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#StayWoke: The Language and Literacies of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement

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#StayWoke: The Language and Literacies of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement

Elaine Richardson and Alice Ragland

Abstract

This paper examines the language, literacies, communicative, and rhetorical practices of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The work pays attention to the communication practices of the BLM and Hip Hop generation in its extension of Black and African American language traditions and prior liberation movements in their unapologetic performance of Black chants, Black grammar, phonology, vocabulary, Black fashion and music, to die-ins, hands-up, and the technologization of the movement through social media, Black Twitter, hashtags, and memes. The language and literacies of the Black Lives Matter movement represent diverse identities within Black community, vernacular associated with various economic and educational classes, diaspora, culturally rooted, Hip Hop generations, cis-gendered women, men, as well as LGBTQ and gender non-conforming. In this way, the language and literacies of BLM promote the value of ALL Black lives.

Introduction and Context

Twelve-year-old Tamir Rice was playing by himself under the pavilion in an empty park behind his house in Cleveland, Ohio on November 22, 2014. Minutes after a 911 caller reported that there was someone in the park with a gun that might be fake, two police officers pulled up in a squad car within two feet of the child. One of the officers jumped out of the car within two seconds of arrival and shot Tamir. Tamir Rice's lifeless, bloody body lay outside on the ground for several hours. Neither of the officers bothered to give him medical attention or to call an ambulance. When Tamir's sister ran to the park to see what happened, she was tackled by the officers (Taylor, 14). Not only did the officers involved not serve a single day in jail for the killing of the child, but the case was never even brought to trial.

There is countless historical precedence for such a phenomenon. Wilderson explains that *Black* and *slave* were synonyms for *anti-human*, "a position against which humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity..." (11). This lack of sanctity for Black life is a text against which Black people have lived throughout the various eras of the Black experience. Tamir Rice's killing has been compared to that of Emmitt Till in the popular imagination, in order to historicize the devaluation of Black life. Both youths were seen as threatening adult men who

caused their own murders. Though the details of each killing differed, the end result was the same: our criminal justice system provided justice for neither the family of Mamie Till nor the family of Samaria Rice. Parallels between the 20th Century white-based state-sanctioned lynching of Black people and today's state-sanctioned police brutality and killing of Black people include lack of empathy, further objectification, and rationalization of disenfranchisement. Another parallel is Black people's "[development of] traditions to affirm themselves in the midst of both physical and institutionalized violence" (Mitchell).

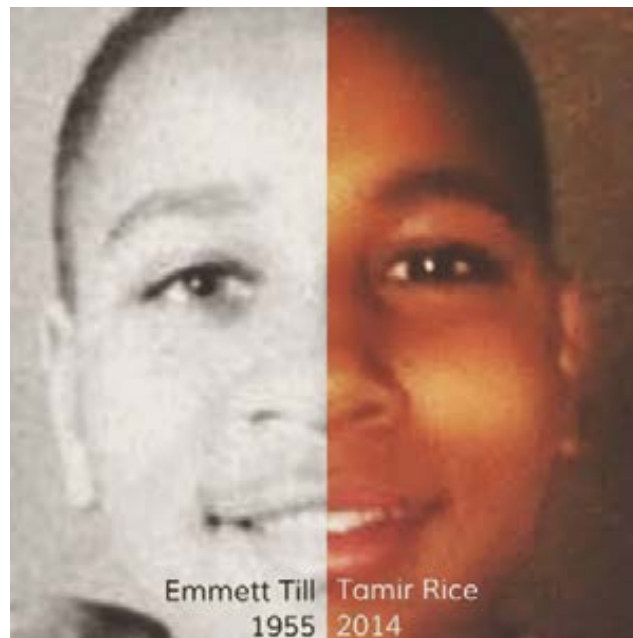


Fig. 1. The Reel Network, *Is Tamir Rice the New Emmett Till*, 31 December 2015, <http://thereel-network.net/is-tamir-rice-the-new-emmett-till/>

Ta-Nehisi Coates, in *Between the World and Me*, explains to his son the current and haunting truth of the disposability of Black life in the United States of America:

I write to you in your fifteenth year. I am writing you because this was the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store. And you have seen men in uniform drive by and murder Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old child whom they were oath-bound to protect. And you have seen men in the same uniforms pummel Marlene Pinnock, someone's grandmother, on the side of a road. And you know now, if you did not before that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction. It does not matter if it originates in a misunderstanding. It does not matter if the destruction springs from a

foolish policy... The destroyers will rarely be held accountable. Mostly they will receive pensions. And destruction is merely the superlative form of a dominion whose prerogatives include friskings, detainings, beatings, and humiliations. All of this is common to black people. And all of this is old for black people. No one is held responsible. (9)

In the above passage, Coates has captured the contemporary and continuing saga of Black people in this country. Unwarranted violence against the Black body, such as the state-sanctioned killings of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Timothy Russell, Malissa Williams, Tanisha Anderson, John Crawford, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, and innumerable others, is a manifestation of the culture of systemic white supremacy. The treatment of the victims' bodies, such as leaving Michael Brown's corpse to lie in the street for hours without calling for medical attention, as well as the judicial system's continual failure to punish the uniformed and vigilante killers of Black people, is evidence that in the eyes of the oppressor, Black still equals not fully human.

The denial of full Black humanity is precisely what the Black Lives Matter movement challenges:

It goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all.

Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement (Source: "Black Lives Matter—About")

The phrase "Black Lives Matter" is subversive in and of itself, as it challenges the institutional, political, and societal practices, and all of the ways the state is complicit in depriving Black people of their humanity, their culture, their lives. The Black Lives Matter movement consists of BLM chapters around the world and is also allied with other social and racial justice organizations addressing human rights and social inequality in and beyond the domains of labor rights, environmental justice, food security, immigration, prison abolition, and education. The Black Lives Matter movement centers Black humanity and Black people's determination to represent their own realities, to value themselves on and in their own terms. Thus, BLM expands upon Black language traditions and creates its own semiotic system and literacy practices to signify pride, resilience, and affirmation of all Black humanity.

Through its examination of the language, literacies, communicative, and rhetorical practices of the Black Lives Matter movement, this article focuses upon the movement's discursive impetus to affirm all segments of Black humanity and to disrupt the intersectional effects of white supremacist capitalist patriarchal logics, which sustain hegemonic normativity of anti-Blackness, cis-gendered heterosexuality, racialized sexualities, criminalization of economically impoverished and otherwise disenfran-

chised Black people. This effort to create social change can be discerned through the (re)production, circulation, and performance of unapologetic Black language and literacy traditions across diverse domains of Black community employing performative communication of chants, Black styles and music, enactment of die-ins, hands-up, Black brunch, Black grammar, phonology, vocabulary, and the technologization of the movement through social media, Black Twitter, hashtags, and memes.

The Language of #BlackLivesMatter

The language of the Black Lives Matter movement is rooted in and expands upon Black and African American language traditions. Smitherman's definition of African American Language (AAL) underscores language forms and how those forms reflect shared experience, Black solidarity, and identity:

Black or African American Language (BL/AAL) is a style of speaking [mostly] English words with Black flava—with [AfroAmericanized] semantic, grammatical, pronunciation, and rhetorical patterns. AAL comes out of the experience of U.S. slave descendants. This shared experience has resulted in common speaking styles, systematic patterns of grammar, and common language practices in the Black community. Language is a tie that binds. It provides solidarity with your community and gives you a sense of personal identity. AAL served to bind the enslaved together, melding diverse African ethnic groups into one community. Ancient elements of African speech were transformed into a new language forged in the crucible of enslavement, U.S. style apartheid, and the Black struggle to survive and thrive in the face of dominating and oppressive whiteness. (3)

Rickford and Rickford alert us to the significance of Black slang and Black vocabulary. Although Black slang—as opposed to Black vocabulary—varies from region to region, every African American can be said to speak some form of Black Talk. Spoken Soul terms often represent the daily experience of life in the skin we speak (94). Although AAL words can be identified as (mostly) European American Language (EAL), it is the way the words are used and their nuanced meanings that make them distinctly Black (Smitherman, “Chain Remain the Same” 8). Concurrently, Spears explains that distinctive Blackness suffuses the utterance. Beyond the word level, distinctive Black language usage is communicated through Black stylistic devices such as “prosodic semantics” and “metadiscursive principles,” which emanate from an alternate worldview, contextually and historically relevant situations, and experiences that produce the ideologically potent discursive field for the Black speaker (“Theorizing African American Women's Language” 77-78). This is evident in the ways that a phrase such as “stay woke” has a particular Black meaning, of which more will be discussed later in this article.

Black language comes out of Black experience. “The Black Experience is a narrative of resistance, of an on-going struggle to be free, perhaps the motive force in African American history” (Smitherman, “Introduction to Ebonics” 34). The language of BLM is similar to previous Black movements such as Black Arts, Civil Rights, Black

Power, and current Hip Hop generations in that they “speak the language of the people” (Smitherman, “Black Talk” 37). In so doing, this language is “rooted in the Black oral tradition of tonal semantics, narrativizing, signification/signifying, the dozens/playing the dozens, [AfroAmericanized] syntax, and other communicative practices. The oral tradition itself is rooted in the surviving African tradition of ‘Nommo,’ and the power of the word in human life” (Smitherman, “Black Talk” 4).

The Literacies of #BlackLivesMatter

The power of the word underscores the Black Lives Matter movement as Black literacies in motion. New literacies theorists understand literacy as socio-culturally situated. “Literacies are social practices: ways of reading and writing and using [...] texts that are bound up in social processes which locate individual action within social and cultural processes” (Martin-Jones and Jones 4-5). As opposed to dominant [imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal]¹ literacy practices, which are understood as a neutral “set of isolated skills divorced from social context, politics, culture, and power” (Richardson 9), Black literacies are based in the lived experiences of Black people and center the ways in which power and oppression operate in those experiences. “African American literacies include vernacular resistance arts and cultural productions that are created to carve out free spaces in oppressive locations such as the classroom, the streets, or the airwaves to name a few” (Richardson 18).

The literacy practices of the Black Lives Matter movement are both new and rooted in Black protest literacies of the past. Kynard states that Black student protest literacies

[...] have been part of a historical trajectory that have included practices that encompass: visual and musical aesthetics and conversations with other people of color; reading and writing outside of class based on racial, class-inflected politics not offered in classrooms; rhetorics that are crafted for community organizing and cultural programming... contemporary critiques of the social institutions that create barriers and oppressive relations for people of color. (66)

Building on African American literacies scholarship, Kynard locates a Black literacies protest tradition led by students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) from the 1920s through the 1960s, wherein Black students enact and embody an education and literacy tradition relevant to the sustainment, survival, and honoring of Black lives (25-66). In this tradition, Black students build on the counter values, ideologies and practices of their formerly enslaved ancestors. These vernacular insurrections redefine what it means to be literate in the interests of Black people. In this tradition Black people circulate their own culturally specific modes of literacy learning and values. Literacy is something people do, not something they have or do not have, or sets of skills according to hegemonic literacy, or what Pritchard calls “literacy normativity” (24). Pritchard’s theorization of Black Queer literacies² helps us to see literacy normativity as “uses of literacy that inflict harm,” uses of literacy that drain people of emotional—and other—resources that they need to advance their in-

dividual and collective best interests (24). Literacy normativity ideologies control who is defined as normal, and control what is considered to be literate, appropriate, and moral. Falling outside of state-sanctioned autonomous ideologies of literacy and morality implicate people as deviant. Pritchard helps us to see that “[f]or both literacy and racialized sexualities and genders, when you are already labeled as being outside of ...normality” (as Black people are), you are a target (16).

Though today’s generation builds on prior language, cultural foundations, and movements, the Black Lives Matter Hip Hop generation is shaping freedom in their own terms, sounds, and likeness. Cohen asserts:

In their chants at demonstrations, spoken word to hype the crowd, or just their aesthetic, one can see and hear the influences of hip hop on this generation of protestors and activists. Hip hop is not just a genre of music to them; it is lifestyle, it is their theme song, and it tells the story of their politics, their degradation, and their rising up. As this new queered configuration of young activists declares “This is what democracy looks like,” they are also reclaiming and democratizing hip hop and asserting “This is what my hip hop looks and sounds like.” And as they revitalize and remix movement politics, they are also finding new ways to help hip hop evolve and inspire. (289)

Remixing of movement politics and language can recall common Black diasporic and Pan-African cultural discourse practices, performances, referents, and ways of being that can also cut across intersectional boundaries between United States Blacks. Performances of Black language and literacies display Black people’s negotiation and deciphering of public transcripts in order to protect and advance Black life (Richardson 35). Black “performative literacies include embodied ways of knowing, communicating, and meaning making” (Muhammad and Haddix 315). In the following section, we offer examples of performative literacies in the form of chants, wearing T-Shirts, Black brunch, die-ins, hands-up, and other performance of unapologetic Blackness.

Performative Literacies of Black Lives Matter: Chants

Through chants, Black Lives Matter protesters perform distinctive Black language practices that seek to dismantle systemic oppression and affirm Black life. For example, consider the following chant, in which one of this essay’s authors has regularly partaken:

Chant down Babylon
Black people are da bomb
We ready, we comin
We ready, we comin

This chant creatively and strategically employs various aspects of Black language. First off, it revisits the Black musical tradition of earlier Black artists/rhetors as it samples “Chant down Babylon,” a Bob Marley reggae song that references “Babylon” (Smitherman, “Chain Remain the Same,” 15). According to Edmonds, Babylon references peo-

ple and institutions carrying out the objectives of colonialism and its legacies, which have oppressed African peoples since the seventeenth century (23). And as defined by Cassidy and LePage, in *The Dictionary of Jamaican English*, Babylon is a “biblical allusion often made by the Rastafari, hence, from their point of view, non-believers, white men” (17). Thus, the language in this chant is influenced by Black diaspora speech, not just within the United States. This diasporic phenomenon is captured by the superordinate term coined by Robert Williams and incorporated into the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s Statement on Ebonics:

...Black language forms ... derive from common historical, social, cultural, and material conditions. ... [Ebonics] refers to language forms such as African American Language, Jamaican Creole, Gullah Creole, West African Pidgin English, and Haitian Creole, as well as Afro-Euro language varieties spoken in European countries. The term was created ... to identify the various languages created by Africans forced to adapt to colonization and enslavement. (Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), Language Policy Committee)

The chant describes Black people with the Black slang term *da bomb* that means “superb, outstanding, excellent” (Smitherman, *Word from the Mother* 27). Further, *da* exhibits Black phonology, where what might be realized as a *th* sound in the initial position of a word in other varieties of English is sonically rendered as *d* sound. The form, zero copula, which is a common and distinctive Black grammatical pattern is exemplified in “we ready, we comin” (Rickford and Rickford, 114). With this form, Black Lives Matter demonstrators express the condition that the movement is a force in perpetual forward motion. Standardized English (“we are ready, we are coming”) does not capture this dual truth as succinctly. Other Black pronunciation patterns such as word final consonant cluster simplification in words such as *comin* add to the flow, contour and sonic vibration of the movement for freedom (Rickford and Rickford, 150).

The following chant is another example of the use of African American language:

*Why are you in riot gear?
We don't see no riot here!*

This chant includes a double negative (“we don’t see no”), which is not grammatically distinctive in and of itself to Black language, as it occurs in other English vernaculars, yet the Black bodies themselves, taking up (white) space, performing and embodying the soul-filled rhythmic vocality of the chants, emit and envision critical Black freedom sounds (Rickford and Rickford, 123).



Fig. 2. Jonathan Backman, A Single Photo From Baton Rouge That's Hard to Forget, The Atlantic, 10 July 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/07/a-single-photo-that-captures-race-and-policing-in-america/490664/>

We next emphasize performance and style through signifying practices. Gee's discussion of semiotics is helpful as he underscores sets of "practices that recruit one or more modalities (e.g. oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphics, artifacts) to communicate distinctive types of meanings" (18).

Literacies of #BlackLivesMatter: Wearing T-Shirts

Wearing T-shirts with messages pertaining to BLM is a sign that conveys meaning. This practice is an important visual communicative aspect of the movement. Whether in an organized mass protest or in one's everyday life, Black people (and others seeking to show up for racial justice) can be spotted wearing T-shirts that read "Black Lives Matter," "Hands Up, Don't Shoot," "I Can't Breathe," names of historical freedom fighters, and other messages that affirm Black life.



Fig. 3. Facebook post from Roots Collective, December 29, 2015: [https://www.facebook.com/ThaRootsCollective/photos.a.778774428845864.1073741828.774442379279069/1019815881408383/?type=3&theater](https://www.facebook.com/ThaRootsCollective/photos/a.778774428845864.1073741828.774442379279069/1019815881408383/?type=3&theater)

The words that appear on the shirts have a way of disturbing the peace of people who are trying to ignore or erase the issue of systemic racism. Public displays of movement paraphernalia work to put the issue of state violence against Black bodies in the faces of all passersby.

On December 8th, 2014, LeBron James, Kyrie Irving, and several Brooklyn Nets players wore T-shirts that read “I CAN’T BREATHE” in recognition of Eric Garner, a Black man choked to death by a police officer for selling cigarettes. A controversy ensued from the fact that these NBA athletes chose to use their platform to make a statement about the senseless theft of Black life. This is an example of movement slogans and discourses being brought into unexpected, white ideologically controlled space. Whether the predominantly white audiences agreed with the athletes or not, they were forced to think about the world from a Black person’s perspective, or at the very least the athletes confronted them. As characteristic of the boldness of this movement, the NBA players perform fictive kinship for Eric Garner (or represent for his humanity) by wearing “I CAN’T BREATHE” shirts. Implicated in the semiotic

and symbolic field is the meaning that killing Eric Garner is killing me (the collective I of Black men, even wealthy NBA playing Black men).



Fig. 4. Robert Deutsch, *LeBron James, Kyrie Irving and Nets players wear 'I can't breathe' shirts before Cavs game*, USA Today, 8 December 2014, <http://ftw.usatoday.com/2014/12/kyrie-irving-i-cant-breathe-t-shirt-before-cavaliers-eric-garner-lebron-james>

Similarly, the Black woman in Fig. 5 represents for Eric Garner and a collective Black community, as Kimberle Crenshaw and the African American Policy Forum indicate in the “Why We Can’t Wait” letter to President Obama and the My Brother’s Keeper (males only) Initiative: “[G]irls and women of color suffer, struggle and succeed with the men and boys in their lives. Only together will our collective well-being improve” (online).



Fig. 5. Patrick Scott Barnes, *Black Lives Matter Orlando 12 - I Can't Breathe T-Shirt*, Orlando Culture Shock, 11 December 2014, <https://orlandocultureshock.wordpress.com/2014/12/11/protestors-stages-die-in-at-downtown-orlandos-amway-center/black-lives-matter-orlando-12-i-cant-breathe-t-shirt/>

Similarly, #Fuck12 T-shirts (Fig. 6) highlight a slang phrase that means fuck the police and the anti-Black establishment. The phrase was also incorporated into a popular rap song, "(Trust God) Fuck 12" by Gucci Mane and Rich Homie Quan in 2013.

This lyric evinces residue of the traditional African worldview shared by non-westernized Africans, wherein “there is fundamental unity between the spiritual and the material aspects of existence,” though the spiritual is prioritized (Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 75).



Fig. 6: Post from @Pot_Lord on Twitter, 19 May, 2014 <https://twitter.com/PotLord/status/468513016774803457>

Literacies of #BlackLivesMatter: Black Brunch

The sacredness of Black life is also put on display by Black brunch performances. Black brunch is an activity in which BLM activists protest the killing of Black people at the hands of police by disrupting brunch spots in affluent white neighborhoods. As such, activists enter these spaces and read off names of the Black dead, in order to upset the comfort, indifference and privileged lives of the predominantly white patrons “who had expected nothing more than a Bloody Mary and an overpriced eggs Benedict.”³ The message is white silence is violence.



Fig. 7. A sign from a "Black Lives Matter" protest march in Rochester, Minnesota. Rose Colored Photo, *Confronting Brunch*, Truthout, 26 April 2015, <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/30427-black-lives-matter-wage-slaves-labor-and-brunch>

Writing about organizing the largest march she had planned at that point, in the wake of the acquittal of George Zimmerman for killing seventeen year-old Trayvon Martin, co-founder of Black Lives Matter, Patisse Khan-Cullors, explains the message that seemingly disconnected white people, who were shopping and brunching on Rodeo Drive and Beverly Hills, needed to hear about the realities of living while Black:

I say that they, those who come for brunch, have to confront the police presence today but that this is our everyday. I say that we were not born to bury our children, we were born to love and nurture them just like they were, and because of this, finally we had to acknowledge that in fact this is what we had been forced to do and we had been forced to do it for too long, centuries too long. We say that those children, now our dead, now our Ancestors, are calling to us, Trayvon is calling to us and asking that we remember so that we at last make the change that deserves to be made, that has to be made. I ask the people who are lunching, perhaps spending more on a single lunch than many of us spend to feed our families for an entire week, to remember the dead and to remember that once they were alive and that their lives mattered. They mattered then and they matter now. (201)

Here, we clearly see that Khan-Cullors and Black Lives Matter brunch protestors are using available means of persuasion and creating their own platform and modality to

disrupt the disposable Black body business as usual. Khan-Cullors is giving voice to the voiceless and confronting middle and upper class whites.

Literacies of #BlackLivesMatter: Die-Ins, Hands-Up and Performance of Unapologetic Blackness



Fig. 8., Jeremy Allen, “Die-In at the Diag: Hundreds of U-M students, community members protest police killings,” 10 December 2014: http://www.mlive.com/news/ann-arbor/index.ssf/2014/12/die-in_at_the_diag_hundreds_of.html

Die-ins are a widely used communicative strategy in the Black Lives Matter movement, wherein people present their bodies as dead. This is intended to disrupt the flow of traffic and to draw attention to the fact that too many Black people are dying at the hands of aggressive state violence and systemic racism. Die-ins have occurred in shopping malls, in university buildings, in busy intersections, in and near political buildings. Historian Robert Widell explains, to BBC News, that during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s die-ins began. Die-ins were also done by cyclists in London to bring awareness to road safety, and against Dow Chemical, an Olympic sponsor. Specifically, related to the Black protest tradition, Widell says

...black people [wading] into the water of whites-only beaches, along with sit-ins and teach-ins, were popular when public spaces were segregated by Jim Crow laws. The idea is to create an image that makes an impression. This kind of publicity forces the country to deal with the violence that faces African-Americans....

Additionally, protestors putting their hands up (a symbol for surrender intended to notify police officers not to shoot) is a protest practice that visually represents

the protest phrase “hands up, don’t shoot.” This gesture is often accompanied by the chant, “Hands up, don’t shoot!” The hands-up gesture is a widely recognized symbol used to raise awareness that many Black people have been shot by police even when they had their hands up.



Fig. 9. Scott Olson, *Hands Up, Don't Shoot*, Vox, 13 August 2014, <https://www.vox.com/2014/8/13/5998591/hands-up-dont-shoot-photos-ferguson-michael-brown>

Die-ins and the hands up gesture are widely known symbols of resistance. They are easily noticeable in photos shared via social media, and they have successfully raised awareness about unchecked police violence. Other ways to communicate Black humanity and resist oppression include unapologetic Black cultural expressions such as dancing, flaunting natural hair, and taking up space as a Black person.

Literacies of #BlackLivesMatter: Black Performance and Style

At the 2016 Superbowl, superstar Beyoncé and her dancers performed these and other unapologetic Black rhetorical, communicative, signifying language and gestural practices. Beyoncé’s “Formation” performance was Braggadocio-full. Smitherman explains Braggadocio as a practice rendered “with clever rhymes, puns, culturally toned experiences and references from a fresh and new perspective” (Smitherman, “Chain Remain the Same,” 12):

I see it, I want it, I stunt, yellow bone it...
 I grind til I own it...
 I just might be a Black Bill Gates in the making
 I slay

Beyoncé’s lyrics do not necessarily align with Black revolutionary consciousness suggested by iconographic aspects of her performance (Ward, 147). However, her use of

Hip Hop slang and powerful referents evince the swag of an emcee (in older terms a toast-teller):

[Beyoncé] is powerful, all-knowing, omnipotent hero, able to overcome all odds. In this way, [she] personifies the self-empowerment dreams of [her] Black audience and symbolizes for them triumph and accomplishment against the odds. (Smitherman, “Chain Remain the Same,” 13)

For example, she “stunt, yellow bone it, grind,” and “slay.” In other words, she “shows off and shows out.” As a light complexioned woman—she “yellow bone it,” (which also includes a play on the word *bone*, meaning she is a supreme lovemaker). She “grind” or works hard (also pun on lovemaking), and she “slay,” meaning she cannot be outdone in nothing (she is so good, double negative needed)! According to Holliday in *Word: The Online Journal on African American English*, Beyoncé uses *slay* 36 times in under five minutes. The lyrics also underscored Black African cultural features, such as “baby hair,” “afros,” “Negro nose,” while the performers were clad in powerfully symbolic Black panther-inspired outfits, shaking and moving with Black woman-power in formation.



Fig. 10. <http://ew.com/article/2016/02/08/beyonce-super-bowl-black-panther/>

These Black cultural practices are part of the literacies of the Black diaspora. As Kynard argues, literacy is something that you do, not something that you have or do not have (32).

Use of Black language and communication style is a pivotal aspect of Black performance culture and movement discourse. Arguably, one of the most significant phrases (also expressed as a hashtag) is “stay woke.” It has become a common phrase among young, Black, conscious people. The phrase means to remain aware of what is going on around you and in society, more specifically, to remain politically aware, or conscious. Also, it doesn’t just mean now or today; it means “stay woke” all the

time. *Woke* is an African American Language word, related to the *awake* occurring in many types of English. *Awake* can be defined as “to come out of the state of sleep; to cease to sleep; awaken to arise or spring into existence or rouse from sleep; and wake to be or remain awake; to keep oneself, or be kept, awake” (“Awake”). “I’m awake,” the predicate adjective, means to be out of the state of sleep. The Black word *woke*, in referring specifically to a political consciousness type of being awake, is an excellent example of how Black people develop African American Language by imbuing it with concepts needing to be expressed efficiently—in one word. As a matter of fact, *stay* is also a word first developed by AAL speakers and that is now spreading beyond the Black community. The *stay* in “stay woke” has the meaning of all the time. It’s a different word from *stay*, as in “She stay [reside] at grandma’s house [sometimes]” (Spears, 168). It’s the same *stay* as that in “stay awake” in other English varieties. Standardized varieties of English use *awake* instead of *woke* as the predicate adjective form (or part) of the verb, as in the following:

- (be) awake e.g. “I’m awake.”
- (vernacular) AAL/Black (Lives Matter) “woke”
- (be) woke e.g. “I’m woke.”

It should be noted that there is a lot of variation with the verb *awake* and related verbs such as *wake*, *wake up*, etc. AAL speakers have taken the form *woke* and given it a special twist in meaning, bringing in the idea of political consciousness. Over time, *woke* has become its own word, so to speak: people who use *awake*, as in “stay awake,” also use *woke* in the political sense of the word. The words have diverged in meaning.

The Hip Hop soul artist Erykah Badu’s usage of “stay woke” is cited, on the *Know Your Meme* website, as one of the first public attestations (see below). It is well known that Erykah Badu was a practitioner of Five Percenter Islam (Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap* 63). Five Percenter Hip Hop artists have a tradition of bringing their teachings of Black nationalist consciousness and solidarity, empowerment through knowledge of self, and awareness of the workings of social inequality and racism to the masses through their music. For example, Five Percent rappers, Brand Nubian (specifically Grand Puba), in their 1990 song, “Wake Up” warn the eighty-five percent that the “The [white] devil’s a conniver” (Miyakawa “The Duty of the Civilized Is to Civilize the Uncivilized” 175).

According to the website *Know Your Meme*,

Stay Woke, derived from the phrase ‘stay awake,’ is an internet slang term often used to demonstrate the need for awareness of an issue, particularly those relating to social justice or the Black Lives Matter movement. The term is also used ironically in a similar manner to Wake Up, Sheeple. Origin-The first instance of the use of stay woke is unknown. One of the first instances of public use was in the chorus to Erykah Badu’s 2008 song “Master Teachers” from the album *New Amerykah Part 1: The 4th World War*.

The phrase was first defined on *Urban Dictionary* on August 19, 2014, where the definer linked it directly to the 2014 Ferguson Riots.

Deriving from “stay awake,” is to keep informed of the shitstorm going on around you in times of turmoil and conflict, specifically on occasions when the media is being heavily filtered—such as the events in Ferguson Missouri in August 2014. (<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=stay%20woke>)

The hashtag #staywoke is in wide use on Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram, where it has more than 128,000 associated posts. In the summer of 2015, programmers Darius Kazemi and Courtney Stanton built a Twitter bot called @StayWokeBot, intended to automate replies to those who might need more education about racism in society. On January 5th, 2016, MTV declared that *woke* was a new slang term for the new year, but many commenters noted that the term was not new (“Stay Woke”). Charles Pulliam-Moore discusses how #staywoke went from Black activist watchword to internet slang.

Actor and activist, Jesse Williams, executive produced a documentary about Black Lives Matter entitled “StayWoke: The Black Lives Matter Movement.” In an interview in the *HuffPost* written by Lilly Workneh entitled “Jesse Williams Wants You to Stay Woke in New Film on Black Lives Matter,” Workneh uncovers Williams’ passion for social transformation:

One of the first steps to being “woke” is understanding the depth of these dangerous myths and how societal constructs impede on the lives of marginalized people. In one poignant moment in the documentary, Williams says “no matter what we do, we’re late”—it’s a striking comment that stresses the requirement for resolution and represents the urgent need to get woke, stay woke and better the state of black lives.

Another significant phrase reflecting Black experience and expressions of freedom that has been utilized in BLM protest is “we gon be alright.” The phrase was popularized by rapper Kendrick Lamar’s song, “Alright,” and it is chanted vigorously in many protests. It is also used as a hashtag, #WeGonBeAlright, and can be found in tweets that speak of Black struggle. *Gon* is often described as a reduced form of *gonna* or “going to” in AAL. “We gon” is one of the most Black of AAL syntax patterns as it reflects a higher rate of zero copula⁴ than other Black patterned phrases where zero copula can occur (in noun phrases) [He a teacher], (in adjective phrases) [She happy] (Rickford and Rickford, 116). Adding to a Black diasporic perspective, linguists such as Rickford have convincing research which suggests the creole roots of “African American Vernacular English” (AAVE) as this feature of Black language is similar to creole and Englishes of the world such as Barbados, Jamaica, Guyana, Hawaii, and Liberia (Rickford and Rickford, 116; Spears, “Pidgeons/Creoles in African American Language, 8”).

So far, we have emphasized the context of Black language and Black literacies and their development with regard to the experiences of Black people, and some of their cultural priorities and properties with regard to the Black Lives Matter movement in this current historical moment. We have emphasized how people give language meaning, structure, and value. In this sense, language, written, spoken, or otherwise

signified, is not universal. It is always under construction and contested. It is always connected to context and discourse. We will turn now to usages of Black language and literacies in new media platforms to disrupt assault on Black lives.

The “New” Literacies of #BlackLivesMatter

The Black Lives Matter movement extends the Black protest literacies that Ky-nard mentions through use of Black Twitter and other online and offline modalities. Hashtags, memes, videos, and other social media practices are all important aspects of the movement’s new literacies.

Khan-Cullors recounts that the origins of “#BlackLivesMatter” emerged from commiserating with her friend and comrade, Alicia Garza, on Facebook after the announcement of George Zimmerman’s acquittal for the killing of the Black teenager, Trayvon Martin, in Sanford, Florida:

... [Alicia] writes these words

Btw stop saying that we are not surprised. That’s a damn shame in itself. I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter. And I will continue that. Stop giving up on black life. black people, I will NEVER give up on us. NEVER. (180)

Khan-Cullors responds with “#BlackLivesMatter” (180). With the help of Opal Tome-ti, the three Black queer women social activists began mobilizing by “creating Tumblr pages, influencing other social media outlets, and placing posters in local California businesses in order to spread news about ... #BlackLivesMatter...” (Ince, Rojas and Davis, 1819). Though police killings of unarmed Black people continued and BLM became more pronounced in the public discourse, the killing of Black teenager, Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014, propelled the #BlackLives-Matter moniker into discursive prominence “as a cry for racial justice” (Ince, Rojas and Davis 1819).

Tate thinks the current Hip Hop generation can thank BLM and Black Twitter for the communication revolution. The Rap music industry is no longer Black folks’ CNN (Tate). The Nielson Report aligns with Tate’s observation:

Technology and social media is transforming and elevating the way in which African-Americans use their mobile devices. African-Americans are the second-largest multicultural group with regard to smartphone ownership, with 91% of Blacks owning smartphones (compared to 94% of Asian Americans, and 90% of Hispanics). The use of social media for community-based activism brought national awareness to issues affecting the Black community, and African-Americans, especially Millennials, are leading the charge to bring about institutional change. The #BlackLivesMatter, #BankBlack, and #OscarsSoWhite social media movements, all of which sparked national conversations, are just three viral examples of how savvy applications of social media and technology are increasingly able to focus national attention on issues of social, civic and political importance. (4)

The language of Black Twitter is common to Black folks. Use of so-called mainstream United States English or codeswitching is not required and outsiders who can't get the references need to build community and background knowledge to successfully participate. McDonald observes:

[...] Perhaps the most significant contribution of Black Twitter is that it increases visibility of black people online, and in doing so, dismantles the idea that white is standard and everything else is "other." It's a radical demand for acceptance by simply existing — or sometimes dominating — in a space and being yourself, without apology or explanation.

New Literacies: Hashtags

Perhaps one of the most important new literacies of the Black Lives Matter movement is its use of hashtags. Hashtags are words and phrases used on social media, particularly Twitter, that have a pound (#) symbol in front. Hashtags make it possible to create a digital footprint or catalogue messages of the same subject matter from various social media users. They have been used to organize people, to generate conversations, and to raise awareness of issues. For example, a search of #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter will yield any and all tweets that have used the hashtag, allowing for a quick means of viewing of Twitter conversations related to the topic. Hashtags are generally catchy, concise, and straightforward. Hashtags are also used in event names, for example "#SayHerNameVigil" or "#BlackLivesMatterRally." Hashtags get to the point and with accompanying video can illustrate the need for constant vigilance of state-sanctioned violence and anti-Blackness, as can be seen in a fairly recent tweet (Fig. 11).

Hashtags have also been used to illuminate intersectionality within the Black Lives Matter movement. For example, in order to bring awareness to the fact that Black women and girls are also victims of state violence, the hashtag #SayHerName has been widely used. #SayHerName was created by Dr. Kimberle Crenshaw and the African American Policy Forum (AAPF). #SayHerName in its creation of a community focused around a more specific issue within BLM represents an example of distributed framing (Ince, Rojas and Davis, 1827). #SayHerName tweets are usually accompanied by the names and media coverage of women and girls whose lives have been taken by law enforcement, including Sandra Bland, Rekia Boyd, Tanisha Anderson, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, and many many others whose stories are often disregarded. #BlackGirlsMatter is also a related hashtag that grew out of the work of Kimberle Crenshaw and her associates. #BlackGirlsMatter and #BlackWomenMatter are used to illuminate ways that Black women and girls experience gendered racism, subordination, and criminalization in American institutions by various types of violence (discursive and physical) by state-sanctioned and naturalized systems and policies that go unquestioned and unchallenged. The consequences of which deeply influence Black women and girls' life outcomes and power to control their futures.



Fig. 11. A tweet from @SHXT_WZRD posted on August 18 2017.

Lindsey's "Herstory: A Brief and Painful History of State Violence Against Black Women and Girls" offers a powerful condensed rendering of this situation as it pertains to Black women and girls:

Beyond calling the names of black women and girls, understanding a history of anti-black racial violence which includes all black people irrespective of gender renders the deeply disturbing arrest and suspicious death of Sandra Bland less anomalous. The stories of Bland as well as the other black women found dead in police custody in July 2015 and the black women and girls killed by police officers over the past 30 years profoundly illustrate the reality of anti-black state and state sanctioned violence. Ranging in age from seven to 93, black female victims of police violence fit within a painful legacy of black women and girls victimized by state and state-sanctioned terror. (15)



Fig. 12. @BLMChi, Twitter, 23 June 2017

The Pew study observed that Black women's use of Twitter exceeds that of other demographic groups.⁵ Sherri Williams highlights particular ways that Black feminists use Twitter to generate movement. She writes:

Black feminists' use of hashtag activism is a unique fusion of social justice, technology, and citizen journalism. It should serve as a fertile ground for emerging news for journalists, a point of connection for white feminists, and a ripe area of study for academics. Twitter is often a site of resistance where black feminists challenge violence committed against women of color

and they leverage the power of Black Twitter to bring attention and justice to women who rarely receive either (343).

The hashtag #AllBlackLivesMatter has also been important in acknowledging intersectionality of the movement. Black queer and trans people, Black working class and poor people, undocumented Black people, and Black people with disabilities, are typically rendered invisible in the dominant discourse, and even in the Black community, while the experiences of straight, male, cisgender, able-bodied and middle-class Black people are privileged. The hashtag #AllBlackLivesMatter is a way of distributing the idea that all Black life is sacred regardless of income, sexual orientation, gender, age, (formerly) incarcerated, or (dis)ability.



Fig.13. @DMVBlackLives, Twitter, 4 April 2017.

As reported by Rankin in *Colorlines.com*,⁶ since 2010 the National Coalition of Anti-Violence database began keeping track of transgender murders. Of the trans and

gender non-conforming Americans murdered between 2010 and 2016, seventy-five percent were Black women. The 2015 publication, “Meaningful Work: Transgender Experiences in the Sex Trade,” reports on the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS), conducted between 2008-2009, which documented the experiences of over 6400 transgender adults. Because of discrimination and racism, many transgender individuals do sex work as a way to avoid homelessness and non-employment. “Black and Black Multiracial NTDS respondents had the highest rate of sex trade participation overall (39.9%), followed by those who identified as Hispanic or Latino/a (33.2%) [p.4].” Trans and gender non-conforming people of color experienced disproportionate rates of incarceration and interaction with police. “People of color were more than twice as likely (46.8%) than their white counterparts (18.3%) to report being “arrested for being trans” (5). Similarly, 58.8% of people of color and 35.2% of respondents reported being sent to jail/prison “for any reason” (5). Pritchard, following Cohen, admonishes that because of “the complexity of racial formations of gender and sexuality that, in their nonheteronormative heterosexuality,” more privileged racialized heterosexuals are yet queered (Pritchard, 23). It behooves queered groups to work across diverse intersectional identities to build coalition for collective empowerment. This is the goal of Black Lives Matter activism.

Memes

Memes are thought-provoking (and sometimes entertaining) images that are spread via social media. Throughout the course of the Black Lives Matter movement, they have been utilized to raise awareness of the state’s violent and unjust treatment of Black people. For example, one popular and non-entertaining meme that has been shared on Twitter and Instagram has a picture of Dylann Roof, the white male mass-murderer, being peacefully arrested by police after killing nine Black parishioners (including an elderly woman) at a bible study at Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015. Next to Roof’s photo is a picture of Eric Garner, a Black male, being pinned to the ground by several officers and suffocated in a debilitating chokehold, which resulted in his death.

This is how you arrest a white man
who shot 9 people, and this is how
you arrest a black man for selling
cigarettes



Fig. 14. *Charleston Church Shooting in Memes*, Grasshopper, 20 June 2015, <https://grasshopper-news.wordpress.com/2015/06/20/charleston-church-shooting-in-memes/>

In another meme, the same picture (Fig. 15) of the Charleston shooter's peaceful arrest is placed next to a picture of a Black teenaged girl in a swimsuit being violently attacked and pinned down by a white police officer during a pool party.

These memes contrast the brutal treatment that Black people are subjected to by the racist law enforcement and criminal justice system with the favorable treatment that white people are shown. The juxtaposition of these images not only exposes police brutality against Black bodies, but it highlights the racism of a corrupt system that devalues Black life while protecting and serving white life. Memes are easy to access, to understand, and they spread critical discourse and critical consciousness via social media, and they are used to mobilize against injustice during this current moment of the Black Lives Matter movement.

how police handle a man who just killed
9 people vs how they handle a teenage
girl at a pool party. America.



Fig. 15. *All bad*, Imgur, 18 June 2015, <http://imgur.com/2FmvdHV>

Conclusion

This article has sought to survey, codify, and trace a sampling of the language and literacy practices of the Black Lives Matter movement, and its productive communicative approach in mobilizing masses to confront racial injustice. The aesthetics—sonic, kinesthetic, and visual—contribute to power-knowledge with the aim of liberation of Black people throughout the U.S. and the Black diaspora. Through the purposeful use of Black language, communicative practices, and new literacies, young Black people are challenging racism, police brutality, and social inequality, while fighting for effective alliances. In so doing, they are performing unapologetic Blackness, seeking to disrupt hegemonic race, gender, sexuality, class oppression, and other social inequities for the greater good of all Black lives. The movement's use of social media and popular culture has resulted in heightened consciousness among many Black youth, encouraging them to stand against state-sanctioned violence against Black people. By making it clear that people will not stand for the continued assault on Black life, the Black Lives Matter movement has asserted that all lives will matter when *all Black lives matter*.

Notes

1. "Understanding Patriarchy" <http://imagineborders.org/pdf/zines/UnderstandingPatriarchy.pdf>
2. Also see Pritchard 22 for further discussion of Black queer literacies.
3. <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/30427-black-lives-matter-wage-slaves-labor-and-brunch>
4. Zero copula-the joining of subject and predicate without use of the verb 'to be'.
5. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/01/06/african-americans-and-technology-use/>
6. <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/new-database-tracks-deaths-transgender-homicide-victims>

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