



Black Lives Matter: Pain, Protest, and Representation

Austin D. Hoffman

University of Missouri-Kansas City

Abstract

This article analyzes the recent emergence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the transformation of collective pain into visible signs of oppression and racism through creative forms of demonstration. I will draw from participant observation and a series of ethnographic experiences to outline ways this collective pain is channeled, converted into political performances, and made objective to others. My theoretical approach will employ Elaine Scarry's model of agency tied to the properties of pain and the objectifying capacity of language. Although Scarry's model of power is applied exclusively to the level of the individual body, it can be incorporated into Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence and expanded beyond the body to social and structural forms of domination. Symbolic violence, which entails the misrecognition of pain, diminishes the agency or capacity of whole communities to represent their own experiences. What I will show is that while various forms of symbolic violence structure and maintain misrecognition of bodily pain, social movements such as Black Lives Matter are engendering a climate of activism that gives communities in pain new and creative outlets for objectifying and validating the lived experiences of racism.

Introduction

I arrived about an hour after the decision and parked a block away from North Florissant in a residential neighborhood. I had my gas mask and goggles at the ready, as I mentally prepared myself for what might lie ahead. Smoke billowed down an otherwise tranquil street; the faint sound of store alarms and police sirens rang in the distance. I walked by rows and rows of quaint houses, many of them proudly displaying signs with the phrase "I Love Ferguson." I was alone, tense, and nervous.

As I walked towards the epicenter of the chaos, I had my first interaction with a resident of Ferguson. He was a middle-aged white male, the owner of an auto-shop just off North Florissant; he paced back and forth in front of his business, chest heaving with labored breathing. As he saw me approach, he slightly hunched over and planted his feet firmly, as if bracing for an impending attack. In his right hand was a Glock. I froze for a moment as his eyes met mine; they were wild and menacing. He seemed resolved to use the weapon. I found myself standing under ornate streetlamps wrapped in garland for the holidays, being stared down

by a man with a gun. I slowly took my hands out of my pockets so they were in plain sight and calmly walked to the other side of the street, not wanting to give him any excuse. Here was a man defending his livelihood, ostensibly, from his own community—a community turned inside out. Just down the road, the words “Season’s Greetings” were up in lights, illuminating the broken glass that littered the streets and reflecting off rows of riot shields. As I surveyed the destruction and anarchy that played out around me, I could not shake the feeling that this could very easily have been my hometown.

One hundred-eight days earlier, on August 9th, 2014, Michael Brown, an 18-year-old African American man, was shot to death during an altercation with Darren Wilson, 28, a white police officer of the Ferguson, Missouri Police Department. Brown had allegedly stolen cigars from a local convenience store, and when Wilson confronted Brown, a struggle ensued. While the exact details of this interaction are still hotly debated, the end result was that Wilson shot Brown at least six times, including twice in the head, in front of several witnesses. Mass protesting, looting, and property damage occurred in response to the grand jury’s decision not to indict Wilson on any criminal charges. The killing of Brown, and the hundreds of other people of color killed by police every year, inspired the formation of a nascent social movement known as “Black Lives Matter” (BLM). The organizational structure of the movement is intentionally amorphous and devoid of any clear leadership; it lacks the charismatic heroes of the civil rights movement. However, this has not stopped it from being widely influential. It has taken America by storm and demands, among other things, police accountability for black lives that are unjustifiably lost to the state.

Ferguson was only the beginning of my introduction to the world of activism and organizing. It has been a process of tremendous personal growth, and as a student of the Social Sciences, it provides lessons about the limitations of analytic distance. As Elaine Scarry has compellingly argued, pain is a radically subjective phenomenon that destroys the ability of the individual to express pain objectively. I have found, however, that activism and a reflexive ethnographic perspective can in some cases draw the pain of others into a shared analytic view. I will focus on the social creation of pain and conditions that either perpetuate or alleviate pain.

The recent emergence of BLM and similar grassroots movements for racial and economic justice offer a compelling opportunity to research the transformation of collective pain into creative forms of demonstration that objectify the often invisible realities of oppression. At the outset, it is worth posing a few questions this research explores. The first question is simply, why is the pain of black communities and the state violence against black bodies not being properly addressed—why are the causes of this pain consistently misrecognized? Secondly, how did the killing of black and brown people become a normalized feature of American society? The final question I will pose—and the one most pertinent to this study—is what forms of protest or political performance emerge that may undo this misrecognition and make visible previously invisible domains

of pain and ultimately contribute to the alleviation of suffering? I will outline some of the forms this collective pain takes as it is converted into political performance.

A Rift Between Cultures: A Methodological Note

Prior to the 1990s the majority of Ferguson's citizens were actually white, but due to the pressure of the burgeoning St. Louis metro area, its demography was completely reversed in only two decades (Teague, 2014). Though Ferguson became a majority black town, its power structure remained almost exclusively white—a white mayor, a white city council, and white police force. What started as uncomfortable racial tension festered over the years, culminating in the horrific killing of Brown and the subsequent federal civil rights investigation of the Ferguson police. This stark racial divide is more than just the estrangement of one culture from another. Pragmatically speaking, it is a divide between entire spheres of social life—a divide between entire worlds—and I find myself inhabiting one while peering into the other as an outsider. Mine is a world of security, complacency, and privilege. Mine is a world of whiteness. I come from a middle-class, Midwest suburban upbringing, entirely insulated from anything like what the people of Ferguson experience. I will say that my olive complexion and black hair have made me the target of some misplaced racial slurs and stereotypes, which I believe has given me a somewhat more nuanced understanding of racism than many of the peers I grew up with. Still, I am obviously limited by my identity from totally understanding *what it is like* to be subject to the oppression that the people of Ferguson live with. I am an outsider, who will never fully comprehend what it is like to be seen as an enemy in his own community, to be demonized and extorted by the same people who are neighbors, acquaintances, and even supposed protectors. But I still decided to try.

My first and most difficult challenge was to push at the boundaries of identity, comfort, and the body itself to build a phenomenological bridge, however partial and flimsy, into the world of the Other. Secondly, I had to select performative contexts and demonstrations strategically to devise an interpretive framework to draw comparative lessons from all of them. Finally, I had to establish a theoretical approach that clearly demonstrates the larger significance of these interpretations without becoming too detached from the pragmatic dimensions of the pain of the Other. I will note that while the events of Ferguson were a flashpoint for the Black Lives Matter movement and the origin point for my study, they largely serve as a backdrop or point of reference. The majority of the forthcoming ethnographic entries are from my experiences working in Kansas City, Missouri, where I became an organizer in a grassroots black liberation organization called One Struggle KC, which formed in October 2014 in response to the events of Ferguson, and is primarily comprised of black queer and non-queer women.

A Brief History of Black Lives Matter: Organizational Structure and Important Issues

There is a common misconception that the Black Lives Matter movement originated around the time of the Michael Brown shooting, but in fact it was founded in 2012 after the death of 17-year old Trayvon Martin, and the subsequent acquittal of his killer, George Zimmerman. The official founders are three queer black women, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors. In their own words as listed on the BLM website, “Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression” (Black Lives Matter, 2016). Unlike other black liberation movements or even the Civil Rights era of the 50s and 60s, Black Lives Matter affirms the value of *all* black lives. The worth of black women, gay, queer, transgender, and disabled black people are constantly and explicitly highlighted.

There are many issues that BLM aims to confront. Acts of police brutality such as the killing of Michael Brown, while tragic, are not the only thing that ignited this social movement. No, Ferguson was a ticking time bomb. The racism that its residents experience is manifested, both implicitly and explicitly, through poverty, chronic joblessness, segregation, policing strategies and tactics, a shredded social safety net, and legislation on the local, state, and federal levels. The criminalization and violence against black bodies is not a new feature of American life. It can be traced in reverse chronological order from Ferguson all the way back to chattel slavery. As I have heard numerous times from other protestors and activists, “The police killing black people is nothing new; people finally standing up and taking action about it is what’s new.” The thousands that took to the streets of Ferguson and St. Louis in the Fall of 2014 did so in response to a long history of racial discrimination, economic deprivation, and a police force that treated them not as constituents to be protected, but rather as potential criminals and sources of revenue to be extorted (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). The history of racism specific to Ferguson coalesced with the history of systemic racism in America, making for the perfect storm. The killing of Michael Brown is what finally made the levee break.

Alongside police violence, the issues of mass-incarceration and the prison-industrial complex are at the forefront of the BLM movement. In the last three to four decades, the United States prison population has skyrocketed and is currently the largest in the world, with 2.2 million people incarcerated, and another 4.8 million subject to some form of state supervision such as probation or parole. African-Americans make up only 13% of the U.S. population, but over 37% of the prison population (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). Due to the increasing privatization of prisons and lax federal regulations, inmates are now used as a labor force for many companies and are paid pennies on the dollar for their work (Schlosser, 1998). In response to these growing problems that continue to plague

black and brown communities, BLM now has dozens of chapters around the U.S. and is truly international in scope. There have also been numerous splinter-groups and campaigns based on the BLM guiding principles and philosophy. One Struggle KC is one such organization.

One Struggle KC (1SKC) espouses much of the same rhetoric and ideology of BLM and even uses similar chants and slogans during protests. There are, however, some significant differences; 1SKC attempts to link all forms of oppression. There is of course a strong emphasis on the extrajudicial killings of black people and their disproportionate imprisonment, but issues of immigration reform, internationalism, and classism are also focal points. For instance, One Struggle KC also has a sister organization, Una Lucha KC, that advocates for and discusses the issues Latino, brown, and undocumented peoples face. And whereas many prominent figures in the BLM movement, most notably DeRay Mckesson, have arguably been co-opted by the Democratic Party or political status quo, One Struggle has more radical tendencies and viewpoints. It is not only anti police brutality but also has firm anti-police and anti-imperialist stances. Some members of the organization, both past and present, are self-described anarchists, socialists, and communists (which has been a source of internal tension at times). This context is important, as the forthcoming experiences come from my insider-outsider perspective during my involvement within this organization.

The Power Dynamics of Pain

Ferguson, like many similar cities in the United States, is a community in pain. On the week of Thanksgiving, 2014, its residents were telling us this by way of peaceful protest. Some, however, chose to communicate grief by breaking glass, looting, and committing arson. Public perception and the media focused mainly on the property damage, consistent with a long series of misrecognitions. Regardless of how the community chose to express its pain, all the protestors in Ferguson were met with tear gas, rubber bullets, and confrontation with an invading army. The truth of pain—so blatant and obvious to those afflicted by it—was somehow lost in translation to outsiders. How does this misrecognition contribute to the amplification of pain for communities like Ferguson? My analysis imports Elaine Scarry's model of agency, which operates at the bodily level, and juxtaposes it with the more abstract concepts of Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic violence. This pairing of theories allows for the power dynamics of bodily pain to be expanded to social forms of suffering, thus challenging the misrecognition that occurs when communities collectively express the pain caused by racism.

Pain destroys language, because it has no referential content outside the individual subject. For example, to *have* pain is to have certainty, but to only *hear* about the pain of another is to have doubt. This is Scarry's position, something she refers to as the simultaneous dimension of pain; for the one experiencing it, pain is that which cannot be denied, yet for the one observing it, it is that which cannot be confirmed. Such is the triumph of pain—it causes an absolute

split between one's sense of one's own reality and the reality of other persons (Scarry 1985, 4). Central to this theory is a model of power or agency tied to the objectifying capacity of language. To clarify, the term "agency" in the social sciences is generally referred to as the ability of individuals or social actors to express their power or influence and affect change; it is usually juxtaposed with the social structures or contexts that may either enable or constrain the actors from utilizing this power. According to Scarry, agency expands by diminishing the other through pain, and as the agency of the one causing the pain expands, the agency of the one incurring pain shrinks. When pain is being inflicted upon us, we lose our ability to convert it into words; and by being deprived of language—our primary mode of self-extension—we become completely embodied, thus losing our ability to move beyond the bodily limit to the outside world.

In contrast, Bourdieu developed the concept of symbolic violence to analyze the dynamics of power and gender. "Symbolic violence, to put it as tersely and simply as possible, is the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 2004, 272). To expound, this refers broadly to the subtle interactions, behaviors, and modes of conduct that allow for the normalization and perpetuation of inequality and domination. The myriad interactions and systems of symbols that pervade everyday life can in fact disguise the true nature of power relations, and it is this that makes symbolic violence so powerful. Bourdieu states that power operates through the subjective misrecognition of the meanings associated with a particular action, practice, or ritual (Bourdieu 1977, 170-1). An interaction that is experienced as normal, legitimate, or natural can actually be an act of symbolic violence that is misrecognized by participants: "power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are, but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eye of the beholder" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, xxii). Again, Bourdieu considered gender domination to be the paradigmatic form of symbolic violence and used his case study of the Kabyle, a mountain society in Algeria, to exemplify this. To give a very abridged version of the study, he believes that male dominated or heteropatriarchal societies impose themselves as self-evident and universal. Kabyle women, for example, are socialized in a way that casts them as the subservient sex. They are subject to a severe sexual division of labor, and the men monopolize all power relations in this society. The women psychically internalize these external social distinctions, thus accepting or reifying them as natural and unchangeable. Indeed, those affected by symbolic violence are generally unaware of their own oppression; they accept as legitimate their domination. Thus, "symbolic violence accomplishes itself through an act of cognition...that lies beyond—or beneath, the controls of consciousness and will" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 2004, 273).

Bourdieu also considered conflict to be central to all social life. Conflict occurs through the dialectical relationship or interplay between *habitus*—the "internalization of external structures," which are historically and culturally constituted within agents that predispose action—and *field*—which are arenas of struggle for legitimization and the exercise of symbolic power (Bourdieu

and Wacquant 1992, 18). To put these crucial terms more simply, Bourdieu also describes habitus as “sets of basic, deeply interiorized master dispositions” or “mental habits” (Swartz 1992, 101-2). Habitus is created through early socialization processes in which, as stated above, external or corporeal social structures and relationships are internalized. In contrast, the term “field” can in some ways be thought of as a playing field where opposing teams compete and devise strategies, although one should be careful not to trivialize the matter. Social fields are simply frameworks where actors (in the context of this study, the activists and the police or criminal justice system) struggle over different forms of capital (i.e. power) (Swartz 1997, 123). They are sites of both resistance and domination, wherein one continually helps generate the other.

Considering the growing literature on the importance of emotion and feeling in catalyzing social movements, for this study it may be worth thinking of habitus in terms of an *emotional habitus*. This concept effectively “locates feeling within social relations and practices, thereby pointing toward their conventionality and countering a standard understanding of feelings as wholly interior to the individual” (Gould 2009, 35). The social sciences can often discount emotions as motivators and not include them in the realm of rational action that agents take or consider as strategies within a given field. In her study on AIDs activism, Deborah Gould points out that the habitus of lesbian and gay men is structured by a dominant heteronormative society. She writes, “The emotional habitus of marginalized groups are influenced by the reigning emotional habitus in a society” (Gould 2009, 35). Similarly, the emotional habitus of BLM activists and similar organizations is structured by the emotional habitus of the status quo. This is especially significant considering that BLM activists are often at the intersection of many identities (black gay & lesbian people, black trans people, black gender-nonconforming people, etc.).

Keeping the importance of emotions in mind, while Scarry’s description of pain is experienced exclusively at the level of the individual body, I argue that her position can be expanded via Bourdieu’s symbolic violence to include social and structural forms of domination such as the pain inflicted by racism. I still retain Scarry’s central model of agency in relation to pain but do so in terms of the symbolic systems that allow for the naturalization of racial inequalities and racial violence. And to be clear, it is these systems that allow for the legitimization of not only the multifarious abstract forms of symbolic violence but also actual violence against black and brown bodies. It is what allows police officers to kill unarmed black men, women, trans people, and children with a sense of legitimacy, and then when people cry out in protest, it is what allows for them to dismiss this pain as exaggerated or fabricated. Thus, the cultural misrecognition of domination and pain diminishes the political representation of entire communities and serves to reproduce social inequality.

Symbolic violence and physical violence have a complementary relationship, with each serving to legitimate the other. This legitimation occurs through institutional forces such as the criminal justice system, which naturalizes

symbolic associations of violence through the power to classify and contain particular bodies. This institution has the unique power to deflect attention from the structural causes of violence because it holds individuals rather than dysfunctional systems responsible. This power dynamic can easily be applied to Ferguson and even larger cities such as Chicago and Baltimore. The degree to which the pain of these criminalized communities can be expressed to the larger society is tantamount to the degree of political visibility and representation they can sustain (Scarry 1985, 12). But since their political visibility is severely obscured by pain's fundamentally unshareable nature and the cultural misrecognition that accompanies it, the structural violence in these communities continues unchecked.

The construct of racism collapses individual bodies into biologically defined population boundaries, and thus those individuals are rendered invisible. The pain of the other gains no objective reality because the group causing the pain misrecognizes it. The system of inequality described here is perpetuated and supported through the invisibility of the reality of pain—specifically, the pain of racism. This case study will detail some techniques Black Lives Matter and its allies utilize as they struggle against this crippling invisibility and against the naturalization of violence against black and brown people. This struggle occurs at the level of political performance. Through carefully orchestrated and emotionally charged analogies, these racialized others seek verification of their pain. Scarry has termed this process *analogical verification* (Scarry 1985, 14). This is a process whereby agents reestablish the lost connections between pain and belief by taking the felt attributes of their pain and lifting them into the visible world, thereby making the sentient fact of a person's suffering knowable to other persons once again.

I will present a series of ethnographic vignettes in order to illustrate ways radically subjective experiences of pain become visible and objective. Put differently, I will show how performance enables symbolic connections of self and other to be pragmatically renegotiated. It is in this way that communal pain—how it is experienced, how it diminishes agency—is being communicated in cities afflicted by state sponsored violence.

The Parade Park Protest

Effectively communicating a political message first requires the public forum or space in which to do it. But in the highly regulated and policed areas that post-industrial cities have become, the use and appropriation of public space is a struggle in itself (Mitchell 2003, 12). So if democratic spaces do not exist, then they have to be created or appropriated. Part of this may mean using traditional means of political activism such as rallies, marches, sit-ins, or, as this section depicts, acts of direct civil disobedience. I will begin with an archetypal activist demonstration, because it underscores the performative, ritualistic, and bodily components of activism, as well as the conflict inherent as actors struggle over the exercise of symbolic power and for legitimation within certain fields.

Parade Park is located about a block away from Interstate I-70. Although

it was not known by most of the protestors, including myself, at the outset of this demonstration organized by One Struggle on a frigid December evening, they intended to block the flow of traffic on the highway for at least fifteen minutes. This was done to protest the recent non-indictment of Daniel Pantaleo, the NYPD officer who killed Eric Garner, a 43-year old black man, by putting him in an illegal chokehold. I was at the very front of the march, holding a banner along with three other people. After marching a short distance, people quickly realized we were headed for the highway off ramp, and many hastily fell to the flank or rear of the march. As we approached, a lone police sergeant stood on the ramp. As we closed the distance, he approached me specifically. He warned me repeatedly by saying “You know this traffic is not going to stop for you, right?! You know that don’t you?!” At no point was a formal dispersal order issued to the protestors, so I ignored his warnings and attempted to simply walk around him and move forward. It was at that point that he grabbed my arm, twisted it behind my back and informed me that I was under arrest. I was not told what I was being arrested for. As he walked me back down the ramp, chaos ensued. Police attempted to drive their cars through the crowd, but people blocked them with their bodies. I was the first to be detained, but more soon followed. The sight of us being apprehended inflamed the other protestors, and their chants grew louder and louder, alternating between “Shame on you! Shame on you!” and “Who do you protect?! Who do you serve?!”

About halfway back down the ramp, the officer loosened his grip on my arm, turned me around and said, “Alright man, are you done now? Did you make your point?” His tone implied that he thought this whole demonstration was trivial. I said “No sir, if you let me go I’m walking straight back up there.” I was then handcuffed, making my arrest final. In hindsight, I realized the officer literally offered me a Get-Out-of-Jail-Free card. I suspect my identity as a white male allowed me that privilege, but I cannot be certain. In any case, he sat me down in the grass on the opposite side of the ramp from the crowd and a second arrestee soon joined me. The other protestors grew incensed and surged toward us with a new chant—“Let them go! Let them go!” They pointed fingers and hurled insults at the police as they inched forward. As the prisoner wagon arrived, the officers hastily shoved us inside. I could see that the police were now grabbing people out of the crowd; some of them were being pinned down and piled on by multiple officers as they were handcuffed. The younger officer who escorted me into the wagon said something to the effect of, “Hey, man, we got no problem with you guys protesting and speaking your minds, we understand that. But you can’t block the highway. We just can’t let you do that, because it’s putting other people in danger.”

After my arrest I was charged with “Failure to Comply with a Police Order” and “Blocking the Free Flow of Traffic,” both were mere traffic ordinance violations. My bail was set at \$600. I sat ziptied to a bench alongside the six other arrestees. It took them over two hours to process us and complete our respective paperwork once we arrived downtown. I had ample time to witness otherwise

invisible features of the policing culture around me. The attitudes of the officers ranged from insensitive and crass to indifferent, and in one case even compassionate. One older heavy-set officer walked by, sneered at us, and announced, “Yelling and screaming in the streets never changed anything.” Another officer made what I thought to be a particularly disgusting comment about Victor White, a 22-year-old unarmed black man from Louisiana. White allegedly committed suicide in the back of a squad car while in custody by shooting himself in the chest, even though his hands were cuffed behind his back (Capehard 2014). The officer said to his partner, “Hey did you hear about that guy who got arrested and killed himself in the back of the squad car? What a fucking coward.”

After a long period of silence, one of the officers, a white male in his mid to late thirties whose name I later learned was James Cartwright, turned to us and said “So I wanna know, and I’m not speaking as a police officer right now, but just as a human being, why are you all protesting out there? What do you think you’re accomplishing?” Some of the other arrestees engaged him mockingly. They cited the killings of Michael Brown, Rekia Boyd, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice. Cartwright said, “Okay well let’s talk through some of those incidents and I’ll tell you why they happened.” I remained stoic and silent for most of their conversation, but it eventually got so petty that I could not help but intervene. “You just don’t *get it* though!” I blurted out, “This isn’t about you and me or us and them, it’s way bigger than that! It’s way bigger than all of us. This is about mass incarceration, the prison-industrial complex and systemic racism. This isn’t about what’s happening between you and me right now. We are all just caught up in it.” Several of the officers fell silent after my short tirade, but Cartwright, who originally started the volatile conversation, approached me and sat down on the same bench I was on. “Okay, you seem like a pretty smart guy, and you’re willing to listen to me. I’ll talk to you.”

The ensuing conversation was representative of the extreme ideological and moral rift between the police and people of color. He presented his day-to-day life as a police officer, detailing some of the difficulties he faces in his profession. He spoke first of his frustrations with the bureaucracy within the department. There was so much “red-tape” he had to navigate and “hoops he has to jump through.” He went on at length about how underfunded KCPD is, and that “all [the] squad cars have over 100,000 miles on them.” He expressed disapproval of then Missouri Governor Jay Nixon and how he had handled the uprising in Ferguson, but he said, “That’s out of our control.” What was most revealing though were his thoughts on Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old African-American boy from Cleveland who was shot and killed by police for brandishing a BB gun. Somehow, Cartwright was able to rationalize the actions of Timothy Loehmann, the Cleveland police officer who shot Rice. He said that since the BB gun had no orange safety tip on it, there was no way of telling whether or not it was real, thus Loehmann acted within reason and the shooting was justified. He rejected any notions of implicit racial bias affecting the killing.

He also tried to humanize the police involved in such incidents, as well

as himself. “Do you think that guy feels *good* about killing a kid? No, of course not. His life is ruined.” He then asked me “have you ever been pinned down under a two hundred fifty pound man who is trying to beat your face in? Well I have, and I feared for my life. That’s the type of thing we have to deal with, and I have a family at home.” He described an incident during which he apprehended a man who was committing armed robbery, and the man filed an excessive force charge against him. He said the charge was a black mark on his record that “hung over his head for five years.” He was trying to use these experiences to illustrate his own structural constraints, the difficulty of his job and the constant scrutiny he faces from his superiors and the public. He also gave some interesting commentary about the requirements for being a police officer in Kansas City: “all you need is your GED and to pass training, and then you get at least 30k a year. So yeah, of course you’re gonna get some bad cops.”

I interpret Officer Cartwright as actively discrediting the black experience in America. By insisting that race has no influence every time a black or brown person is unreasonably searched, pulled over in traffic, beaten, brutalized or killed by the police, the very reality of a human’s day to day existence is downplayed or denied. This is precisely what Scarry means by the creation of distinct and separate realities caused by the infliction and reception of pain, in which one of those realities is more valid than the other. The inflictor diminishes the agency of the other, and then constructs the meaning of the other’s pain as if it is real only in the subjective sense. The inflictor refuses to acknowledge that racism is a form or cause of pain, which is then ascribed to some other origin.

Despite evidence put forth to validate the connection between structural violence and racism, it is continually misrecognized. It is as if people of color, the ones who are experiencing the pain as such, do not get to decide if that pain is legitimate—if it is tied to real transgression on their part, or to something much more arbitrary. This is just one manifestation of the political consequences of pain’s inexpressibility. Cartwright was seemingly the most compassionate officer I encountered, but even he ultimately refused to acknowledge the unique pain of the black experience or how he may somehow have been complicit in causing that pain.

This interaction with policing culture and the posturing of officer Cartwright is an excellent example of the interplay between habitus and field. As Wacquant states, habitus “is the result of the internalization of external structures, [and] reacts to the solicitations of the field in a roughly coherent and systematic manner” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 18). In this case, Cartwright internalizes and embodies the historically constituted and institutionally grounded practices of modern policing. Of course, habitus is socially variable to an extent, and, as this scenario depicts, Cartwright was considerably more receptive to the questioning of the police’s legitimacy from other activists and me (i.e. the solicitations of the field) than his peers were. But still, his disposition is ultimately limited by the structural constraints that generally put him fundamentally at odds with grassroots movements, and especially Black Lives Matter, as they work to divest the police of

their symbolic power, and therefore legitimacy, by attacking the existing hierarchy of positions within the field. Conversely, the activists in this scenario, myself included, also embody certain dispositions through their habitus, causing them to repudiate the authority of the police and put them in conflict with the status quo within the field. The impact of race, class, and gender cannot be overstated in this respect, as the experiences and socialization processes that constitute the habitus of oppressed people are often downplayed or ignored by policing culture. We can see, then, how this dialectic of habitus and field complements and bolsters Scarry's notion of separate realities caused by different relationships to pain. The roles of the inflictor and recipient of pain correspond to the dominant and subordinate roles within this field of struggle. Police exist in a socially constructed reality in which notions of racism and implicit bias are rejected, and thus they often reject the very realities of those they are sworn to protect and serve.

A Night in Jail: Notes on the Violence of Incarceration

Prison is dehumanizing, and especially so to people of color. Over 60% of the people in prison are now racial and ethnic minorities. For young black males, one in every nine is incarcerated, compared to less than 2% of young white men (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). Black and brown people are both disproportionately imprisoned and are often subject to worse conditions within the penal system. This vignette differs in that it is not an activist demonstration but an insight into incarceration, bodily thresholds, and how symbolic violence naturalizes racism within the prison-industrial complex. My own experience offers a tiny glimpse of what others endure at an ongoing level.

I was forced to remove my shoelaces, jacket, and socks (apparently white socks are allowed but black socks are prohibited). I was allowed to write down three numbers from my cell phone, because I "behaved properly" during processing. I had my picture taken from several different angles and was fingerprinted. Many of the people operating the holding facilities were police cadets in training, and one was kind enough to offer me water and a sandwich before I was sent to the cell; it was bologna and cheese on white bread, but beggars cannot be choosers. As all this was happening, one of the other arrestees, who identified as transgender, was being verbally harassed by the staff. This person identified as a woman who was transitioning into being a man, but wanted to be placed in the women's holding cell and not the men's. The police staff were dumbfounded and seemed to have no established protocol for such a situation. Some of them began to act abrasively, asking questions like: "What were you born as?" and "What's between your legs? Do you have a penis or a vagina?" I was escorted to the men's holding cell as this was going on.

The cell was damp and cold. There was a cooler of water and paper cups on top of a rusted iron table, a small television encased in Plexiglas, and a filthy toilet in the corner behind a low wall. The windows were barred, so you could barely see outside. There were three payphones anchored to a wall, one of which

had a weathered piece of paper on top of it with a list of local bail bondsmen. I spent hours trying to call the three numbers I had written down, but since I was making a collect call, my friends on the outside, having no idea I had been arrested, thought it was a telemarketer and did not answer. Before speaking to me they were required to provide a credit card number to pay for the call. This makes it extremely difficult to contact anyone outside the jail, especially if they have no knowledge of your arrest. After giving up on making contact with my friends, I tried calling bail bondsmen. None answered. I became more frustrated and anxious. It was Saturday, and that meant if I did not get bailed out I would wait in a cell until Monday to get my case heard in front of a judge.

As the night slowly crept onward, more and more men were brought to the cell. My personal space was relatively large when I first got in around 6:00pm, but by midnight or so I could not help but feel like I was a caged animal. My physical world, already limited to one room and its contents, continued to shrink as more bodies were crammed into the cell. Scarry helps us understand how material reality, such as a room, can be transformed into an instrument of pain. In normal contexts, a room is the simplest form of shelter; it “expresses the most benign potential of human life. It is, on the one hand, an enlargement of the body: it keeps warm and safe the individual it houses in the same way the body encloses and protects the individual within” (Scarry 1985, 38). But in the context of jail or prison, the room turns the body inside out. It deprives it of warmth and safety. It exposes it and makes it vulnerable. The concrete walls and bare floors offered nowhere to lie down and nothing to lean upon with any comfort. The windows only offered a sliver of the outside world, severing connection with the rest of civilization. The disgusting toilet made me reluctant to relieve myself. Whereas rooms usually respond to the needs of the human body by offering many places to sit, lie down, sleep, excrete waste, and eat, the jail or prison cell intentionally deprives the body of these things. The cell—cold, hard, cramped, unsanitary, putrid—is designed to expand rather than diminish pain. “The room, both in its structure and its content, is converted into a weapon, deconverted, undone. Made to participate in the annihilation of the prisoners” (Scarry 1985, 41).

Since it was almost impossible to sleep or find a comfortable position to sit, I talked with some of the other men in the cell to occupy my time. Most of them were African-American and had been picked up on petty warrants for things like driving without a license or nonviolent drug charges. This is now of course typical of American criminal justice. The “war on drugs” of the Nixon era, the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s, and the increasingly punitive policing tactics focused on meeting arrest quotas and generating revenue for cities lead to an extremely high number of citations and warrants issued. And, of course, those who are unable to pay the associated fines get funneled into this ever-growing prison population, the majority of whom are poor people of color. Municipal legislation such as “Broken Windows” policies and the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act have contributed billions of dollars in federal funding to police departments and drug enforcement agencies, which have only

exacerbated these issues (Greenberg 2014). Sociologist Alice Goffman's recent ethnography, *On the Run*, and legal scholar Michelle Alexander's seminal work, *The New Jim Crow*, expertly detail and analyze the rise of the carceral state, new tactics of policing and state surveillance, and the devastating impact it has had on black and brown communities. These issues plagued my mind as I dozed in and out of a fitful sleep on the cold cell floor. I was eventually bailed out by One Struggle around 1:00 or 2:00 am; they had a fund set up for those who willingly put themselves in jeopardy participating in acts of civil disobedience.

There are a variety of symbolic systems based on race that allow the criminal justice system and prison-industrial complex to wield the amount of power necessary to incarcerate people of color disproportionately with little protest from the public. These systems, some of which I will point to in the conclusion section, operate from a tacit belief that black and brown people are naturally more prone to criminal behavior, poverty, violence, and deviance than others. The injustices and human rights violations that pervade American criminal justice are shrouded in these fabrications, and the fundamentally interested character of these social practices is misrecognized as disinterested or natural. It is this misrecognition, elicited from both the dominators and the dominated, which "legitimizes these practices and thereby contributes to the reproduction of the social order in which they are embedded" (Swartz 1997, 90).

Ritual Resurrection: Martin Luther King Day and the Mock Funeral

Martin Luther King Day offered the perfect opportunity to plan social justice events and demonstrations. One Struggle KC intended to take full advantage of it, and I helped organize local activities for the national holiday. We heavily advertised for a "Reclaim MLK" weekend based on the idea of promoting the revolutionary and radical side of MLK, as opposed to the whitewashed, sanitized version of his legacy that is often propagated. Our events included community workshops on "acknowledging racial trauma and stress," a dance and yoga session, and several group discussions. There was also a showing of Dr. King's "Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam" speech, in which he spoke out against capitalism and called for a broader redistribution of wealth in America. One Struggle highlighted this as the more accurate voice of King and called attention to the less popularized periods of his career, specifically when he organized the Poor People's campaign for economic justice in 1968 shortly before his assassination. But all these efforts were only supplementary activities to the focal point of the Reclaim MLK agenda—a mock funeral for victims of police violence.

The funeral was to be a peaceful demonstration during MLK Day. We asked everyone to wear black in solidarity. On the day of the demonstration, we gathered in a grassy lot outside a prominent local Baptist church. After a number of people arrived, I heard galloping in the distance and turned around to see a contingent of the KCPD mounted police arrive on the far end of the field. They did not approach; they just lined up facing us and began to watch. The heavy

police presence seemed excessive for an event we had repeatedly advertised as a peaceful march with no planned acts of civil disobedience. It also seems ironic, given the dominant, ritual symbol of MLK as a legendary figure of civility and non-violence. We knew the appearance of the mounted police was only a frequently employed intimidation tactic and assured everyone that they were just trying to scare us off.

The most striking centerpiece of the demonstration was a nearly life-sized wooden coffin covered in graffiti and paintings. It was made by a black man named James, an artist and member of One Struggle, along with some of his friends in the Kansas City arts community. It was a pastiche of political and racial images; it had a backwards American flag flanked by cherubs, the word “AmeriKKKa” scrawled across it, and a police officer armed with a shotgun with a Ku Klux Klan hood on. Near the bottom of the coffin and running along its side was a tree with a black body hanging from a noose, alongside the phrase “strange fruit,” referring to Billie Holiday’s famous anti-lynching song. The upper panel of the coffin, where the body’s head would lie, was open, and painted on the wood inside was the image of a black man’s face with the words “Who next?” It was a powerful, bold, and emotionally evocative artifact. The coffin was large and cumbersome, so I offered to be one of the pallbearers when the funeral procession began.

We marched for nearly a mile, from the church down Linwood Boulevard, to the front of the Kansas City Police Department’s central patrol division building. We did not chant as we marched; it was a silent procession, with the exception of a speaker placed on top of the coffin that blared out Dr. King’s “Don’t Sleep Through the Revolution” speech. When we arrived at the police station, we ascended the steps to the front entrance. The building had a glass façade, and as we approached, several police officers and staff came to see what was happening. The other pallbearers and I carried the coffin right up to the glass and placed it standing upright so they could closely examine its inflammatory imagery. Some of them looked confused and shocked, some had completely blank expressions, and a few seemed genuinely angry. The sheer audacity of what we were doing made me slightly nervous. We just brought a coffin that essentially portrays the police as a racist hate-group akin to the KKK to the front door of a police station. I looked at James, who had one hand placed on the coffin as if to claim ownership of his art. He unflinchingly met the gaze of the spectators on the other side of the glass. His brazen demeanor alongside that morbidly mesmerizing coffin almost seemed to represent a moral challenge or indictment against the police and everyone else inside the station, as if he was forcing them to grapple with the idea that somehow they might be complicit in the forms of racism and violence perpetuated by police across the country. After the sight of the coffin had sufficiently antagonized the onlookers, we sat it down horizontally on the ground as our procession gathered in a large circle. We then began the service.

After some comments were made about the purpose of this action and the brief history of ISKC as an organization, we started to read the names and biographies of the victims. Among them were Kansas City locals such as 24-year-

old Ryan Stokes, but also the nationally recognized names of Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, John Crawford, and Rekia Boyd. As each name was read, a designated person holding that victim's picture would step forward from the crowd, walk up to the coffin, and place the picture inside. Everyone stayed largely silent and solemn; the atmosphere did feel eerily like a funeral service. After all the names were read and the victims were "buried," everyone in the crowd holding a red rose came up and placed it on top of the coffin. Several people cried during this process. A protestor in the crowd held a sign that read, "Bullets are the nooses of the 21st century;" I thought about those words for a while, and I reflected on the dramatization we were performing. The scene painted on the coffin conflated the police with the KKK and the lynching of black people. I originally thought it was just a clever depiction with great shock-value, but after listening to the eulogies of dozens of unarmed black people who had been killed by police with no repercussions, it seemed much less hyperbolic.

Along with medicine, literature, Amnesty International publications, and certain courtroom litigations, Scarry includes art as a medium by which pain enters into public discourse and thus memory. For those whose voices have been silenced by the language-defying nature of pain and the symbolic violence of race, art can in some occasions provide the symbolic referential content needed to express and externalize suffering (Scarry 1985, 10). However, it is crucial to understand that the coffin alone, while evocative, does not do the work of analogical verification. Without the actions of agents, it would merely be an object of semiotic significance. The coffin, already a symbol of death and connotative of the bodily pain usually leading to death, was adorned with lurid depictions of the painful acts and hateful beliefs that cause the suffering of black people. It is an object that *represents* the totality of dead bodies caused by police violence, and then literally poses the question, "Who will be the next victim?" But by itself it is just that—a representation—an object of descriptive function rather than a vehicle of social change. It is only with the accompanying funerary ritual that the pain of these individuals and their families is shifted to a collective suffering and social malady. It takes on significance, because it helps agents alter power structures. This approach to *art as a system of action*, pioneered by Alfred Gell, expands on Scarry's notion of art as a medium for communicating pain by emphasizing the "practical mediatory role of art objects in social processes, [rather than] the interpretation of objects 'as if' they were texts" (Gell 1998, 6). Thus, through the performances of agents, a casket becomes more than a piece of art encoded with symbolic meaning; it becomes an uncompromising display of what many activists view as a modern day form of lynching. Black bodies—the strange fruit—may no longer swing in the southern breeze, but they do stain American city streets with their blood and waste away in overcrowded prisons.

An Unnatural Reenactment: The August 9th Day of Action

Michael Brown was killed on August 9th, 2014. This is the day that his bullet-ridden body was left on the pavement, under the hot sun, for over four hours, in front of his community. One year later, Black Lives Matter staged a national day of action to memorialize Brown. Hundreds of cities across the country planned demonstrations, including Kansas City. In the sweltering August heat, we planned to shut down a busy intersection in an affluent suburb.

We gathered just outside Ward Parkway mall, a popular shopping center. After brief opening comments and eulogies, we marched a few blocks around the mall to an intersection on State Line Road, the border between Kansas and Missouri. At this point we split the protest into two groups, and one continued to march up the Missouri side, while the other marched on the Kansas side; this was to symbolize and draw attention to the victims of police violence in the neighboring state of Kansas. Then, at a carefully selected intersection, we stopped. Selected people hurriedly wrapped caution tape around the streetlights, running it across the street and blocking the flow of traffic. Once the caution tape was set up, we began our demonstration. The goal was to suspend the flow of traffic and engage in a type of political theater in the middle of the intersection. Black protestors among us represented victims of police violence by wearing simple white t-shirts with the names of the victims screen printed on them. A couple of other protestors dressed all in blue represented police officers. I was role-playing as one of the police; we were equipped with plastic badges, handcuffs, whistles, and water guns that were filled with a mixture of ketchup and water that resembled the color and viscosity of blood. While the rest of the protestors formed a crowd around the outskirts of the intersection, we reenacted several high profile police killings. The victims held their hands up above their heads to indicate that they were unarmed, and then the other police officer and I “shot” them. I ran into the intersection and yelled, “Freeze!” as I drew my gun, and pumped it several times toward my targets, drenching them in fake blood.

The “victims” fell to the ground and lay there as if they were slowly dying, and some took out water balloons filled with the fake blood and broke it over themselves to make the scene appear more gruesome. I stood over their bodies shouting out, “They had a gun! I swear they had a gun on them! I feared for my safety!” I pointed my plastic weapon down at them as if they were still a threat. The other protestor role-playing as a cop handcuffed one of the victims as they lay dying. Those of us role-playing as police also intentionally acted as if we were in fact the victims being preyed upon, and who justifiably acted in self-defense because we feared for our safety. The whole chaotic performance was a collage of the circumstances surrounding these various killings—the excessive force, quick trigger fingers, multiple shots fired, and the warped rationalizations from the police. It did not go exactly as planned, but we delivered the intended message. We were able to carry on our demonstration for maybe ten minutes before the mounted police stormed onto the scene, quickly followed by a dozen

squad cars. They tore down the caution tape and slowly began to surround us, but they did not seem like they were certain of whom they should arrest. By sheer luck I was able to evade custody, but four others were put in handcuffs and hauled away in a wagon. The purpose of this highly choreographed political theater was to expose not only the excessive brutality of the killings, but also the utter arbitrariness of them. Such killings have become commonplace in America, and all too often they are misrecognized. When a police officer kills a black person in the street it is more or less considered a natural occurrence. This demonstration is a direct challenge to this phenomenon, and to the narratives and beliefs espoused by the police. By exposing this arbitrariness, it denaturalizes the phenomenon and destroys the myths that allow for its misrecognition as legitimate social practice.

Out of all the protests and acts of civil disobedience I have participated in, even when I was on the verge of being teargassed or beaten by the riot squads in Ferguson, I was never more scared than I was in the middle of that intersection impersonating a police officer. In that instant, I was not just one dissenter among thousands—I did not have the anonymity and safety of numbers. The few moments we spent in that intersection felt like hours, and I was torn between a sense of duty to play my role and an impulsive fear of the police that I repeatedly had to stifle. I felt exposed. I kept thinking of Tamir Rice and how he was killed for playing with a BB gun that the police mistook for a real weapon. Now here I was brandishing this water pistol, doing my best trigger-happy cop parody, yet I would walk away unscathed. There was some sort of sick irony in it that made me uncomfortable. I did legitimately fear for my life that day. I did not think it was out of the realm of possibility that the police could seriously injure or kill me. Those thoughts were in the back of my mind the entire performance. I wondered to myself, “Is this what it feels like to be black in this country? Do people of color carry this fear with them every day of their lives?” It was another one of those surreal moments where, very briefly, I gained partial insight into the black experience; the lines between my own identity and that of the marked black identity blurred. The difference is that my fear of the police in this scenario, no matter how intense it might have been, was fleeting. It originated only because I willingly put myself in a potentially dangerous confrontation with law enforcement, and after that confrontation was over, the fear dissipated and I retreated into the safety of my identity as a white male. In other words, I engineered this temporary fear, and it was not a permanent fixture that accompanies my racial identity in the context of American society, whereas for black and brown people, fear of police violence can be a fundamental part of their identity and their daily existence.

Conclusions

Whereas Bourdieu’s theories help us analyze systems of domination and how they reproduce, he says comparatively little about how progressive social change occurs. By using Scarry’s concept of analogical verification, we can inject a model of social change into Bourdieu’s overall framework of habitus and field.

Through analogy and performance, actors or agents may provide the symbolic referential content needed to express their pain accurately, thus reestablishing the lost connections between pain and belief—between the objects that inflict pain and the sentient subjects who incur it. By making the radically subjective experience of pain verifiable at the social level, the misrecognition of domination may cease.

We know that symbolic violence may accompany or precede physical violence, but Bourdieu highlights a “general shift from physical coercion to softer forms of social control [that] nonetheless foster the reproduction and legitimation of inegalitarian social relations” (Swartz 1997, 285). This is especially true in respect to race relations in the United States, as white supremacy and racism have adapted from their previously overt manifestations to more covert and insidious ones. This is what Michelle Alexander broadly refers to as the evolution of racism, meaning the methods of “racialized social control that have managed to morph, evolve, and adapt to changes in the political, social, and legal context over time” (Alexander 2012, 15). Many struggle to understand this nefarious evolution, especially those who are exempt from racial violence. Black Lives Matter has broad notions of racism that encompass many of the symbolic systems that allow for its misrecognition, which include respectability politics, whitewashed educational curricula, Eurocentric views of history, distorted media framing, the hegemony of the police, and implicitly racist laws, among other things. However, the incisive analysis offered by BLM is often undermined by white America, the corporate media, and from both conservative and liberal ideologies. No doubt this is symptomatic of a monopoly on symbolic power. While popular notions of colorblindness or racial indifference may originate from a place of kindness, they can actually be emotionally negligent of people of color whose lives and aspirations are constantly attacked and curtailed, both implicitly and explicitly, by racism. Such negligence contributes to the erasure of black experiences. For “racial caste systems do not require racial hostility or overt bigotry to thrive. They need only racial indifference” (Alexander 2012, 14).

Someone’s pain cannot be externalized and objectified if others refuse to acknowledge its existence or even its possibility. Pain’s reality, although incontestable to the sufferer, must be made equally incontestable to those outside the sufferer; otherwise, analogical verification will be obstructed, and inequalities will be reproduced (Scarry 1985, 52). If we assume that the act of verbally or performatively expressing pain is a necessary prelude to the collective task of diminishing pain, then Black Lives Matter’s goal is to become a precise reflection of material reality, and in doing so, achieve lasting social change.

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