose. This is a moment where incredible things are happening; but to live up to this moment’s full potential, we must strive for solidarity that exceeds our own expectations and actively strives to do better.

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