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The New Protest #Journalism

Black Witnessing as Counternarrative

I strolled with my mobile journalism students one afternoon through the close-knit neighborhood of Kliptown in Johannesburg, South Africa. A few of the girls called the town home, and they wanted me to see it before I returned to the United States. Kliptown is a neighborhood of stark contrasts. There are houses made of nothing more than rusty corrugated metal—no insulation or plumbing fills them but there is love bursting inside. There are dirt roads that look as if no cars have driven along them for months, yet children are kicking up their orange dust in rousing soccer games. I remember sitting down to speak with a young woman and her daughter as my students swarmed about, gathering oral histories from their families and friends with an iPod Touch. After a few minutes, the woman asked me to watch her daughter.

"I need to top up," she explained, gesturing just up the road to a giant, shiny, white truck.

"What does 'top up' mean?" I asked, confused. I had been in South Africa for an entire month yet I had not heard that expression.

The woman laughed. "It means 'charge.' I need to charge my phone," she said kindly.

"May I come?" I asked. She shrugged and smiled, slightly amused that I would find this mundane act so interesting.

Still, I wanted to see inside the truck. I walked down the street holding her daughter's hand. When we reached the vehicle, I saw a maze of electric power strips hanging on its interior wall. Dozens of phones were charging there. The woman gave the telecommunications worker a few coins, then her cellphone. I heard a low buzz of power being transferred, from invisible packets of energy to the very visible faces and fingers of the South Africans who seemed delighted to be connected.

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Here we were, in the middle of one of the poorest towns in the world, yet cellphones were helping its residents tap into a collective force of information and knowledge sharing. Kliptown, after all, is the place where anti-apartheid leaders met to draft the Freedom Charter in 1955, which served as a formal list of black South Africans' demands to end its version of Jim Crow laws. The document opens with: "The people shall govern!" I realized that afternoon in Kliptown that the people *were* governing, in their own quietly rebellious way. They were overcoming the cruel system that withheld electricity to their homes yet offered it to them in small bundles to power their phones. The people were texting. They were engaging in e-commerce. They were laughing at jokes. Mobile phones were their *lifelines*, I thought. I found myself thinking this again on July 6, 2016, as I watched Diamond Reynolds livestream the fatal shooting of Philando Castile from their car. Her four-year-old daughter, Dae'Anna, was in the backseat.

"You shot four bullets into him, sir," Reynolds said, in a preternaturally calm voice, holding her cellphone steadily toward the officer.

"Ma'am, keep your hands where they are," the officer shouted at Reynolds, adding, "I told him not to reach for it! I told him to get his hands up."

"You told him to get his ID, sir, his driver's license," I heard Reynolds say in the video. Then, a prayer: "Oh my God, please don't tell me he's dead. Please don't tell me my boyfriend just went like that."

Castile groaned as if he was trying to speak. Then he stopped.

"Jesus," I said as I watched the video, probably in a tone not unlike the one my dad had used while watching the Rodney King video in 1991. Castile was the second black man to be shot fatally by a police officer in 24 hours. Alton Sterling had been killed in Baton Rouge just the day before. This time though, Reynolds' recording marked a watershed moment for black witnessing. When she decided to activate Facebook Live that day, she became the first person to capture police brutality in near real time. It was her *lifeline*. What might have happened to her, or to her daughter Dae'Anna, had her camera not been rolling, I thought to myself. By the afternoon, a local NBC affiliate television station invited me to participate in a Facebook Live chat about the Castile video. I did not hesitate.[1] *Black women and children are unsafe too*, I wanted to yell. But I wanted to cry too. For Dae'Anna. For Diamond. For Philando.

I talked about power relationships between the people and the police on the NBC broadcast and how Diamond Reynolds disrupted them that day. I said a lot of other things too, but I kept thinking during the program about what I could do personally. I felt so helpless. After leaving the studio, I began searching for other activists. I needed to channel my anger. When I got back home, I went online and started googling. The first search retrieval was a CNN story from the year before, entitled "The Disruptors."[2] I wrote down the names of the 13 activists that were featured in the story. Some of them I knew already, from the reading I was doing in my PhD program, or through my time spent on Twitter. Others I did not yet know. I contacted all 13 disruptors via Twitter initially, either through direct message, if they authorized this feature, or on their public walls. Two of the 13 granted me interviews right away. Two activists never responded at all. The remaining nine activists declined my requests for interviews but referred me to an ally in the movement who was still doing press. I later found out that the activists have developed a sophisticated, alternating method of talking to academic researchers and professional journalists to avoid burnout. Within three months of the Sterling-Castile tragedies, I had booked interviews with 15 leading anti–police brutality activists. And for the next year they let me follow them, to see how they formed the vanguard of black witnessing at the peak of the movement. Some of them let me sit in on Black Lives Matter meetings and workshops they hosted. Others visited my mobile journalism classrooms, either in person or with the help of FaceTime, to talk to me and my students. Still others allowed me to visit them in their neighborhoods. They wanted me to know another side of the saga that was being portrayed on televised news. They wanted me to know what activated them. They wanted me to come and *see*. I want you to see them now too, without further ado.

The Witnesses

Our 15 black witnesses fall into five broad groups: (1) the Black Lives Matter activists; (2) the "Day 1's"; (3) the Masters of Agitprop; (4) the Bards; and (5) the Rogues. The Black Lives Matter activists were leaders who self-identified as members of the formal organization. The Day 1's were the frontline protestors of Ferguson who believed their actions galvanized the movement. The Masters of Agitprop were the creatives who used art as propaganda for the movement. The Bards provided the soundtrack to the

movement, blending hip-hop, poetry, and prose to spread news. Lastly, the Rogues were associated loosely with all of these groups, but refused to be labeled Black Lives Matter activists, for a variety of reasons. I should mention that I did not prompt the activists to share their sexual orientations in the short bios that follow. Some said that they wanted me to highlight this part of their identity, to end the historic erasure of black, queer social activists.

The women of Black Lives Matter. Three activists wanted to be identified as Black Lives Matter leaders affiliated with the official organization. Alicia Garza is one of three co-founders of the international group. Her love letter to black people after George Zimmerman's acquittal in the Trayvon Martin murder trial in July 2013 contained the original #BlackLivesMatter hashtag. When Garza's friend (and co-founder of Black Lives Matter), Patrisse Cullors, shared the letter to Twitter it went viral. Garza is based in Oakland, California. She is an award-winning community organizer who championed workplace equality in the Bay Area prior to establishing Black Lives Matter. She self-identifies as a member of the LGBTQ community and emphasizes the inclusion of queer leaders in the movement. I interviewed Garza in person, at a mid-Atlantic university in October 2015, after she facilitated a closed-door workshop on self-care.

Marissa Johnson was a member of the Black Lives Matter Seattle chapter. She gained notoriety in August 2015 when she interrupted presidential hopeful Sen. Bernie Sanders at his Seattle campaign rally. Her assumption of his podium dominated the news headlines for several weeks. Prior to that protest, Johnson organized "die-ins" at local businesses in Seattle to oppose the shooting deaths of unarmed black men by police. One die-in shut down a major downtown mall on Black Friday 2014. Johnson self-identifies as an evangelical Christian, a former theology student, and a "biracial, queer woman." Johnson spoke, via FaceTime, to my mobile journalism class at a Maryland HBCU in February 2017.

Shellonnee Chinn is a member of the Black Lives Matter Rochester, New York, chapter. She is a former educator at a prominent private secondary school in Buffalo, where she taught for 15 years. She claims she was fired after she complained about discriminatory teaching practices in the classrooms and filed suit in federal court against her former employer in 2015. While the case is ongoing, Chinn has taken to social media to report on educational inequalities in her state. My mobile journalism students and I interviewed Chinn via Google Hangout in February 2017. She gave us incredible insight into how she believes U.S. schools—with their metal detectors and armed security guards—normalize police brutality for young people of color.

The "Day 1's." The leaders in this group believe that the movement did not begin until the Ferguson, Missouri, uprisings in August 2014, in the wake of Michael Brown's death. In the months that followed those protests, they called themselves the "Day 1's," to differentiate themselves from activists who did not have actual boots on the ground in the early campaigns. The Day 1's were the movement's first fact checkers, churning out data and eyewitness news from the frontlines that served often as a corrective to legacy media reports.

Brittany Ferrell is a native of St. Louis, Missouri. She was a founder of the now-defunct organization Millennial Activists United (MAU). When she began protesting in the days after Michael Brown's death, she went on Twitter to find like-minded demonstrators in her age group, since she said the earliest activists actually were friends of Brown's mother, Lesley McSpadden. Ferrell found Alexis Templeton and Ashley Yates on Twitter. The three women founded MAU and pushed to have Officer Darren Wilson prosecuted for Brown's murder. Ferrell self-identifies as a mother, a nurse, and Alexis's wife. She and Templeton were married months after meeting for the first time during the protests. My students and I interviewed Ferrell via FaceTime in February 2017. She was gracious enough to take part in one of the longest interviews, even though she was on her way to a 12-hour work shift as a nurse.

Brittany Packnett Cunningham is also a native of St. Louis, Missouri. She is Vice President of National Community Alliances for Teach for America and co-founder of We the Protestors (WTP), which has several initiatives. Campaign Zero, for example, is a 10-point plan to reduce police violence in the United States. Packnett Cunningham created the policy-oriented organization—with DeRay Mckesson, Johnetta Elzie, and Samuel Sinyangwe—after the four met on the frontlines in Ferguson. Packnett Cunningham is a former appointee to Pres. Barack Obama's 21st Century Policing Task Force. She self-identifies as a Christian, a daughter, a sister, and a community activist.

Samuel Sinyangwe is the last of the Day 1's that I interviewed. The 2012 Stanford University political science graduate was working at PolicyLink, a Bay Area social justice nonprofit, when Ferguson erupted in 2014. He said he contacted DeRay Mckesson on Twitter to ask how he could help once he arrived in the city, after noticing Mckesson's trending tweets. Sinyangwe became chief data scientist of WTP. His first project was "Mapping Police Violence," which curated statistics from disparate police databases around

the country to a centralized record. Sinyangwe is a native of Orlando, Florida, who said he was inspired to study political science as a means to fight for social justice when Trayvon Martin was killed in his home state. Sinyangwe self-identifies as a son and an eventual political science professor. I interviewed Sinyangwe via FaceTime in February 2017.

The Masters of Agitprop. All of the activists who use art as social propaganda fell into the group Masters of Agitprop. These leaders have created much of the visual culture that we associate with the Black Lives Matter Movement. Devin Allen is the self-taught photographer who shot the now-iconic images of the Freddie Gray protests in April 2015. Allen's pictures of Baltimore in turmoil landed on the cover of *TIME* magazine, making him one of few amateur photographers ever to achieve this feat.[3] He said that the late Gordon Parks, the legendary black photographer for *LIFE* magazine, is his idol. Allen's images hang in the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. He is a philanthropist who collects donated cameras to disseminate to Baltimore youth. Allen self-identifies as a black man, a father, and a survivor of Baltimore's gang violence. I interviewed Allen in person, in his favorite neighborhood store, City of Gods, in October 2016. It was a near-two hour session in which his friends and neighbors trickled in and out of the shop to hear him speak.

Dread Scott (née Scott Tyler) is a New York-based visual artist who creates live installations, paintings, photographs, prints, and videos about African American human rights issues. In the year of the Sterling-Castile double tragedy, Scott remade the NAACP's historic black flag that read, "A Man Was Lynched Yesterday." The original NAACP flag flew outside the organization's headquarters in the 1930s as the group pushed for anti-lynching legislation in Congress. Scott's 2016 version of the flag read "A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday." The reimagined pennant stoked as much controversy as the original. The landlord of the exhibiting museum threatened eviction if it was not removed immediately. Scott self-identifies as a black man and an artist with "Communist sensibilities." We spoke via FaceTime in November 2016.

Lincoln Mondy is the writer and producer of the film, *Black Lives, Black Lungs*. His documentary on the tobacco industry's targeting of African Americans earned him seven visits to the Obama White House to discuss the links between the Black Lives Matter Movement and public health. Mondy is a 2016 graduate of The George Washington University in Washington, DC. He screened his film at his commencement and served as its keynote student speaker. Mondy now serves as senior manager of strategic projects for

Advocates for Youth, a DC-based nonprofit. Mondy self-identifies as a biracial black man. I interviewed him in person early one October 2016 morning as we strolled through his neighborhood in Washington, DC.

The Bards. This group of activists comprises poets and musicians. They have attained their status as the most popular of all black witnesses on Twitter by providing prolific updates and thoughts on the movement. Eve Ewing is an alumna of Harvard University's Graduate School of Education and a current assistant professor in the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration. She studies inequality in the U.S. public education system. Ewing is a founding editor of *Seven Scribes*, which aspired to create a digital space for African American audiences to enjoy long-form journalism when it launched in 2015. The publication was born after a $10,000 Kickstarter campaign garnered more than $14,000. Ewing uses Twitter to provide updates on black activism in her native Chicago. As the daughter of a professional journalist, she is careful not to label herself as a reporter, however, even though her essays have been published in the *Nation* and *New Yorker*. She self-identifies instead as an essayist, a poet, a cultural organizer, and a black woman. I interviewed Ewing for nearly two and a half hours on FaceTime one rainy afternoon in February 2017. She was incredibly instrumental with linking me to other activists too.

Clint Smith is a PhD candidate in education at Harvard University. He studied alongside Ewing during her time there. He became a leading voice in the Black Lives Matter movement when his TED talks, "How to Raise a Black Son in America" and "The Danger of Silence," went viral, with more than 6 million collective views and counting. Smith's poetry on growing up black in the Deep South, witnessing police brutality, and fearing violent death have become award-winning pieces of literature. His essays have appeared in the *New Yorker* and *American Poetry Review*. Smith identifies as a teacher, a poet, an inequality scholar, and a black man. He splits his time between Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Washington, DC. Smith granted me a FaceTime interview in February 2017.

David Banner (née Lavell William Crump) is a graduate of Southern University and A&M College, an HBCU in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Banner began his career as a critically acclaimed rapper. After several chart-topping hits and a lucrative record deal, Banner said he began to feel conflicted about the music he was making. In 2007, he testified in a Congressional hearing on explicit rap, which the Democratic Representative from Illinois, Bobby L. Rush, convened. Banner stopped using denigrating lyrics after

his testimony. He rebranded himself as a composer and took on Fortune 500 companies as clients, penning music for global advertising campaigns. When the world turned its eyes on Ferguson in 2014, however, Banner's focus shifted again. He became a sought-after lecturer on police brutality and representations of blackness in the media. His Twitter updates during the Ferguson protests earned him invitations to appear on cable news networks and on local TV and radio shows around the country. He visited Ferguson to facilitate meetings between the Bloods and Crips gangs, which called ceasefires to help the city heal after Michael Brown's death. For all of these reasons, supporters of the Black Lives Matter Movement consider Banner a leader in the overarching campaign to end police brutality although he does not identify with the organization. Banner is a self-described hip-hop intellectual and social entrepreneur. He lives and works in Atlanta, Georgia. Banner spoke to my mobile journalism class via Google Hangout in February 2017. When the university's WIFI dropped our laptop connection, Banner was so dedicated to the interview that he finished it through the magic of LTE—chatting with us by FaceTime as we crowded around my cellphone.

The Rogues. This final cohort of leaders has rejected any attempts from journalists or academics to label them as activists working within the Black Lives Matter Movement. All three Rogues, however, have different reasons for doing so. L. Chris Stewart is founding partner of the Atlanta-based law firm, Stewart, Seay & Felton Trial Attorneys, LLC. He has represented the families of both Walter Scott and Alton Sterling in various lawsuits against the police departments and the individual police officers who shot both men. Stewart said he serves as an ally to anyone who is pursuing civil rights for vulnerable populations. While working with local Black Lives Matter chapters is sometimes part of this strategy, he noted that he collaborates with other organizations too. Stewart is the recipient of the 2014 Esquire Award from the National Bar Association. Additionally, his peers designated him a Super Lawyer for the State of Georgia for four straight years, from 2011 to 2015. Stewart self-identifies as a civil rights attorney, a husband, and a Christian. He spoke to me by FaceTime before a day in court, in February 2017.

Ieshia Evans was the subject of the viral photographs of the Alton Sterling protests in August 2016. She was pictured in a peaceful standoff with Baton Rouge police. They were wearing riot gear. She was wearing a sundress. Evans eventually was arrested and charged with obstructing a

highway. After being released from jail, she said she planned to return to New York to live a quiet life. When someone created a fake Twitter account in her name, however, she decided to bear witness on the platform with her own verified account. Evans has conducted international interviews about her civil disobedience since she became a media sensation. She emphasized, though, in our interview that she went down to Baton Rouge from her native New York in the summer of 2016 on her own. She is not affiliated with any Black Lives Matter chapters or allied groups. Evans self-identifies as a "regular degular girl from Brooklyn," a mother, and a black woman. Evans spoke to my mobile journalism class via FaceTime one afternoon in February 2017.

Finally, Mark Luckie has toed the line between legacy media and black witnessing. Luckie is a former *Washington Post* National Innovations editor who went on to work as Twitter's first manager of journalism and news in 2012. At the end of his tenure at Twitter in 2015, Luckie lamented the life of an African American staffer at the company in a *USA Today* editorial piece. He wrote "Witnessing firsthand the lack of faces of color instilled in me the desire to apply my technology skills toward the visibility of Blacks in media."[4] Luckie left Twitter to join the staff of Reddit in February 2016. The social bookmarking service named him its first-ever head of journalism and media. Nine months later, however, he quit, citing the same lack of diversity he had witnessed at Twitter. He launched his own site, *Today in #BlackTwitter*, to amplify voices from the Black Lives Matter Movement. He shuttered that webpage in the fall of 2016 though, citing the desire to escape the "litany of hashtags of slain black men and women," which traumatized him, he said. In October 2017, Luckie signed on at Facebook as its strategic partner manager of influencers. His quick departure from that job the following year led to another round of open letters and mainstream media interviews—this time about the company's alleged censorship policies against black users' commentary on the Black Lives Matter Movement and other social justice campaigns.[5] He told the *Guardian* in a November 27, 2018, article, "In some buildings, there are more 'Black Lives Matter' posters than there are actual black people." Luckie offered lots of insight in his interview about how African Americans over-index on many social media platforms, yet are silenced increasingly when they attempt to use those platforms to protest. Luckie self-identifies as a former journalist and a gay, black man. He is based in Atlanta. He participated in an interview via Skype in February 2017.

A Dozen Reasons to Bear Witness

In each high-profile incident of police brutality that occurred between 2014 and 2018, the frontline black witness typically retreated from view. Many of them—like Ramsey Orta who filmed Eric Garner's death in New York—either expressed regret for coming forward or frustration with the media frenzy that invaded their privacy. Remarkably though, distant black witnesses—like our 15 activists—were eager to continue the work of looking when the initial frontline witness left the public sphere. To investigate how and why these activists performed any of this journalistic labor I established some guiding research questions. First, I wanted to explore the lived experience of bearing witness while black. What are the trials, triumphs, risks, and rewards associated with doing this kind of work? Second, I sought to understand how much activists relied on their smartphones for storytelling. Third, I wanted to know how they used social media in their news production mix.

I identified a dozen themes in my talks with the activists: (1) a desire to revise news narratives; (2) a sense of responsibility to bear witness; (3) a belief that their reports could redress police brutality; (4) an abiding love or fond regards for their community; (5) a retrospective appreciation for predecessor activists; (6) an acknowledgment of personal risks they faced by engaging in activism; (7) an unresolved rage against racism and the ongoing lack of police accountability; (8) a desire to see the movement (and victims of fatal police shootings) redeemed in mainstream media; (9) a sense of seeing themselves reflected in the body of a victim; (10) a feeling of mourning or requiem for the victims; (11) a sense of regret, at times, for joining the movement so visibly; and (12) a sense of how their religion did (or did not) influence their decision to bear witness.

Creating the Counternarrative

All 15 activists said that they felt a responsibility to bear witness to the anti-police brutality movement to revise existing news narratives. The activists aimed to challenge racism, sensationalism, or factual errors in legacy news reports. They felt existing news frames encouraged police brutality and public support for "law and order." Additionally, they believed deeply that changing news narratives about black people could help curb police brutality against them. A few of the activists spoke specifically about a cable television

news broadcast that angered them most. They recalled that Wolf Blitzer sat behind his news desk on the set of CNN watching the peaceful protests in West Baltimore give way to violence on a late April afternoon in 2015. The community had just buried Freddie Gray, who sustained fatal spinal injuries while in police custody. In the days leading up to Gray's funeral, Black Lives Matter activists asked the Baltimore Police Department for more information about the cause of his death. Answers were not forthcoming. Frustrations mounted. On the day of Gray's funeral, some citizens began to loot stores and destroy property in the city. Blitzer attempted to relay the mélee, in real time. He said: "This is a picture of a CVS pharmacy, and casually people are just going in there—they're not even running—they're going in there, stealing whatever the hell they want to steal in there, and then they're leaving, and . . . I don't see any police there. Where are the police?"[6]

Just a few hours later, in nearly identical language, CNN's evening news anchor, Don Lemon, asked why the mayor and governor had not called a state of emergency to summon the National Guard to intervene as black youth descended upon Baltimore's tourist district of the Inner Harbor. Both Blitzer and Lemon were pilloried by their journalism colleagues for suggesting that law enforcement officers quell violence, rather than instigate it.[7,8] The *Rolling Stone* specifically described Blitzer as "a man of breathtaking stupidity, who daily belies his catchphrase of 'watching very closely' with a myopia that dwarfs Mr. Magoo's."[9] By focusing on the destruction of buildings, cars, and other material goods, critics said that the underlying causes of the riot, which included police brutality and longstanding disinvestment in Baltimore's poorest and blackest neighborhoods, were ignored.[10,11]

Many news outlets sensationalized the riots too, journalist Natalie Keyssar claimed in a May 3, 2015, *Medium* blog post, writing that: "For about 23½ hours a day since I've been here, I've seen nothing but peaceful protest . . . [but] turning on network news in my hotel room, I see the same loops of these brief moments of violence over and over, with the name of the city plastered across images of fire and mayhem." Keyssar's testimony served as a springboard to explore why the activists I interviewed believe we need fresh news frames about the anti–police brutality movement. Many of the activists said that traditional journalists did not do a good job covering the protests in which they took part. Brittany Packnett Cunningham, for example, one of the Day 1's, had driven to Kansas City in early August 2014 to deliver a series of talks to high-school-aged girls. The afternoon that Michael Brown died, she said she was online when she saw a picture of Brown's stepfather. She

recalled: "He had written on a piece of cardboard, 'Ferguson Police just killed my unarmed son.' And I posted it [online], and reposted it, and then I started to follow along with what was happening."

Packnett Cunningham had not known Brown, but Ferguson and St. Louis are "right next door to each other," she explained. She had grown up traveling back and forth in between the two cities, as did most of their residents. To hear that her hometown was in crisis touched her in a very deep way, Packnett Cunningham shared. She said her social media timelines began to flood with images of "very young people going out there, and being met with German Shepherds and an armed police force, when they were unarmed and peaceful." She was stunned. Packnett Cunningham left Kansas City a day early.

"The whole drive back, I remember feeling like, I told these young women today to be leaders *one* day, but the time is now," she said, adding, "Clearly this world is calling for them to step up now." Packnett Cunningham recalled all of this one rainy afternoon in February 2017, as she sat in a Washington, DC, coffee shop. We were on FaceTime. Even though it had been three years since her frontline demonstrations in Ferguson, she remained appalled by how it was portrayed in the mainstream. Much of the black civil disobedience that looped on television actually were acts of self-defense, she explained with a frown:

> CNN was sitting there saying: "People are breaking into the McDonald's—there's more looting happening." Well, we would go on the [live]streams and what we'd be tweeting is that people are being tear-gassed and they're breaking into the McDonald's because they had milk in the McDonald's and milk is what you have to use on tear-gas. Not water. That is the instantaneous correction that you're allowed to have. We challenged the mainstream media, who were outsiders to our community, to tell the truth.

Packnett Cunningham said that she continued to use Twitter to provide updates on the movement after she saw how vulnerable her community would be to legacy media's chosen narratives. "Media needs to always be held accountable," she said, adding, "The same kind of relationship that we should have with the free press, it's the same kind of relationship we should have with Democracy. We should engage with it and reserve our right to criticize."

Brittany Ferrell, another Day 1 as well as busy mother and full-time nurse, sat in her car to chat with me one afternoon, adjusting her smartphone

occasionally to maintain our connection on FaceTime. She chose to conduct her interview in the presence of my journalism students, as she is passionate about youth civic engagement. She spoke of her use of Twitter to debunk legacy media reports in the same tone as Packnett Cunningham. She explained, "The upside is it [Twitter] definitely has helped me get the message out to the people who want to support this movement. It allows me a place to tell the truth without any bias or anybody policing the things that I choose to say. . . . It's like we are so much better connected in this struggle via social media because we know where to turn to when we need the truth."

Nearly every activist expressed some level of caution or outright cynicism when I asked if they trusted news media to tell their stories accurately. For Ieshia Evans, one of the Rogues, that answer was a resounding "no." When she participated in her first demonstration in July 2016—to protest Alton Sterling's killing in Baton Rouge—she said she was surprised to see it portrayed in the news as a riot. She told my journalism class one afternoon: "People were boisterous, they were rowdy as far as being very vocal but there was no violence. There was nobody throwing things." My students crowded around the FaceTime session on my laptop as I continued questioning Evans. Some students shook their heads in disbelief. Evans said the police on the scene became increasingly physical and started "pushing the protestors into the grass." She explained that the cops' behavior led to her now-iconic standoff. She recalled: "I don't even know what came over me but, I just decided to stand in the street, like what's your goal here? What's the reason why you guys are decked out in your war gear, and I'm in a sundress?"

Attorney L. Chris Stewart, who traveled to Baton Rouge from his native Atlanta to represent the Sterling family in the summer of 2016, said: "I was down there the whole time. There weren't mass riots everywhere. The demonstrations were really just certain streets, certain areas, and a lot of them were just kind of standoffs between the police and the protestors. You know, you're just kind of at the will of whatever the media says."

That sentiment—of feeling at the mercy of "the media" bears a bit of explication here. "The media" are made up of real people. And real people in the newsroom often rely on shortcuts to report a complex story quicker and easier—for better or worse. A few things have led U.S. journalism to this point, where words like "crime" or "War on Drugs" have become so loaded that they are synonymous with "blackness," for example. Many post-colonial theorists have described "blackness" as an identity that is thrust upon people of African descent, rather than an identity that they have selected for

themselves. Frantz Fanon, for example, recounted a time when a white child saw him and exclaimed, "Look, a Negro! *Maman*, a Negro! . . . *Maman*, the Negro's going to eat me."[12] Fanon described the encounter as an out-of-body experience, in which he did not think of himself as the black "Other," until the child singled out the identification for him. In that moment, he imagined the child must be conjuring up all that blackness *means*. He wrote "The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is wicked, the Negro is ugly."[13] Similarly, Stuart Hall wrote that people racialize "Otherness" by using a set of binary polarities. He theorized:

> There are the rich distinctions which cluster around the supposed link, on the one hand, between the white "races" and intellectual development—refinement, learning and knowledge, a belief in reason, the presence of developed institutions, formal government and law, and a "civilized restraint" in their emotional, sexual and civil life, all of which are associated with "Culture"; and on the other hand, the link between the black "races" and whatever is instinctual—the open expression of emotion and feeling rather than intellect, a lack of "civilized refinement" in sexual and social life, a reliance on custom and ritual, and the lack of developed civil institutions.[14]

In addition to these black/white binaries, Michael Omi and Howard Winant have argued that race might be a fluid social formation (rather than a fixed biological fact) too, which is "constantly being transformed by political struggle." One of the mediated battlegrounds for this struggle is television, they wrote, as it tends to "address the lowest common denominator in order to render programs 'familiar' to an enormous and diverse audience."[15]

Stuart Hall agreed that the visual medium is the strongest way to perpetuate racist stereotypes. He explained that imperialist iconography exploded in printed works at the end of the 19th century, after the Europeans encountered Africans on maiden voyages with increasing frequency.[16] Over time, derogatory photos and videos of black people became "controlling images," according to Sonja M. Brown Givens and Jennifer L. Monahan. Givens and Monahan have written that the particular portrayal of black women on TV shows and in film—as overweight mammies or as promiscuous Jezebels—translates directly to real life discrimination, especially in the workplace.[17] News media deal in these damaging tropes too though. While we know that popular culture exists to entertain us—and that those who are employed in those spaces may be putting on a persona—many people consider what they

see on the news to be true. Journalism enjoys an air of veracity that few other mediated platforms can match. The news never has been neutral or objective though—especially about race.[18,19] Instead, it has been influenced always by the dominant racial myths of its day.

Teun A. van Dijk explained in his book, *News as Discourse*, that three strategies work in tandem to make news appear neutral. First, journalists often emphasize the factual nature of events via eyewitnesses, reliable sources, and statistics. Second, news broadcasts use tried-and-true narrative frames that audiences can follow easily. Third, news stories provide information that stirs strong attitudes or emotions, which makes the piece more memorable.[20] I did not have to explain van Dijkian theory to these 15 activists. They identified unfair or incorrect news frames repeatedly in our interviews on their own. For example, Attorney Stewart said he disliked how the news media framed the African American cop killer in Baton Rouge, who emerged after the Alton Sterling shooting, as a member of Black Lives Matter:

> The guy who did that heinous crime and shot those officers in Baton Rouge: that had nothing to do with the cases, [or] with Alton Sterling. That was just a deranged individual. . . . [W]e see examples of crazy people doing stuff all the time—I mean Dylann Roof going, shooting up that whole church!—and the narrative in the media wasn't, "All white guys aged 19 or 20 are evil."

Stewart said news coverage like that made him want to start commenting, as much as the law allowed, on social networks like Facebook and Twitter. One of his most proud moments of witnessing occurred in February 2017, he said. He recalled that the Black Lives Matter chapter in Atlanta organized and led a rally to raise awareness about the police killing of an unarmed black man named Deaundre Phillips. Stewart was proud to see such a broad coalition of support in his hometown. "Seventy percent of that crowd was white," he said. When he turned on the news that afternoon, however, he recalled, "they called it a Black Lives Matter rally, and they only showed the black people, which I thought was just hilarious, because everybody out there was just shocked how many white people were out there supporting it, but you didn't see that."

I asked Stewart why he thought the news media in Atlanta framed the story that way. He shook his head and answered: "I get it, I mean that's fine, that [imagery] kills the narrative that white people don't support Black Lives

Matter and all that stuff, [but] through social media, I was able to show what the crowd really looked like." Stewart said he published his pictures and videos to Twitter to highlight the crowd's diversity.[21] He was happy, he said, when he saw the television station change its evening news broadcast to include more accurate images after he held them to task. "[When] social media covers stuff, it's kind of like a snowball effect," Stewart said, adding, "Once it starts rolling and it starts picking up and picking up and picking up, it's just really effective to let people know what's going on. Other than that, you have to rely on TV news, and that's not the most effective way, because you have no control over that."

Battling the Big Three News Myths

Part of crafting a counternarrative to racist news frames or images involves identifying first the prominent news myths that traditional journalists may peddle without even knowing it. Three of the most popular black stereotypes that circulate in the news are: (a) the myth of inherent black criminality, (b) the myth of black marginality, and (c) the myth of post-racialism. The activists told me they want to shatter all of these.

The myth of black criminality. Paul Gilroy has explained in his essay, "The Myth of Black Criminality," that as the U.S. Civil Rights Movement wound down in 1968, after the assassination of Dr. King, the rest of the Western world began to question whether immigration and integration were worthy experiments after all.[22] Particularly in Great Britain, conservative Member of Parliament Enoch Powell urged the UK government to police people of color more rigorously, lest, he said, "In this country in 15 or 20 years' time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man."[23] Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech described a dystopia where whites are overcrowded by uncouth, foul-smelling "Negroes" and their "wide-grinning piccaninnies."[24] The media coverage that the "Blood" speech garnered discouraged further anti–police brutality legislation and birthed the myth of black criminality, Gilroy explained in 1982:

> Indeed the recent history of "law and order" is scarcely separable from the growth of popular racism and nationalism in the period following Enoch Powell's famous intervention. Powell's wide-grinning piccaninnies have grown up, and with the onset of their adulthood, potent imagery of youthful

> black criminals stalking derelict inner-city streets where the law-abiding are afraid to walk after sunset has been fundamental to the popularization of increasingly repressive criminal justice and welfare state policies.[25]

Several journalism studies have assessed how this theory functions in televised news. Robert Entman found that between 1992 and 1994—immediately following the Rodney King video—African Americans were featured most commonly in crime news stories at both the local and national levels.[26,27] Specifically in Chicago, when journalists decided to include the names of suspects, whites were identified 72 percent of the time, but blacks were named only 28 percent of the time.[28] Entman concluded that namelessness dehumanized black suspects and reinforced the idea that bad individual black behavior represented a larger pattern of communal deviance.

Theodore Chiricos and Sarah Eschholz found that blacks and Latinos are four times more likely to be portrayed as suspects than as victims of crime in local Orlando television news, while whites are portrayed evenly.[29] Travis L. Dixon and Daniel Linz reported similar results in their survey of local Los Angeles television news, in that whites were more likely than African Americans and Latinos to be portrayed as victims.[30] News reports also overrepresented African Americans as perpetrators of homicide and underrepresented Latinos and whites as perpetrators of this crime.[31]

Paula M. Poindexter, Laura Smith, and Don Heider conducted a more longitudinal study of how race and ethnic groups were portrayed in local TV news, from the late 1980s to 1998. The team researched 26 stations across 12 cities. They claimed that while Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans were seldom the subjects of television news reports, African Americans "were more likely to be newsworthy because they had committed a crime."[32] Sixty-nine percent of the news stories that featured black people as the main subjects were about crime, whereas only 28 percent of the news stories that featured white people as the primary subjects were about crime.

I read some of these statistics to Samuel Sinyangwe throughout our interview in February 2017. Sinyangwe is a data scientist and one of the Day 1's. He is both enigmatic and nomadic. He wore all black clothing for our video teleconference and declined to comment on where he was based, yet his demeanor was warm and inviting. He is committed to dispelling news myths about black criminality, he explained. Sinyangwe recalled that he took a leave of absence from his job at PolicyLink, a Bay Area think-tank to protest in Ferguson in 2014. Once he arrived in Missouri, he said he kept hearing the

same two narratives: either that shootings like these were one-off events or that all shootings of unarmed black men began because the slain men had resisted arrest. He said: "I think when Mike Brown was killed in Ferguson and the protests started across the country, there was just this huge question about are these police shootings isolated incidents or a broader systemic issue? That was a data question, and every time that that was being asked, people were like, 'Well, we don't have the data.'" Sinyangwe said he discovered that the federal government did not collect data on fatal police shootings, but websites such as *Fatal Encounters* or *KilledbyPolice.net* did, he said. He decided to merge the data from both sites first. Then, he filled in the many statistical gaps. He explained:

> About 40 percent of the records were not identified by race, and so I went through social media profiles—like every social media [platform], like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram—went through obituaries, criminal records databases, and between those could actually identify more than 90 percent of the people in the database. Then for armed or unarmed—nobody was keeping track of that—so I had to go through all of the reports, both the community perspective, the police perspective, all of that, to identify that column. That was the dataset.

Sinyangwe said that being armed with this data made him realize that he could tell different stories about police brutality. I asked him to talk about a time when he believed his investigative reporting shifted an actual narrative in legacy news coverage of an event. His eyes lit up and a wide smile crossed his face. He explained a triumph in Colorado, where a police department challenged his data, only to find out their numbers were incorrect. A college newspaper then published an investigative piece about the department's underreporting of fatal police encounters. Many local newspapers then picked up the students' story.[33] Sinyangwe said:

> They [the police] got embarrassed in that article, but that's the crazy part about the work: it's the people who are supposed to be the professionals, like the criminologists and the professors and the FBI director and the police chiefs, they actually don't have as much data as I have sitting in my computer. It's easy to run circles around them in that way. I think that is cool and empowering.

Once the demonstrations in Ferguson tapered off in 2014, Sinyangwe said he began to analyze his home state of Florida when he realized that Orlando was "off the charts in terms of every level of police violence, whether it was use of force or stops and searches, arrests or killings," he said. Sinyangwe explained that once he realized this trend, he convened a meeting with the leadership of the Orlando Police Department (PD). The officers claimed that the high rates of excessive force were due to equally high rates of tourism. Sinyangwe crunched more numbers. He told Orlando PD that their rates were higher than New Orleans and Las Vegas, which have equal—if not more—annual visitors than Orlando. "They didn't have a response," Sinyangwe said, adding: "Nobody else could come and say, 'Actually, we have the data comparing you to all these other tourist locations.' After that, they were like, 'Okay, we're going to listen.'"

Sinyangwe said he audited the Orlando PD's use of force policy to show that the agency did not have a rule that restricted officers from using lethal force as a final resort. The police department in Tampa, about 90 miles away from Orlando, did.

Sinyangwe said: "We're like, 'Well, you know, Tampa has this policy in place. You guys don't have this policy in place, and this policy is associated with a 25 percent reduction in police brutality,' because we did that analysis."

The final pieces of data that helped convince Orlando PD to change its excessive force policies were his findings on why people were stopped by police in the first place. "We also showed that of the people getting killed by police, those interactions were starting off with people who were suspected of, quote, 'suspicious activity,' or drug possession—like small, minor things that then get escalated into deadly force. That helped debunk this narrative that police were killing people because they were trying to apprehend violent criminals," Sinyangwe said.

After Sinyangwe recounted what he regards as his major victories, I asked how professional journalists respond to his investigative reporting. After all, he tweets all of the statistics he finds in near real time and even fact-checks *their* work. He laughed wryly. He said that some journalists respect his data. Others seem to be waiting for him to make a mistake. He talked about July 2016, for example, as one of the most fast-paced reporting cycles he has endured in the wake of the back-to-back killings of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling. He recalled that after the news first broke about Sterling's death, he engaged in what he called "rapid response." He said:

> As soon as that [Sterling shooting] happened, I'm opening my computer, pulling the spreadsheet, pulling all the facts for Baton Rouge. I tweet them all out immediately about the disparities, how they rank with other the [police] departments, about how that's related to policy issues—all of that—so it can then get incorporated in the media coverage. . . . You never know when something's going to happen, and you have to be able to respond immediately to those situations, and you can't fuck up. They [mainstream media] don't have any data, but they're still able to control narratives, and that's crazy, but if we have any problems with our data, like all of a sudden, we are the people you shouldn't listen to. That's a different double standard. Our shit has to be right all the time.

Attorney Stewart said he eschews early news reports and resists the urge to jump into the reporting fray quickly. He opts instead to conduct independent investigations in his capacity as a civil rights lawyer. He said he was sitting in church one Sunday morning in April 2015, for example, when he received an urgent message through Facebook's text messaging feature on his smartphone. It was Walter Scott's niece.

"She messaged me and said it was an emergency and said that her uncle had just gotten killed the night before, and the family really wanted to talk to an attorney. She had seen all of the work that I had done on other civil rights cases on Facebook, and she had gone to our website," Stewart said. He promised to contact her after the worship service concluded. When Stewart eventually connected with Scott's brothers and mother by phone, he said he felt the police department's official report sounded suspicious. Stewart said:

> The video wasn't out. You know, we didn't even know there *was* a video. They asked me to look into it online through the articles and tell me what I thought. I looked at the articles that were out in the media, but they were all saying that Walter Scott had tried to kill the officer . . . [and] you have to kind of go with your gut, and it just didn't sound right—a man that age fighting a cop—none of it made sense. The family said if I could be there by the morning, then they would pick me as their lawyer, so we hopped in the car and drove eight hours up there. Then, once we got up there, we started hearing rumors that there was a video.

In both Sinyangwe's and Stewart's work, there is a stated dedication to debunking the persistent myth of black criminality—that African Americans

deserve harsher policing strategies because they are predisposed to commit crimes. This is not easy frame to contradict, since doing so often requires time. Sinyangwe, for example, took several months to develop his complete database of fatal police shootings. Many newsrooms today do not have the luxury of working on a project that long. Shortcuts and stereotypes, therefore, become de rigueur under the strain of a daily deadline and cost constraints. Moreover, black trust in legacy media is waning. That Scott's family wanted to talk to an attorney before a member of the press is, perhaps, very telling.

The myth of black marginality. Many of the activists communicated a desire to be seen more fully in the news. Our hometowns and our people are featured only when there is trouble, was a common refrain. Media scholar Christopher P. Campbell has called this phenomenon the myth of marginality. Campbell's studies of local television news in the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots reported that the newscasts were full of threatening images of minority crime suspects—many shown in police mug shots, others bound in handcuffs closely guarded by police. "Considering the general dearth of minority coverage on the evening news," he wrote, "these may be the most dominant images of nonwhite Americans."[34] Campbell argued that black human-interest stories would balance such coverage, yet television news stories rarely examine everyday black life. He wrote, "the paucity of coverage of minorities and minority life contributes to a myth of marginalization—people of color exist at the periphery of mainstream society and do not merit the attention granted to whites."[35] Clint C. Wilson and Felix Gutierrez said that this inclusion of people of color only to discuss hot-button issues, such as immigration or social welfare, serves to frame minorities as "problem people," who are "projected as people who either have problems or cause problems for society. The legacy of news exclusion thus leads to the majority audience seeing minorities as a social burden."[36]

Campbell suggested that diversity in the newsroom could help correct the myth of marginalization, since people of color might propose stories that simultaneously elucidate universal truths and highlight varied worldviews. At the time of his study in 1995, only 4 percent of local television news directors were people of color, and whites held 92 percent of the supervisory jobs that usually lead to those positions, such as assistant news director, assignment editor, or executive producer.[37] Twenty years later, in 2015, Joshunda Sanders still bemoaned the lack of newsroom diversity. She wrote: "The number of black journalists in traditional media dropped 40 percent since 1997 in a profession that had in its ranks a little more than 36,000 employees by the

2013 count of the American Society of News Editors . . . . [A] 2012 Radio Television Digital News Association diversity study reported that 86 percent of television news directors and 91.3 percent of radio news directors are Caucasian."[38] Sanders called these statistics startling in the face of U.S. demographics, which project that minority ethnic groups will become the majority by 2043.[39]

Devin Allen, one of our Masters of Agitprop, said that all of this is why he tries to show the beauty that he sees in black Baltimore; not just its turmoil. It is why he chose a local clothing store, City of Gods, as our meeting place for the interview, he said. It is his stomping ground. It is his place of peace. Men at the barbershop next door greeted him by his nickname—*Hey, Moody!*—as we walked inside to get started. The homegrown celebrity waved, greeting everyone with an easy grin. Some of the onlookers followed us into the store, standing quietly in the doorway as the interview began.

"I try to tell people with my art in Baltimore, if you see me taking pictures, I'm not wandering around," he said, adding: "All my pictures are in West Baltimore for the most part—you might catch me over East sometimes, but I rarely go in East Baltimore—so you don't see pictures of East Baltimore. I'm not one of these people going out looking for something. This is my life."

Allen mentioned that his earlier work before the Freddie Gray uprisings captured black women with "natural hair, no makeup, not models, just my friends," he said. He endeavored also to photograph the positive things police officers did in his community to provide balance to black-versus-blue tropes. He admitted this was difficult to do initially. He said: "The thing is, I had so many run-ins with the police, and I still do! I'd get pulled over for the dumbest things, but the thing is, growing up in Baltimore, we learned at a very young age how to avoid them."

Like Sinyangwe, Allen said he feels his reportage has created entry points for dialogue between African Americans and police. He explained: "My photography has allowed me into spaces to literally influence some changes. Anytime, I can have an art show and have the [Baltimore City] police Commissioner on the panel," he shook his head incredulously. His eyes began to well with tears. He let out a low whistle and said: "I did an art show for my youth [photographers], and he [the Commissioner] came. I was like, 'I want him on the panel. He needs to be on the panel. He needs to see my kids' work. Period.'"

"This is the area that police are constantly . . . " his voice trailed off, brimming with emotion. In this delicate moment, the men who were

gathered to witness Allen's interview—his friends—all averted their gaze from him. It was as if they knew their eyes were viewing a private moment of rawness that many men do not display publicly. Some of his friends sighed, as if they were fighting back tears themselves.

"People are being . . . " Allen's voice cracked. He still was not ready to finish his sentence. He paused to collect himself.

"Take your time," one of the men whispered from the store's doorway.

There was silence. A heaviness that seemed to be honoring the city's dead.

Allen sighed deeply, and after a while explained, "This is where Freddie Gray is *from*, and if you don't smother and kill our kids—this is what they can do."

The men in the room exhaled as Gray's name hit the air. That is when I realized his friends had been holding their breath, waiting to see if Allen could bear to speak of him. To this community, black life is not marginal. It is not something to be highlighted only in times of crisis. Black life is rich, beautiful, and complex, Allen said.

The myth of post-racialism. The last recurrent news myth that the activists sought to disrupt is that of a "post-racial America." Post-racial America is a mythical place where all of the old markers of segregation have fallen away to forge a promised land of equal opportunity. Helen Neville, M. Nikki Coleman, Jameca Woody Falconer, and Deadre Holmes have explained: "Social scientists argue that a color-blind racial framework is a contemporary set of beliefs that serves to minimize, ignore, and/or distort the existence of race and racism; at its core is the belief that racism is a thing of the past and that race and racism do not play an important role in current social and economic realities."[40] The façade of post-racialism is most evident when journalists either use naively optimistic news frames that gloss over lingering racial tensions or apply verbal or visual double standards in their coverage of ethnic minorities. To the first point, Christopher Campbell, for example, has noted that local news outlets' portrayals of Martin Luther King Jr. Day in the early 1980s largely ignored lingering hostilities toward the federal recognition of this holiday and pushed forward, instead, tales of racial harmonies.[41] More recently, news audiences viewed these same tropes in the headlines that announced Pres. Barack Obama's historic win as the first black Commander-in-Chief of the United States in 2008 and 2012. He was "The Dream Realized" for hundreds of newspapers and newscasters who parroted the pronouncement that racism was officially over.[42]

To the second point, racialized double standards in the news contradict the idea of colorblind post-racialism—and most African Americans know it when they see it. For example, early Hurricane Katrina coverage in August 2005 claimed that blacks were "looting" stores for food, while whites were "finding" provisions for their families.[43] Moreover, news anchors described the forced black migrants as Katrina "refugees" within their own country, while whites were regarded as "evacuees."[44] Such nuances in language are not a matter of mere personal preference. The connotations of choosing one word over another during the Katrina aftermath spoke volumes about a journalist's potential view of the story's subject—as either a criminal or a victim; as roaming marauders to be shut out or displaced victims to be welcomed.[45]

Our 15 activists were aware of these kinds of double standards too—especially when it came to coverage of the Black Lives Matter Movement between 2014 and 2018. More than half of them said that they were angered when the media chose words like "race riot" to describe the peaceful demonstrations that they organized in their respective cities. Media scholar Jennifer Heusel has argued that using inflammatory language to report on black protests is a tool that elite media use to delegitimize black political demands. She explained that: "marking a race-conscious protest as a race riot [is a] normal expression of traditional racial hierarchy in the US. Such hierarchy maintains whiteness as invisible and always innocent, and blackness as highly visible and criminal."[46]

Brittany Ferrell, one of our Day 1's nodded when I mentioned this phenomenon to her. I asked what she thought about the framing of the 2017 Women's March in Washington, DC, which was organized to highlight women's rights and, in part, to denounce Pres. Donald Trump's growing catalog of misogynistic behaviors. In an infamous "hot mic" moment, Pres. Trump bragged to an entertainment reporter that a man of his stature simply can "grab them [women] by the pussy" without anyone ever complaining.[47] Women's March participants defiantly (and ironically) donned pink hats, stylized to resemble vaginas, at many of the nationwide protests. Although two of the Women's March organizers are women of color, the demonstration was regarded popularly as a white feminists' march. Ferrell's voice rose in anger as she dissected the media framing she felt the Women's March received. She said:

> I feel like a lot of white women went out and they were like, "Oh, this march is *peaceful*." And really putting the emphasis on *peaceful*. And it's like well,

> you know, our demonstrations were also peaceful, but when you see a sea of white women with pink vagina hats on their heads, white women are not going to be met with the same type of aggression from police officers as a community of traumatized, torn black people who continue over and over and over again to be traumatized. To be told that we don't matter. To be in communities where we don't have food, we don't have jobs, we don't have nothing! White women had the audacity to emphasize how safe their protests were! And it's like of course they were. They're protecting you! No one's protecting us. So [the news media] frame this narrative about how *this* is peaceful, and *this* is not. And it's like no, *this* is valued in society and *we* are not!

Ferrell recomposed herself. She was very near tears. She concluded quietly that black activists working in this moment should create independent media outlets, such as blogs, podcasts, and web video series, to reframe their organizational missions and leaders. Some of the activists said that the myth of post-racialism requires us to reframe even the deceased victims of police brutality. The news media state what seem to be objective facts about victims, they explained, yet those facts carry racist or classist connotations. For example: Eric Garner sold loose cigarettes illegally; Michael Brown robbed a convenience store; Freddie Gray was a petty thief; and Walter Scott had cocaine and alcohol in his blood when a white officer shot him in the back. In other words, if all of these unarmed black men were not in the process of committing crimes when police approached them, then the officers would not have killed them. How does one explain, then, the fact that *armed* white men—especially mass murderers—tend to survive high-profile encounters with police, while many unarmed black men have not? For example, police escorted Dylann Roof—the white man who shot nine black people during a June 17, 2015, worship service in Charleston, South Carolina—from the crime scene wearing a bulletproof vest, and later took him to a fast food restaurant for a meal.[48] Similarly, James Holmes, a white man who shot 12 people dead and injured 70 more in an Aurora, Colorado, movie theater in 2012, lived to stand trial in 2015.[49] Media scholar Jaclyn V. Schildkraut found that the news framed Holmes favorably, as the "Ph.D. student in a prestigious neuroscience program" who was "kind of quirky, just the way you expect smart people to be," "a bright but quiet and enigmatic student," and "a brilliant person that could've done a lot of good."[50]

Nancy A. Heitzeg has stated that this framing of white violent offenders—as the good guy gone bad—is normative. When whites commit heinous acts of violence, it is presented as divergent, while black violence is presumed inherent—even if the victim is black, she explained:

> There have been more mass shootings by white perpetrators, including Adam Lanza who killed his mother, twenty children and six adult staff members at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown Connecticut, and then himself. And more criminalization of Blackness, including that of Trayvon Martin, who, even as a victim, was demonized in death, and, in effect, put on trial for his very own murder.
>
> This is an old story too, one told and retold in various versions since the end of Reconstruction. It is a story of a white racial frame that largely denies white criminality and defines it when it must as an "aberration" . . . It is a story too of how this is made possible by the persistent attribution of crime to Blackness, the complicity of media in the framing of crime and criminals, and the reliance on differential sources of social control.[51]

Heitzeg's analysis is poignant in light of the fact that "seeing color"—especially in the newsroom—is supposed to be a relic of the 20th century. But given an increasingly polarized viewing public, where people select news now that matches their political leanings more than they ever did before, media scholars have begun to question anew what ideas people take away from daily broadcasts—especially in terms of race.[52] Some studies have shown that it takes only five seconds of exposure to a mug shot of an African American or Latinx youth offender in a newscast to raise the level of fear in a viewer. This increases their support for "law-and-order" policing styles, like the "stop-and-frisk" encounter that led to Amadou Diallo's 41 fatal shots, in 1999.[53,54] Other studies have found that exposure to news stereotypes triggers the perception of a facial threat from an unknown stranger—especially when that stranger is dark-skinned.[55,56]

Another body of research suggests that anti-black stereotypes are becoming ever more sophisticated, relying less on words and more on moving images to convey loaded meanings. Linus Abraham and Osei Appiah wrote: "[R]acial appeals in American politics now take place through visual imagery, without any explicit or overt reference to race . . . . [N]ews stories make implicit links between Blacks and negative thematic issues and concerns—such as violent crime, drugs, poverty, prisons, drug-addicted

babies, AIDS, and welfare—by predominantly juxtaposing or illustrating stories with images of African Americans."[57]

Abraham and Appiah called this post-racial practice of cognitive association, "implicit visual propositioning." This theory states that people file away a single, lasting image in one area of their brain, while attaching numerous verbal or textual meanings to that image in another area. In TV news, this has looked like looping photographs of an unsmiling Trayvon Martin wearing a hooded sweatshirt, instead of airing pictures of the teen grinning with his family. This implicit visual propositioning did not go unnoticed. The hashtags #IfTheyGunnedMeDown and #CrimingWhileWhite emerged from a desire to counter what was being suggested as Martin's inherent criminality.[58,59] Youth of all races began to post to social media images of themselves in stereotypical poses that were juxtaposed to wholesome poses, such as smiling graduation pictures, which begged the question, *Which image would the media choose if I was shot by police?* It was a compelling, yet damning question for mainstream news media to consider.

News frames, after all, help us categorize complex concepts into tidy, digestible dichotomies, for better or for worse. At their best, news frames make certain stories recognizable to us. We know a good sports underdog story, for example, when we see one. What may be harder to see though are news frames at their worst. Persistent news myths perpetuate the tendency to frame African Americans as inherently criminal, dismissively marginal, or simply "playing the race card" in a supposedly colorblind United States that has moved past all of that. These myths work in tandem to produce cumulative cognitive effects in news audiences, some of which are now knee-jerk in nature. This is the prevailing journalistic cause that black witnesses have taken up: to seize power from these negative images and narratives. Just like the woman I met in Kliptown in 2011—who had to walk a quarter of a mile to charge her cellphone in a truck—these activists can see, very clearly, who holds the power. And they want it.

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Chapter 3

1. My Facebook Live discussion about the role of black witnessing in excessive force cases is public. *See*: https://www.facebook.com/nbcwashington/videos/10154413415478606/. At the time of this writing, the video had upward of 17,000 views—even though both deaths took place outside of the Washington, DC, area where this NBC affiliate station is based. Those metrics indicate just how much the Alton Sterling and Philando Castile deaths struck a nerve throughout the United States—especially among black people.

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Chapter 4

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