

Black Protest on the Streets: Visual Activism and the Aesthetic Politics of Black Lives Matter¹

Nicole Schneider

ABSTRACT: In this article I am reading the visual protest practices of the Black Lives Matter movement as aesthetic and artistic actions which redistribute the sensible, presenting the legacy of slavery and the consciousness of being in the wake. By looking at representations of the movement in press photographs, I am trying to establish the movement's iconography of protest and the visual strategies employed therein.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetics; Black Lives Matter; Visual Activism; Distribution of the Sensible; Being Human as Praxis; Visual Culture Studies

Introduction: The Superhero Photograph and the Visual as Activism

In his July 2016 *New York Times Magazine* article “The Superhero Photographs of the Black Lives Matter Movement,” Teju Cole references photographs that have become famous, if not iconic, through their online usage in social media and alternative journalistic outlets. These images, he writes—as he compares them to stills from superhero comics—, form an alternative archive, placing the black individual portrayed in a position of agency and greatness not normally depicted in mainstream media. “The ‘superhero’ photographs of protesters, with their classic form and triumphal tone,” Cole writes, “are engaged in a labor of redress. They bring a counterweight to the archive. Against death and helplessness, they project power and agency” (Cole). It is specifically the popular culture figure of the superhero that is significant for this presentation of agency and protest. These heroes in their respective stories act upon the communal demand to restore order to a fictional city, country, or world reigned by moral demise. Alternatively, they protect the community from

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an overpowering system of corruption and misrepresentation. The heroic individual confronts the threats of these systems, thus sending out both an image and a message of (moral) legitimacy and power.

I see the photographs Cole mentions as part of a photographic counter-archive that has taken on a central role in today's protests for black lives in the United States. Portraying the demands of the Black Lives Matter movement, this archive consists to a large extent of images of scenes of protest on the streets. This photographic counter-archive has been embraced, as Cole's article shows, as a decisive tool and intricate part of the movement's work in the attempt to regain control over black representation in the mediated public sphere. While these images were created by professional photographers on behalf of their respective agencies and established newspapers and thus also need to be considered in terms of the commodification and continuation of existing hierarchies, their imagery works from within the media system and is appropriated by activists and supporters of the movement online. Thereby, it functions as a segment of Allan Sekula's "shadow archive," which visually orders and restructures the hierarchies within a social terrain influenced by various kinds of photographic images (10). As the photographs connected to the Black Lives Matter movement position bodies within these photographically created social structures, they propose an alternative presentation of black lives that stands in contrast to stereotypical images of blackness presented for instance in popular culture.

Like the snapshots of black everyday life, which challenge "both white perceptions of blackness and that realm of black-produced image-making that reflected internalized racism," (50) as bell hooks points out, these images form an alternative archive of what she calls the 'black oppositional aesthetic' that ruptures our experience of the visual (hooks, "In Our Glory" 50). As she further asserts, the "history of black liberation movements in the United States could be characterized as a struggle over images as much as it has been a struggle for rights, for equal access" (46). The Black Lives Matter movement is as much about representations of black lives as it is about the demand for a radical reconfiguration of the U.S. social and juridical systems. It is as much about correcting the violent and threatening images of the victims of police brutality utilized to justify the violence used against them, as it is about changing the policing system or living conditions of black people.

These forms of representation of black lives function thereby as what Patricia Hill Collins terms “controlling images” (69). These images help to establish and perpetuate racial violence and oppression by naturalizing them through e.g. stereotypical depictions and narrations (73). Therefore, what seems to be a binary opposition between the fight over images and that over social and economic status and rights, is in fact, intricately connected.

As Cole goes on with his article, he lists three images of the Black Lives Matter protests as what he defines to be icons of the movement: Ieshia Evans standing—almost levitating—nymph-like while using her patience like a power shield to confront police officers in “storm-trooper get-up” in Baton Rouge (Cole); Edward Crawford, the man in the T-shirt adorned with the American Flag in Ferguson, who hauls a tear gas canister back at the police as if he were handling fire or launching Thor’s hammer; and Bree Newsome, like Spider-Man, climbing a flag-pole seemingly without any effort, in front of the South Carolina State House to remove a Confederate Flag and defy the legacy it symbolizes.²

There are, I think, other photographs that are strangely arresting and significant for the Black Lives Matter movement. In an image by Stephen Lam, a woman leans on crutches, her back is turned toward the camera and a long empty street lies in front of her. On her backpack rests a handwritten sign that reads “I CAN’T BREATHE”; the last words of Eric Garner who died in a police chokehold in New York City in July 2014. In another picture, taken by Elizabeth Shafiroff during similar protests in New York, the pleading statement is turned into an accusatory question: The demand “CAN U BREATHE?” is written on a mask for breathing protection. The protester seems to ask whether society is at ease with what she defines as the suffocating state of police violence and racism in contemporary U.S. society.

For Cole, these images show “the continued relevance of Black Lives Matter” and the “existence of many unacknowledged everyday black heroes.” Additionally, I would say, these photographs show that today’s protests for black lives use the expressiveness of the visual as they employ visual protest strategies, such as presenting political claims as visual statements, protests as performances, and recurrent phrases and demands as images.

² These Images were respectively taken by:
Jonathan Bachman (Reuters), Robert Cohen (AP), and Adam Anderson (Reuters)

Therefore, I agree with Cole when he states that “[t]he stage of the street, the drama of protest, the theatrical image caught on the fly” become methods to seize back the visual initiative. He, too, indirectly recognizes that the images he calls “superhero photographs” are results of the movement’s visual activism. The significance of this activism lies decidedly not in a distinction between ‘authentic’ (black) protest and artistic practices, dominated by white interests and understandings of art, but in a meaningful combination of the visuality of protests and a democratic aesthetic, read in terms of Rancière, that culminates in politically motivated visual tactics of protest.

These scenes fall within the field of visual activism, a form of (street) protest that is highly influenced by visual modes of communication and focuses on the transmission of meaning through visual means. The term ‘visual activism’ is borrowed from Zanele Muholi who “invent[ed] this phrase as a flexible, spacious rubric to describe her own practice, which documents and makes visible black lesbian communities in South Africa” (Bryan-Wilson et al 7). Describing the larger framework of conceptualized, political art, activism, and protest, the term is frequently applied to scenes in which social and political dissent is portrayed through visual and artistic tactics; that is, by visually pointing out hidden meanings, alternative understandings, or contradictions, and creating objects and performances. Contemporary international examples classified as visual activism are, e.g., the 15 minute protest of a Japanese power-plant worker, accusatorily pointing his finger at the plant’s CCTV (Bryan-Wilson et al 5)³ or “I heart NY” T-shirts, on which the heart as the emblem of the love for the place is replaced by a stop sign signifying racist police practices in the city (Gach 57).

In this article I am going to look at scenes of activism as they are presented in selected press photographs emerging from the protests, i.e. the photographic counter-archive of the Black Lives Matter movement. These images, created by professional photographers, exhibit a formal quality which is rendered towards mainstream media’s demands. They are used in various contexts, to respectively portray, support, or even discredit the protests and the movement. This article, however, will focus on the actions and tactics of visual activism presented therein. Taking a closer look at the protesters and the ways in which they use

³ For the video and more information see: enformable.com/2011/09/mysterious-pointing-tepco-worker-explains-actions-on-live-cam/

visual means to present their “call to action and a response to the virulent anti-Black racism” propagated by the Black Lives Matter movement (#blacklivesmatter), I will try to determine principles behind these actions and performances and establish a common set of visual statements, gestures, and signs along with their respective messages; a visual vocabulary that is used and perpetuated throughout the protests. To do so, I will start with some theoretical considerations regarding the contested terrain of black representation, its reconfigured definition of the term ‘aesthetics,’ and the field of visual activism. In the second part of this paper I will look more closely at the visual protest of the Black Lives Matter movement on the streets and its iconography of protest.

Theorizing Blackness: Wake Work, Aesthetics, and Visual Activism

The visual activism of the Black Lives Matter movement can directly be related to the notions of black lives’s ongoing connection to the nation’s history and its economic systems built out of the institution of slavery. This is a consciousness that Christina Sharpe calls ‘being in the wake’ in her book *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being*. She defines this condition, referring to Sylvia Wynter, as an alternative understanding of “being human” as a narrative and performative “praxis” (Wynter/McKittrick 23). This can be connected to Rancière’s understanding of aesthetics as the “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière 7). All three, the entanglement of the past with the present, the alternative concept of being human, and ideas of aesthetic (re)distribution, help to theorize blackness and set the frame for an analytical discussion of the aesthetic politics of the movement’s visual activism.

Drawing mainly on both Sylvia Wynter’s work on the praxis of being human and Dionne Brand’s configuration of diaspora, Sharpe conceptualizes black diasporic life as “being in the wake” (14). That is, the consciousness of being constantly and interminably entwined in the history and memory of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery—including the former status of being human property—as well as living within the structural legacy of the capitalist slave system (Sharpe 14; 19). Sharpe uses the term ‘wake’ as its meaning originally encompasses, e.g., the tradition of sitting with the recently deceased, the ripples on the water following behind a ship, as well as the recoil of a gun (8; 10-11). Additionally, wake also references the condition of being awake and waking up (21). According to Sharpe’s definition of the wake, black people are not included in the Western/Colonial definition of ‘human being,’

established and propagated by Western systems of knowledge and representation (14). Being in the wake, here, is being aware of “the ongoing problem of Black exclusion from social, political, and cultural belonging [, and the] abjection from the realm of the human” (14). But being in the wake also encompasses the revelation and deconstruction of, and resistance to these systems (14).

In her book, Sharpe sets out to “ask what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation, and how [...] literature, performance, and visual culture observe and mediate this un/survival” (14). She detects this artistic and aesthetic aspect of speaking of and through the wake, e.g., in the poems in *Zong!* by M. NourbeSe Philip, remediating the story of the slave ship by the same name (32), or in a press photograph by Joe Raedle (Getty) of a little girl who was injured in the Haitian earthquake in 2010. The girl in the photo from Haiti is lying on the ground and is clearly wounded. Yet, Sharpe writes, “[s]he is looking at or past the camera; her look reaches out to me. Affixed to her forehead is a piece of transparent tape with the word *Ship* written on it” (44). As Sharpe remarks, what is striking besides her clear stare into the camera is the message on the girl’s forehead: “how does one mark someone *for* a space—the ship—who is already marked *by* it?” (48). The phrase “being marked by the ship” here stands for life in the “afterlife of slavery” and during the “long emancipation” (Walcott), for bearing the burden of being continuously influenced by the legacy of the ships of the transatlantic slave trade.

Taking my cue from Sharpe’s analysis of the sign of the wake in Raedle’s photograph, I see a similar sign in an image of 10 year-old Jordan Puckett from Ferguson, which was taken by David Carson (St. Louis Post Dispatch) in the aftermath, or wake, of Michael Brown’s death in a police shooting in Ferguson, MO, in August 2014. The boy in the photograph is similarly marked by the condition of ‘blackness in the wake.’ While he is seemingly standing upright and appears to be healthy and confident, his forehead bears the acronym ‘R.I.P,’ as a protest sign against police violence. Despite the different contexts—the girl being marked for the ship in an attempt to rescue, and the boy proudly wearing the acronym as protest—Jordan, too, is marked with a sign that unites the *for* and *by* of the ‘ship’ in a system that anticipates

social death.⁴ The girl's miserable situation, by and large, is not only influenced by the natural catastrophe of the earthquake, but also by her blackness and her life within the legacy of slavery. In the light of Brown's death, the police violence he was facing, and the juridical system that did not hold the murderer accountable,⁵ the mark on the boy's head works similarly to show that his life in the United States, too, is affected by racial stereotypes, unproportionally high incarceration rates, and unequal chances for education.⁶ Additionally, which brings my reading closer to Sharpe's, the mark on his forehead depicts the underlying condition of "insistent Black exclusion, [and] ontological negation" (Sharpe 14) through which blackness is fundamentally kept in a state of social death. Jordan is marked *by* the 'ship,' as the phrase 'rest in peace' seems to describe his life within the system of anti-black racism; marked *for* it, not in terms of rescue, but as he is notably exposed to premature biological death through the social and ontological status of (his) blackness, which shows itself, e.g. in police brutality.

In the details of Jordan's photograph, however, another reading becomes possible that focuses on the prospect and hope for change, present in the scene. The boy's prevailing gaze confidently and relentlessly confronts that which can be seen in the reflections in his eyes: a line of people, including the photographer who enshrines this moment into a monument of black subjection. This reflection visually echoes other photographs from similar scenes of the Black Lives Matter protests, in which police officers stand in line to confront and enclose the protesters. The photograph, thus, portrays the consciousness of being in the wake confronting police violence and discrimination, and asks its viewers to recognize and reconfigure the state of social relations and the systems underlying racialized conflicts. It is a powerful photograph and protest action, whose message reaches beyond the connection with the past, as the boy's gaze shows the confidence of a movement that describes itself as

⁴ Originating in discussions of the Holocaust and Slavery, where it describes the process of enslavement (see e.g. *Slavery and Social Death* by Orlando Patterson), the term 'social death' is used here in reference to the dehumanization of black lives (#blacklivesmatter) and the social, political, and economic oppression that black people face in U.S. society.

⁵ Darren Wilson, the Ferguson, MO, police officer who fatally shot 18-year-old, unarmed Michael Brown on Aug. 9, 2014 was not indicted after a grand jury decision in Nov. 2014 (Cobb).

⁶ On mass incarceration of black people, its history and implications see Ta-Nehisi Coates' essay "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration" in the Oct. 2015 issue of *The Atlantic*.

“a response to the virulent anti-Black racism that permeates [U.S.] society,” while asking its supporters to “(re)build the Black liberation movement” (#blacklivesmatter).

Engaging in the question of how to give humanness a different future, Sylvia Wynter proposes to see ‘human’ not as a noun but as an adjective (Wynter/McKittrick 9; 23). Being is constantly redefined and renegotiated according to different “genre-specific” narrations of being human, told to make sense of the world and to situate oneself and one’s kin in a narration of humanness and normalcy (Wynter/McKittrick 55). Like Judith Butler’s definition of gender as a ‘fictive’ cultural norm that is *performatively* enacted and actively inscribed onto the body through constant repetition of gender specific behavior (Butler 45; 185; 124f), Wynter asks to drastically reconsider our understanding of being human, by removing it from the culturally constructed factual human qua birthright—naturalized through Western thought—and by seeing being human as a praxis that originates hybridly in both a biological and a storytelling or mythmaking being—*bios* and *mythoi* (Wynter/McKittrick 23; 33). What is normal or considered to be ‘human’ is therefore not given, but performatively enacted, governed by regulatory practices, and naturalized through constant narration (10).

We need to speak instead of our *genres of being human*. Once you redefine being human in hybrid *mythoi* and *bios* terms, and therefore in terms that draw attention to the relativity and original multiplicity of our *genres* of being human, all of a sudden what you begin to recognize is the central role that our discursive *formations*, aesthetic fields, and systems of knowledge must play in the performative enactment of all such genres of being hybridly human. (Wynter/McKittrick 31)

Therefore, there is no longer one truthful mode of being human or one accurate definition of normalcy and aesthetics: “Humans are, then, a biomutationally evolved, hybrid species—*storytellers who now storytellingly invent themselves as being purely biological*” (Wynter/McKittrick 11, emphasis in original). This new definition of humanness leaves room for various versions of being human and of existing in the world, and refuses to hierarchically position one above the other.

The genres of being human are reflected in the principles of the Black Lives Matter movement, as it affirms all black lives “along the gender spectrum” (#blacklivesmatter)—including transgendered, disabled, and undocumented lives. It places those lives in the center of attention which have been marginalized within black liberation movements so far (#blacklivesmatter). Thus, the organization states as one of their principles:

We are guided by the fact [that] all Black lives [matter], regardless of actual or perceived sexual identity, gender identity, gender expression, economic status, ability, disability, religious beliefs or disbeliefs, immigration status or location. (#blacklivesmatter)

As an organization that has been formed initially by the queer black women Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, it takes up relevant feminist issues, i.e. in fighting sexism, misogyny, and male-centeredness along with racism. In the protests of the movement, the hierarchies of factually being human are questioned and sought to be replaced with the coequal genres of being hybridly human as suggested by Sylvia Wynter.

As a movement that originated in a social media hashtag—#BlackLivesMatter—posted by Alicia Garza on facebook after the death of Trayvon Martin, who was fatally shot by a neighborhood watch volunteer in Sanford, FL, in 2012, the Black Lives Matter organization moved “the hashtag from social media to the streets” (Garza). Participants did so by visibly protesting on the streets and creating artworks and everyday monuments in public spaces. These protests and artworks raise awareness of the ongoing struggle for black lives, the state-sanctioned violence against black people (#blacklivesmatter), and the nation’s gridlock in the legacy of slavery—or to use Sharpe’s term, ‘the wake’. According to social justice activist Bryan Stevenson, slavery has corrupted U.S.-American society as a whole and the narrated naturalness of the ideology of the antebellum South and the Confederacy still permeates the nation’s racialized discourses. “[The] American South,” he states, “is littered with the iconography of the Confederacy and we romanticize that era in the mid-nineteenth century, which should be characterized by the horror of slavery” (Stevenson, transcription mine). The ideology of slavery is still present today in its romanticized narratives, made explicit by the monuments of the leaders of the Confederacy. The process of taking to the streets, which Garza references, then encompasses a reclaiming of the public sphere and the narrations circulated therein by presenting narratives that oppose these ideological burdens. Therefore, narration, storytelling, and image-making are complexly entwined in the political moment and the movement for change. Thus, the use of artistic practices is the attempt to establish an “affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression” (Garza), aesthetically incurring attention and creating new spaces for discussion and restorative justice.

The idea of aesthetics, as I am using it here, returns to the general concept of aesthetics as the ‘distribution of the sensible,’ as put forth by philosopher Jaques Rancière. Being basically a concept of inclusion and exclusion, this primary aesthetics focuses on the question of who is able to hear, feel, and see what in public discourse, and who is not. The sensible is distributed within a community according to what is important or common to its subjects (8). Thus, not everything is equally visible to a certain community, as the general function of aesthetics delineates spaces and times, the visible and the invisible, speech or noise (8). “The distribution of the sensible,” Rancière writes, “reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed” (8). This is echoed by Wynter’s idea of the genre- or culture-specific “*referent-we*” as the subject of a storytellingly constituted community (71). Here, again, community and humanity are discursively and performatively constructed in terms of aesthetics as the distribution of the sensible. “Politics[, then,] revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (Rancière 8). In this understanding, politics and aesthetics merge, as seeing or rather sensing—that is being aware of a certain element—, are central to the formation and (self-)definition of a given community and the possibilities to act upon, generate, and fulfill societal ideals.

Artistic practices in general, then, and I would also include those of the visual protest of the Black Lives Matter movement, use this realm of aesthetics to create attention for that which is invisible, unheard of, or figured impossible in a given community. This includes, but is not limited to, making the unseen visible, presenting different viewpoints, emphasizing minor elements, and shifting the focus of attention. In the case of the Black Lives Matter movement, this entails, e.g. placing the focus on the marginalized, advocating for the rights of e.g. queer black lives, or demanding a restorative justice process that works through and acknowledges the legacy of slavery as a problem of the entire nation (#blacklivesmatter). Connecting the concept of aesthetics to the realm of art, Rancière writes:

It is on the basis of [the] primary aesthetics that it is possible to raise the question of ‘aesthetic practices’ as I understand them, that is forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they ‘do’ or ‘make’ from the standpoint of what is common to the community. Artistic practices are ‘ways of doing and making’

that intervene in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility. (Rancière 8)

The concept of the aesthetic is highly connected to the ‘work’ a scene or sight does in visually presenting concepts and ideas, countering or establishing positions, and narrating the moment—or here, the movement. They intervene in public space, revealing both their own ways of functioning within these places and the structuring of the public sphere and its discourses. By visually breaking into the scenes perceived as ‘usual’ by large parts of U.S. society—as e.g. depictions of blackness in mainstream media that “cruelly mock and ridicule blackness” (hooks, *black looks* 6)—, the visual protest, functioning according to these aesthetic/artistic principles, presents hidden layers and structures. The image, for instance, which portrays Ieshia Evans as resembling an antique statue, is refusing to show her as a protester about to be arrested. Instead it presents robotlike policemen in “storm-trooper get-up” (Cole) that come to symbolize the power over and negative effect of, for instance, the U.S. criminal justice system on black lives.

Of course, the aesthetic appeal of an image is in several regards subjective and culturally influenced, e.g., on behalf of the photographer, a proposed audience, or the spectator. Additionally, the (mediated) contexts in which the image is presented can change the entire meaning of a photograph. This subjectivity should, however, in no way be seen as imposing an aesthetic hierarchy or aesthetic normalcy onto the scenes. That is, there is no collective or beautiful aesthetic form which renders a photograph or a scene more valuable than any other. Moreover, when I speak of aesthetics here, I do so in terms of various differential and concretely graspable aesthetic genres such as, e.g., the ‘superhero aesthetic’ Cole writes about or a ‘democratic aesthetic’ which Winfried Fluck describes as presenting concepts of participation and concepts of an idealized citizenship through visual means.

The visual actions of the Black Lives Matter movement that reveal the hidden structures and systems governing contemporary everyday lives and the constant and ongoing relation to the past, are connected to the conception of the primary aesthetic. What Sharpe calls ‘wake work,’ then, is to some extent also tangled up with these ideas of the aesthetic and can be found in the acts of visual protest and activism of the movement. Wake work is the analytic work that comes out of a critical awareness of living with the black exclusion brought upon by American and transatlantic history—that is, the consciousness of being in the wake

(Sharpe 18). It is a continuous reimagining of possible lives coming from a position of entanglement with the African American and Caribbean past, “a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives” (Sharpe 18). This entails, but is not limited to, breaking out of, and deconstructing the violent frames of knowledge and academic structures that exclude black being and thought. To do so, it uses artistic practices and aesthetic renderings of the encounter with a “past that is not past” (13; 14). That is, with the ongoing legacy of slavery and its hidden structures, which still govern today’s cultural and societal discourses, as e.g. in the broken windows policing strategy, seeing minor offenses, such as drinking in public, as leading to more serious crimes (Lipsitz 124). This strategy is predominantly used against black people and burdens them with a disproportionate liability of a criminal record.

The concept of the wake and wake work presents an understanding of the relation between troubling past and possible present that is similar to what Leigh Raiford calls “critical black memory,” i.e. the analytical confrontation with the African American past through photographs and other relics and remnants. As Raiford states, it is a confrontation that engages historical interpretation and political critique (“Photography” 113; *Imprisoned* 17), including the critical reprocessing of, e.g., photographs of the African American past to lay bare political aspects hidden in the images, objects, and lives of the people themselves. What in Raiford’s descriptions is done through conceptual art using photographs of a lynching⁷ is presented in various forms of black expressive culture in Sharpe’s analysis. By “depict[ing] aesthetically the impossibility of [reconciliatory] resolutions⁸ [and] representing the paradoxes of blackness within and after the legacies of slavery’s denial of Black humanity” (Sharpe 14), these works invite the spectator to reconsider, rethink, and actively engage with the past.

As a response to processes of image-making that dehumanize black lives, even in those instances when photographs are supposed to manifest ‘humanity,’ Sharpe positions the practices of black annotation and black redaction (115). Both—by adding or covering

⁷ E.g. the art projects *Erased Lynching* by Ken Gonzales-Day, or *Heirlooms and Accessories* by Kerry James Marshall.

⁸ That is, in terms of assimilation, inclusion, or civil or human rights (Sharpe 14).

information in an image or text—, shift the focus away from a direct reading of the scene towards “reading and seeing something in excess of what is caught in the frame” (117). Looking beyond the confirmation of a status and location of black lives within the dominant ideology (116), the redacted or annotated picture makes life visible by looking at details of the scene (123). This theory can be applied to a Reuters photograph of a man holding up a cardboard sign that reads the word ‘history’ during the protests on West Florissant Avenue in Ferguson in 2014. His sign, in light of the photograph’s context, annotates the present moment with several meanings that the word ‘history’ encompasses: e.g., the idea of history repeating itself in terms of a black person’s death at the hands of white police officers, or the need to protest to end discrimination as the Civil Rights Movement did, 60 years ago. Alternatively it refers to the legacy of slavery and the ongoing struggle with the past that elicits black dehumanization and caused Michael Brown’s death. Another annotation the sign makes is the declaration that this very moment, caught by the camera might well be a historical one that marks significant changes in U.S. American society and for its juridical system. The single word, the annotation on the sign, asks the viewer to look further into the scene and into the moment. It thus employs, to use Sharpe’s terms, “[r]edaction and annotation toward seeing and reading otherwise” (117). These are used here in the sense of the artistic practices Rancière conceptualizes, as they focus on those aspects in an image which are otherwise not seen, highlighting those otherwise easily overlooked.

What these actions and those mentioned above have in common is the way they marshal the realm of the visible “in the service of wider political efforts” (Bryan-Wilson et al 6). They apply the creativity of the activists to social movements and make the ills of today’s society visible while offering visual invitations in form of signs, actions, or community campaigns to join the larger conversation and the protests (Demos 89; Chatelain 6). Thus, in the visual activism of social and political movements, an aesthetic value is recalibrated to become creative political capital (Moten 104). In visual protest on the streets, then, hands are held up in surrender to signal dissent, bodies rest inertly on the ground, their outlines traced with chalk, activists hold flowers or wear hoodies, and handmade paper signs are actively set in contrast to electronic billboards. As Chantal Mouffe asserts, many artistic, and I also include aesthetic, practices in the public sphere are created to aim “at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony” (Mouffe); in this new context,

the visual protest shifts the focus on the marginalized, as well as on the topics and debates that are not considered for discussion by the general public. The visual practices present annotations through visual clues that ask the spectator to look further than that which can be seen directly on a respective image. These artistic practices are again a redistribution of the sensible, using different “ways of doing and making” to intervene into the common structures of living and knowing, and to distinguish between the visible and the invisible within these commons of American life (Rancière 8).

In general, visual protest is based on several assumptions, two of which are especially important to note in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement: Artistic practice aesthetically reclaims the public sphere, as a site of large-scale interests of the dominant elites (Castells 10; Mouffe) and of the exclusion of minority groups (Mitchell 379). People literally take to the streets and artistically occupy symbolic spaces, visualizing their claims and demands through gestures, signs, artworks, and disruptions. Additionally, the distance between the realm of art and that of life is reduced in order to render art politically meaningful (Fluck 34). To become politically effective, the aesthetic fields have to become part of the ordinary and of our everyday lives, so as to actively signify political issues and not be put off as mere art. For Nicholas Mirzoeff, “visual culture activism [involves] creating, performing, and disseminating memes in urban public space and across social media networks to involve, extend, and create a political subject” (279). In the case of #BlackLivesMatter, the aesthetics of visual activism in the public sphere enable a wider distribution and recognition of the movement’s demands, and help to cross the borders into the national discourse about citizenship, justice, and the recognition of the nation’s past. Especially so, as the resulting photographs, which I look at, were targeted at the audiences of mainstream journalism and thus present an aesthetics of the spectacular to stand their ground in the cultural and journalistic economy of images. The movement, however, is by no means homogenous in its actions, as “its organisation is decentralized, with many leaders” with common guiding principles, as Patrisse Cullors states in an interview with Christina Heatherton (38).

It’s an organizing that is rooted in healing justice and in principles of abolition. It’s an organizing that rejects respectability politics and reinforces the fight for all Black lives.

It's an organizing that is deeply rooted in what our long-term vision can be as Black people and their allies. (Cullors 38)

United in their goals, the individual chapters of the movement work independently on achieving them. Thus, Cullors describes, e.g., a campaign in New York, which asks the movement to reclaim social structures such as access to jobs, healthy food, and shelter as a cure for social ills as opposed to a police response to these ills (Cullors 36).

Expressive Tactics and the Visual Scenes of Activism

The actions in the protests on the streets present political resolution, historical memory, and utopian projections. Complex messages are condensed into single images and small actions seem consciously enacted and well thought-through, as to the messages presented. Like the protests of the Occupy movement, these protests in the streets speak a language of carefully choreographed spontaneity and honesty on several levels, using e.g. handwritten cardboard signs or ready-at-hand objects that present the idea of natural, authentic acts and convey a sense of spontaneity and inclusiveness. These scenes show a full embrace of art as a political weapon and as a communication tool. They contribute to political discourse (Bryan-Wilson et al 9) and disseminate the movement's aims through 'visual discussions' (Mirzoeff 259). In the following, I am going to look at various scenes of visual protest and try to determine the visual tactics and messages presented through them.

In today's Black Lives Matter demonstrations, the body becomes an expressive protest tool. Whether in positioning it amidst others, creating a visible community standing against police violence, or situating oneself in symbolic spaces, hidden structures are revealed and messages are visually presented. When, e.g., protests are staged in malls or on downtown streets, bodies interrupt everyday life and consumption, critiquing the economy and its structures of exclusion and discrimination. Protests are staged on Times Square to attack the center of the entertainment industry and the forces of representation it encompasses. Handwritten cardboard signs are juxtaposed against the spectacle of electronic billboards. In the image by Elizabeth Shafiroff, showing protesters on Times Square after the acquittal of the officer who choked Eric Garner, the signs held by the people in the crowd are lost amongst the enormous light installations and advertisements. Yet, it is exactly the handwritten text that anchors the spectator's view. It offers a calm textual counterpoint to the surrounding visual chaos of lights and faces. The simple scale of the video screens compared to the people protesting in the foreground poses questions of power and influence, speaking of powerlessness in relation to the large media industry and a sense of empowerment in countering them as a community, using exactly those means that today's high-resolution technology of the media landscape refuses. In a photograph by Mladen Anthonov (AFP) two signs are held up, one of which clearly mimics and subverts dominant

media productions through the bright orange color of the background and the comic-style font that reads “Demilitarize the Police.” A visual statement is given that condenses claims of the movement into a single scene; onto a single image. This, too, is typical for visual activism, as the most important points and complex matters are narrowed down into abstract, yet easily graspable phrases. Stories are told on these sheets that become more powerful and moving as they can be taken in with one look (Mirzoeff 271). Some of the protesters turn to the Civil Rights Movement and quote Martin Luther King asking for justice and nonviolence, while others use the names and last words of the deceased to display that only “[w]hen Black people get free, everybody gets free” (Garza). The problematic systems within the nation can only be transformed when people “without value within White supremacy” (Garza) are liberated.

The images of protests show the threat for black lives. If a spectacle is a scene that, through size and awe, reminds individuals of their insignificance, some protest scenes are “miniaturized spectacles,” (596) as Baz Kershaw argues. They reduce persons to the role of playthings tossed by inexplicable forces. The spectacle, he writes, “[threatens] always to eliminate the human, to reduce us to total insignificance in the grand scheme—or chaos—of things” (596). In the protests, lone individuals stand on empty streets surrounded by clouds of tear gas, or are confronting lines of police in riot gear. The individual’s insignificance is played out in a realm that presents the dehumanization of black life. In the letter to his son, published in *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates describes how he experienced such a moment when he was confronted by a boy with a gun in his hands. In form of the gun, this boy was literally holding the narrator’s life and body in his small hands (19). Such vulnerability and despair is echoed as protesters sit or kneel in front of the police, fight tear gas, or use signs to ask “Am I Next?” They make the consciousness of the wake visible by performing the insignificance of individual black bodies facing oppressing racial systems.

Several gestures became ubiquitous throughout the movement. For instance, there is the gesture ‘Hands Up, Don’t Shoot,’ which originated in the assumption that these were the last words of Michael Brown. It is widely used to show solidarity with the movement and disapproval of police violence and the racialized strategies of policing. The sign of ‘surrender’ has shifted in its meaning for the Black Lives Matter movement from submission to the

mourning of the deceased, as well as respect and solidarity towards the victims' families (Reckson). Thus, it has become an almost universal sign for the common cause of an 'imagined community' on the streets that stands in line with the one Benedict Anderson theorizes in relation to the concept of the nation. The gesture also mirrors the expectations of how certain bodies ought to move through certain spaces defined and policed by the nation-state (Reckson), making visible how bodies deemed other and threatening become "objects of state violence" instantaneously (Reckson). As a self-conscious act of visual protest, showing the alliance of the individual with the movement, this gesture creates, as Mirzoeff notes, "a new self-image of the protestor" (929), which positions the individual within the collective protest. "In visual activist projects," he writes, "an alternative visual vocabulary emerg[es]. It is collective and collaborative, containing archiving, networking, researching, and mapping among other tools, all in the service of a vision of making change" (292). These visual protest actions, like the 'Hands up' gesture, metaphorically present the scenes of police violence, "even though [they were] perpetrated out of sight of any media depiction or representation" (Mirzoeff 291-92). As signs of dissent, bodily gestures like this, Reckson writes about the Ferguson protests, "emerge as mute but powerful protest." They assert that black lives matter and perform the consciousness of the wake along with the demand to make this consciousness liveable.

Other gestures used in the protests of the Black Lives Matter movement include the already established upraised, clenched fist (or Black Power Salute) as a symbol of solidarity and support. Shifting its meaning from symbolizing the narrow concept of Black nationalism (#blacklivesmatter) to an affirmation of all black lives, this sign becomes an enactment of citizenship and participation in the transformation of the nation. I read the gesture as an expression which presents citizenship neither as submission to extant national structures nor as the absolute refusal of citizenship and the nation. Rather, it encompasses citizenship as the obligation to improve state and social structures by voicing dissent, demanding changes on a larger level, and creating change through local community actions. Fred Moten points out that the juror's gesture in the O.J. Simpson Trial in 1995 was misinterpreted as the refusal of citizenship (99), when in fact it should be understood as an enactment of citizenship and the right to differ (105), a concept that can also be found in the movement's aim at "acknowledging, respecting and celebrating difference(s) and commonalities"

(#blacklivesmatter). Moments of staged disorder and seeming disobedience, Moten writes, “constitute a general, *gestural critique of judgement* that animates black art, black politics and their relation to the law” (92). Within what Moten describes as a paradox of the abstract, granted citizenship—“the fact that it has never and does not now actually exist” (93)—the gesture portrays the participation in the transformation of a nation that has only formally granted equal citizenship to its black inhabitants. In a complex entanglement, it enacts citizenship by voicing dissent, while simultaneously protesting the lack of full civic participation in society. Returning to Christina Sharpe’s ideas, this gesture of both dissent and refused but enacted citizenship portrays the “knowledge that the wake has positioned [black people] as no-citizen” (Sharpe 22).

When in scenes of recent protests for black lives athletes, as e.g. Colin Kaepernick, are kneeling during the national anthem, this gesture, too, belongs to this paradoxical realm of citizenship, in which the refusal to stand for the anthem becomes a signifier for denied citizenship, the knowledge of being in the wake, and the participatory ideal of voicing dissent and affecting change within the nation. In kneeling during the anthem, Kaepernick states, he is standing “with the people that are being oppressed. [...] When there’s significant change and I feel like [the American] flag represents what it’s supposed to represent, this country is representing people the way that it’s supposed to, I’ll stand” (Kaepernick in Morrison). In his statement, the affiliation with the nation becomes apparent that shows an embrace of citizenship and a reform of the nation to fulfill its ideals.

This renewal of citizenship is also reflected in the abundance of national flags in the protests. When the flag is upturned or burned, the clear dissatisfaction, mistrust, and dissent of a generation feeling mistreated and misrepresented by the nation and its juridical and social systems becomes apparent. But simultaneously the iconic pattern on shirts, umbrellas, or scarves shows a strong allegiance to the nation and its ideals of equality and unalienable rights. Especially, it seems, these flags are presented as both a demand for full citizenship and a reminder, pointing to the realization of the very ideals the symbols of the nation stand for, namely “equality and justice for all.” A promise that cannot be realized by redefining the status of blackness, but calls for a complete renegotiation of what it means to be human moving away from the currently dominant episteme of the human (cf. Wynter). The waving

and wearing of the flag asks to surpass the symbolic equality granted since the Civil Rights Movement and achieve lived equality and justice that does not differentiate on behalf of the ones who have the power.

The liberation of black lives that Black Lives Matter aims to achieve through restorative justice, community work, and other practices (#blacklivesmatter), needs a collective, nationwide effort to face both the history of slavery and its legacies. The concept of a nation acts within the wake simultaneously as its initiator—through the acceptance, tolerance, and promotion of slavery in the past and its continuing structures today—and as the idealized, utopian ideal of equality whose responsibility it is to actively work through the traumata of the past and value all black lives. In a communal effort of the imagined community of the nation, sparked by the movement's calls for historical appraisal and the affirmation of black lives, the consciousness of being in the wake needs to be extended as a formative experience for the nation. One way of doing so is e.g. the Lynching Marker Project of the Equal Justice Initiative, which sets up visual markers at the exact locations where lynchings of black people took place (Stevenson). These sites of memory bring the awareness of anti-black racism into the everyday lives of the nation's inhabitants and make black lives and the past visible in the present.

Within the Black Lives Matter protests themselves, black lives and their loss are presented through visual markers, as well. One example of a performance of protest is the image of the enlarged eyes of Eric Garner, a banner that headed the Millions March in New York in 2014 (Cheng). Created by the artist JR, this image turned the street into a 'person' and the mass of protesters into one single pair of eyes. The spectator looks directly into the large pair of eyes, which I read as a presentation of the humanity of the victim and of a need to communicate. In regard to this image, it is useful again to look at Sharpe's theories. Like the process of redaction, which Sharpe describes in her book, the focus on one fragment of the face leaves room to see the black person beyond the victim and the black abjection portrayed in the entire, unredacted image (118). His eyes, in a reversed redaction (Sharpe 118), look past the instrumentalization of the image as if opening a pathway to his thoughts. Judging from the expression of these eyes, the sight induces guilt on the viewer and expresses the anger of the person portrayed, equaling that of the crowd marching behind

the sign. But his eyes also show a deep sadness and resignation mixed with resilience that is also echoed in Garner's last words: "Every time you see me, you mess with me. I am tired of it. This stops today" (Sharpe 110).

Just as the enlarged eyes redact the image of Eric Garner, some banners annotate the scenes and add important claims and different viewpoints. In another scene photographed by Eduardo Munoz in the protests in New York after the grand jury's decision after Eric Garner's death, an almost invisible net holds the shining red letters of the movement's signature in place. The words are hovering above the protesters, thus directly inscribing or annotating the scene with the movement's slogan, highlighting its demand for universal recognition. This sign functions like a stamp that places itself upon the scenes of the city, the night sky, or the surrounding office buildings. The phrase is present within these spaces, showing that to affirm black lives and renegotiate humanness is not only relevant in the protests, but in every single moment. Cutout silhouettes of bodies in the background represent the people recently killed by police. Each abstract figure bears the name of a victim both to commemorate the dead and protest the violence used against them, as well as the lack of accountability. In a similar action, symbolic caskets and mock coffins were carried through the streets, mourning the victims and symbolically carrying justice and equality to their graves. These scenes are completed by street marches, boycotts, and bridge and tunnel blockades, which essentially intervene into everyday life. These disruptive protest tactics (Harris 37; Altman) both literally and figuratively hold up a mirror to society and the police. Staged 'die-ins,' e.g., have become one of the main actions of the protest. To demonstrate against the deaths of black people and the dehumanizing treatment of their bodies, activists lie motionless on the ground, pretending to be dead. They 'perform' the scene of a murder in the public sphere, essentially blocking off everyday life and commerce. Outlines traced with chalk create the iconic figure of a murder victim during police investigations, thus stressing the aesthetic and artistic quality of the scenes, taking into account the power of the image created.

These expressions of protest go hand in hand with a more cheerful side of visual activism. Joyful artistic practices similarly confront state violence, lines of militarized police, and discrimination with the beauty of black lives, enacted political participation, and cultural

diversity. This, again, is reflected in the principles of the Black Lives Matter movement, which is “committed to acknowledging, respecting and celebrating difference(s) and commonalities” (#blacklivesmatter). In this regard, Stephen Thrasher writes for *The Guardian* that “[w]e need to be reminded of Black beauty in the face of Black death.” The focus is placed on a fundamental celebration of black lives, which creates communities, and engages in grassroots projects to help black neighborhoods. Thus a frequent sight in the protests are joyful moments, such as dancing on the streets (Thrasher), community BBQs uniting police officers and black communities (Chappell), and moments of silence and prayer, which can be seen e.g. in an image by Eduardo Munoz that shows two women from the aerial perspective who sit in front of burning candles arranged to spell the name ‘Mike.’ An alternative creative autonomy develops through this activism, T.J. Demos explains, “in which expression is not a matter of picture politics or duty-free visibility, but [in which] visual activism [is] directly attached to the places and practices of social engagement, [and] democratic self-governance” (98). Artistic intervention and visual activism are not only about the pictures created, but also about reconnecting with a past that influences lived environments and working through these histories to create a community and effect change. In terms of Christina Sharpe’s theory, I would say, the visual activism of the Black Lives Matter movement encompasses the realization of being in the wake. The movement is aiming for a restorative justice process, in which the community is “collectively, lovingly and courageously working vigorously for freedom and justice for Black people and, by extension all people” (#blacklivesmatter). Thereby it intentionally builds and nurtures local black communities as well as the collective of the movement (#blacklivesmatter).

Conclusion: The Aesthetic Politics of Black Lives Matter

When Teju Cole writes about the ‘superhero’ photographs of the Black Lives Matter movement, he indirectly acknowledges the expressiveness that speaks through both the superhero aesthetic mediated in the photograph and the transformative power of visual protest and visual activism. Having embraced the visual as a protest tool, the activists use visual means to present their claims and demands, drawing from artistic and aesthetic practices. Thus, protest scenes are turned into (mental) images and often seem to be created in order to be turned into a photograph and disseminated. Visual activism in this

sense consists, e.g., of performances, annotated scenes, and messages condensed into an image that can be taken in with a single glance. Thus, it presents the current scene of protest, the situation's entanglement with the past, as well as its projections on a possible outcome for the future through visual and aesthetic means.

More importantly, the concept of aesthetics employed in the actions, and in my readings thereof, can be related to Rancière's concept of the distribution of the sensible. What can be seen and recognized depends on its in/visibility in the realm of primary aesthetics. As normalcy and being human are, according to Wynter, narratively and performatively created through culture-specific stories, there are cultural truths that are not universal. Tangled up with the hegemonic, Western/colonial genre of being human—having long been (falsely) established as the norm and the human being—the current epistemological framework is addressed in the movement and the ideal of an alternative is visually presented. Within these protests and through its actions, contemporary bases of thought and knowledge are contested and an active engagement with the past is asked for. As the mode of black life in the United States is constituted by both a sense of constant black exclusion, as Christina Sharpe states, and its ubiquitous entanglement with the past—especially the country's history of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade—the aesthetics of the wake and of wake work come to speak through the movement's protest actions. A direct recognition and reference to this legacy of the past, or a past that is in fact not past, becomes visible in the practices of protest, while simultaneously pointing towards a different future that sees the human not as a being per se, but as a praxis—the human hybridly created through narration and biology.

The artistic and aesthetic practices of protest and activism, then, use their artistic configuration to break through old and long established frames of knowledge and recognition and present that which would have otherwise remained invisible. The practices of visual activism in the Black Lives Matter movement—be it the black redaction and annotation of specific scenes through images and poster signs, the staged death of the die-ins, or the large-scale posters and image installations—highlight and emphasize the politics of the movement by doing and making things differently, presenting the 'otherwise' and the unrecognized, in order to make sense of the un/livable and the un/imaginable. Like Cole's

analysis of the superhero aesthetics in the photographs, these aesthetic and artistic practices present both the individual image's functioning and the structures they try to unravel. Thus, the aesthetic politics of the Black Lives Matter movement rely on the combination of the distribution of the sensible and the practices of visual activism and visual protest; that is, the redistribution of the sensible by means of the artistic practices of visual activism.

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