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Black Lives Matter in Wartime

One of the most striking moments in the media coverage of the April 2015 protests in Baltimore following Freddie Gray's death in police custody came from an unnamed demonstrator who was recorded on BBC radio. In the midst of a riot escalated by police and National Guard troops in armored vehicles and combat gear firing tear gas at locals and Black Lives Matter demonstrators, the unnamed man pushed back against the pervasive war rhetoric surrounding the protests:

First of all, this is not a war. It's not a war. We want peace. But y'all got to give us that. And if y'all keep coming and taking everything we got, we gonna take what y'all got. We're not playing out here. This is not a war. But we want our rights. ("Newshour" n. pag.)

Invoking peace, not war, he demands attention to the underlying links between a militarized police force, economic inequality, and structural racism. In a fleeting but unforgettable moment of protest, we can hear an anonymous citizen of Baltimore, whom the reporter calls an "unnamed rioter," eloquently displacing the rhetoric of militarism in favor of a discourse of rights and economic inequality. This is a moment where the racialized narrative and spectacle of militarized policing is interrupted and a space for reflection can be briefly glimpsed. It reminds us that Black Lives Matter can be understood as an anti-war movement, and that to protest unchecked police brutality on American citizens of color means that we must challenge the logic of militarization that would make a war of everything.

One of the remarkable achievements of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has been to render visible and interrupt the pervasive reach of militarization in American society and to expose its intimate relationship

to longer histories of structural racism and white supremacy. To do so BLM has both intervened in the historical memory of America's wars, and challenged US citizens to question the logic of the war paradigm in the name of a demand for peaceful existence beyond the reach of unlawful police killings and state violence.

Black Lives Matter has drawn attention for its seemingly leaderless loose network structure, its leveraging of the potential of social media and viral circulation of cellphone videos, and its savvy use of hashtag activism and consciousness raising. The movement – and its spin-off activist projects, Campaign Zero, Stay Woke, and the Wikipedia based Resistance Manual – has also proved extraordinarily adept at manipulating visual culture. Its campaign against police brutality has moved into public policy debates in Campaign Zero's proposed agenda to reduce police killings of people of color. It has intervened in the tangled relationship between sports and the military in the "I Can't Breathe" protests by high profile NBA players like LeBron James and the NFL team protests against police brutality sparked by San Francisco 49er quarterback Colin Kaepernick's decision to "Take A Knee" during the National Anthem. BLM also took a leading role in the campaign to remove Confederate Memorials after the 2015 Charleston church massacre prompted Virginia's state government to take down monuments celebrating white supremacy (Lowery 180-184). The movement's explicit attention to LGBT issues has also had clear commonalities with the recent rise of the #MeToo movement. As Jared Sexton has argued in his Afro-pessimist meditation, "Unbearable Blackness,"

'Black Lives Matter' is, from its inception, a feminist and queer proposition. It does not require modification or specification or expansion against a presumptively male and heterosexual victim of anti-black violence. It *is* that modification and specification and expansion, the collective enunciation of black feminist and queer activist intervention and leadership (162).

The movement's focus on militarized policing helped lay the ground for the high school student #NeverAgain movement that followed the Parkland shootings at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School, protesting

the widespread availability of AR-15 style semi-automatic assault rifles as “weapons of war.” Most recently its legacy has informed the “Occupy ICE” protests against the Trump administration’s policy of forcibly separating and detaining the children of illegal immigrants from their parents. The movement’s ongoing relevance has been heightened by the election of President Donald Trump in November 2016 and by the seemingly endless series of police killings of young black men.

Challenging the war paradigm has been particularly important for Black Lives Matter, especially given that a persistent refrain at protests has been to appropriate war discourse to frame a pattern of structural racism that includes police brutality, a racist criminal justice system, mass incarceration, discrimination against LGBT people of color, persistent economic inequality, and the resurgence of white supremacist groups into public discourse in the wake of President Trump’s election. Unlike previous antiwar movements, they are not protesting a distant war, but one seemingly being waged at home. Interviewed by CNN’s Wolf Blitzer in August 2015, Julius Jones, founder of the Black Lives Matter chapter in Worcester, Massachusetts declared,

some people live in a world where it’s just a pressing issue in politics and some people live in a world where it’s actually our kids’ dying. And so if folks want to inform their own perspective on Black Lives Matter, it’s the urgency that we see in the video of Sam Dubose who got shot in the head point blank range in a car just for driving. It’s the urgency of Tamir Rice, who was 12 years old, who was shot literally for playing. And it’s the urgency of Sandra Bland, the case that everybody knows. So temper – I would say temper your perspective with the urgency that black lives are actively under attack and we are in a terrible war with our own country, African-Americans are Americans and we’re not treated like that. We’re not treated as if black lives matter. (Blitzer n. pag.)

By asking CNN viewers to “temper your perspective,” Jones evokes the various meanings of the verb to temper, which can mean both to harden a metal, to make more resilient through hardship, and also to moderate by diluting or qualifying. This is a strikingly nuanced use of war discourse, which would subsequently be lost in the FBI’s labeling of BLM organizers as terrorists or later controversies about a “war on cops.”

Yet, invoking war discourse, especially during wartime, can be a risky strategy, given its violent connotations and expansive tendencies in an era when wars have been declared on drugs, poverty, terror, cancer and a host of other social ills. Despite the absence of a clearly defined war culture emerging from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as I have argued elsewhere, war discourse and militarization proliferates in our everyday lives (*Mapping Contemporary War Culture* 54). Militarized uses of language permeate a staggering array of fields: in medicine and health, where patients are routinely in a “battle” against obesity or depression, or can find themselves locked into “losing the battle” against cancer; in business, where the *Harvard Business Review* recently urged corporate leaders to scale back on their use of war metaphors (Cespedes; Freedman 505–12); in policing, where the War on Drugs rages on; in sports, where the routine use of war metaphors converged with the battlefield as the NFL and the US military recently joined forces to “combat” the scourge of concussion and Traumatic Brain Injury; or in politics, where “embedded” campaign reporters follow candidates from their “war rooms” to “take the fight” to their political “foes.” This banal circulation of war rhetoric in the body politic can result in confusion between a dominant militarism and more plural and diffuse social processes of militarization.

For anti-war activists, this blurring of boundaries has two main risks: first it can ascribe a kind of totalizing inevitability to the war machine that undercuts individual and collective agency; second, this expansion of war discourse across civil society risks blurring the crucial distinction between war and peace, making harder the struggle to imagine and achieve a demilitarized world. Taking up this challenge – “First of all, this is not a war . . . We want peace” – I would like to explore what it might mean to think about Black Lives Matter as an anti-war movement that emerged in the aftermath of the invasion and occupation of Iraq (2003–2011), the ongoing war in Afghanistan (2001–present) and the seemingly endless “Long War” against terror waged by drone warfare in six countries and by Special Forces operating in 149 nations in 2017 (Chatterjee and Turse). What would it mean to connect this critique, “that black lives are actively under attack and we are in a terrible war with our own country,” with these ongoing US wars in the Global South?

Considering Black Lives Matter as an anti-war movement also reminds us that the US antiwar movement has been from its origins historically intertwined with anti-racist movements: from the protests against the Mexican War of 1846 as an attempt to expand slavery, the Abolitionist struggle against slavery and debates about military violence in the US Civil War, campaigns to desegregate the military in WWI and WWII and advocacy for veterans' rights, to the powerful connections between the non-violent tactics of the 1960s Civil Rights movement and the anti-war movement against the Vietnam war.¹ As Dr. Martin Luther King argued in May 1967, a month after his breakthrough speech "Beyond Vietnam": "Somehow these three evils are tied together. The triple evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism. The great problem and the great challenge facing mankind today is to get rid of war" (5). Black Lives Matter, as Wesley Lowery has noted in his influential history, *They Can't Kill Us All*, has a complex but profound relationship with this tradition: "Every social movement must grapple with the generational and tactical divides that arise between varying groups and factions that comprise the ground troops" (98-99). As Lowery notes of Cleveland's allied group, Movement for Black Lives:

Cleveland is built from a proud activist and civil rights tradition, with locals quick to note that it was here – partially in response to the civil right movement – that the first black mayor of a major American city was elected. That legacy left a mosaic of community organizing groups – from those focused on black-on-black crime, to those left over from Occupy Wall Street, to those who have for years worked on police brutality issues. (92)

To these local legacies can be added a longstanding tradition of critiques of American militarism and racism by William Lloyd Garrison, Henry David Thoreau, William James, Bayard Rustin, Juanita Lopez, Barbara Deming, Dr King or Cornel West. The US antiwar movement, as their voices and struggles make clear, has often doubled as a movement for social justice demanding a society free from the plague of racism and racialized poverty.

I will argue here that one of Black Lives Matter's crucial interventions has been to challenge and interrupt a much wider logic of the ongoing

low intensity militarization of American society, culture and economy. By intervening in the embedding of policing within military agendas and a permanent war economy, Black Lives Matter has denaturalized the spectacle of police violence against black bodies by re-embedding the stories of the young black men killed by police in a counter-narrative of outrage and protest. Despite the anxiety of advocates of policing reform that symbolism may distract and detract from policy proposals (Bearfield, Maranto, and Kingsbury), this symbolic politics both interrupts an institutionalized logic of structural racism and opens up a space for alternative debate and reform. It can do so because contemporary militarization is heavily invested in both symbolic and material forms of embedding military agendas within institutions and civil society.

Police Murders and Extraheavy Equipment: Resisting the Spectacle of Militarism

The most explicit policy proposal to emerge from Black Lives Matter movement to date has been Campaign Zero, a set of ten policy reforms launched in August 2015 designed to reduce the number of police shootings to zero. The focus of much media attention has been on the spectacle of paramilitary tactics and military hardware deployed by local police forces against communities of color. Although Black Lives Matter was started in 2013 to protest the vigilante killing of Trayvon Martin in Florida by George Zimmerman, and his subsequent acquittal, it was the heavy handed policing of the protests in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 following the police killing of Michael Brown and the Grand Jury's decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson which drew national media attention.² The spectacle of militarized policing of protestors in American suburbs became a familiar feature of the media reporting. As Robin D.G. Kelley has observed:

it wasn't the mere existence of protesters that made Ferguson an international story; it was the fact that the people who took to the streets faced down police with riot gear, rubber bullets, armored personnel carriers, semiautomatic

weapons, and a dehumanizing policy designed to contain and silence. To the world at large, Ferguson looked like a war zone because the police looked like the military. (Kelley 26)

Against racist narratives that represent communities of color as predisposed by culture and poverty to crime and thus requiring higher levels of aggressive paramilitary policing, Black Lives Matter has helped create a counter-narrative. Their protest movement has called attention to police forces deploying military tactics and weaponry against citizens of color to enforce a structurally racist criminal justice system that has disturbing commonalities with the experience of occupation.

The success of Black Lives Matter in the realm of political symbolism has led to anxieties about their politics of representation. A number of critics of the police killings of people of color have warned, for example, that focusing on the spectacle of military hardware deployed by police forces against communities of color may divert attention from the underlying logic of structural racism and the place of police departments in a larger neo-liberal logic of subjectification and “capitalization” that also includes profound economic inequality, a highly racialized criminal justice system and mass incarceration directed against people of color. Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore have argued: “The righteous outrage against police murders and extraheavy equipment enables a strange displacement (often unintended, yet also often cynically co-opted) of political focus from the necessarily systemic character of organized violence” (147). In their work connecting the vast budgetary expansion in manpower, equipment and resources or “capitalization” of the LAPD’s racialized policing since the 1960s to recent “Broken Windows” policing pioneered by NYPD Chief William Bratton, Gilmore and Gilmore contend:

Any focus on military-police interdependence might usefully drill down through both equipment and ideology to reveal the underlying strategies and practices that rebuild rather than weaken legitimacy . . . in a long moment of crisis. If the principal use of tanks and armor is to deliver a visual message via news and social media that those who demonstrate against police killing and other outrages are dangerous, then what is obscured behind that implicit

narrative? What, in other words, do police organizations do to secure their foundational role? . . . Whether the equipment was first designed for or acquired from the military or not, this process is capitalization. (147-48)

The community organizer Hamid Kahn has argued for the importance of focusing on more insidiously militarized tactics: “When we talk about militarized policing we often are talking about police use of military weapons. We also need to think about how police increasingly describe the people they monitor as insurgents or enemy forces” (Kahn 132).

In his recent work, Nikhil Singh has argued that we also need to situate such critiques in a longer history of settler colonialism at home and US “police actions” abroad that predates the current crisis around policing of communities of color: “The framing of what we now think of as war by police historically precedes what we often now describe as the militarization of policing, or the conditioning of police by war, which includes both the real and the metaphorical inflations of the term *war* to define battles against various domestic ills: poverty, crime, drugs, terror and the like” (Singh 53-54). As Singh reminds us, one of the corrosive effects of colonial and racial violence, like war discourse, is to blur boundaries and muddy thinking: “If the US era of continental settlement progressively translated war into policing and frontiers into borders, the globalization of the US realm translated policing into war and it became possible to think of war at home and police in the world. Crucially, colonial and racial precedents, institutions and practices remained instrumental to the blurring of these boundaries” (55-56). Drawing parallels between the simultaneous media reporting on the military presence in Ferguson and the Israeli invasion of Gaza in 2015, Robin Kelley has argued:

the consequences for the ruled ought not to be measured merely by the destructive force of American-made F-15s, cluster bombs, and white phosphorous, but also by the everyday routine of occupation: unemployment, poverty, insecurity, precarity, illegal settlements, state-sanctioned theft of water and land, destruction of local economies and agriculture, a racially defined security regime, the effects of permanent refugee existence. (26)

The Israeli assault on Gaza was predated, of course, by the US invasion and occupation of Iraq between 2003 and the official end of active combat missions in November 2011.

These cautions about the potentially distracting effects of focusing on police displays of military hardware parallel the intense debate about the circulation of civilian videos of police killings of young black men. There is also a long history of the embedding and normalization of racist images of killing and mutilation of black bodies within everyday life, which goes back to the photographs and mementos of lynching from the Gilded Age to the 1930s. In more aestheticized forms, these are a staple of popular entertainment in police dramas and films. Given this long and disturbing history of spectacular violence directed against black people, there has been an intense and illuminating debate amongst African-American journalists and scholars about the circulation of videos of police killings since the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012. Arguing against the circulation of videos of the police killings as “Spectacles of Black Death and White Impunity,” Kelly Hayes has asked, for example, “Have ‘the people’ not already seen what police terror looks like?” (Hayes n.pag; see also Balthaser).

Militarism, Militarization and Embedding

These concerns about political symbolism and the politics of representation not only reflect on the social media echo chamber in which Black Lives Matter has emerged as a protest movement. They also register the intense effort to embed militarized images and narratives within culture and everyday life which has escalated drastically since 9/11, the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the ongoing US global “Long War” on terror.

This is where it is crucial to distinguish between militarism and militarization. The greatest challenge for cultural critics, writers or activists seeking to understand this slippery terrain, as I have argued elsewhere, comes with equating war culture with a dominant culture defined by militarism, rather than as a more uneven process of militarization of culture and everyday life (*Mapping Contemporary War Culture* 52). Seen in this light, focusing on militaristic displays of police armored cars,

camouflage uniforms, helmets and gas masks, or paramilitary SWAT weaponry and tactics, can distract from the social impact of less overt forms of militarization like electronic surveillance or covert infiltration of activist groups or the use of Fusion Centers that combine military, FBI and police forces. Police militarism can also draw attention away from the brutal effects of criminalization and mass incarceration.

Militarism, as the historian John Gillis has observed, is an older concept typically “defined as either the dominance of the military over civilian authority, or, more generally, as the prevalence of warlike values in a society” (1). For this reason, militarism is a word that tends to be directed as a term of abuse towards enemies in wartime, becoming a convenient “way of displacing responsibility and blame” (1-2). To understand America’s recent war culture and the environment within which BLM has been waging its symbolic struggles, we are better served by thinking in terms of the messier concept of militarization, which has been influentially defined by Michael Geyer as “the contradictory and tense social process in which civil society organizes itself for the production of violence” (79).

The advantage of the idea of militarization is that it challenges our conventional ideas about the relationship between the state, its military institutions, and civil society. In liberal ideology these are seen as separate spheres into which war erupts from the outside from particular sources or at particular moments. For this reason, Geyer argues, “in order to avoid these mystifications we must move from the delineation of the ‘sites’ of militarization to the analytic recovery of the ‘process’ of militarization” (78). As Catherine Lutz has argued, as a social process this has far-reaching implications:

Militarization is intimately connected not only to the obvious – the increasing size of armies and the resurgence of militant nationalisms and militant fundamentalisms – but also to the less visible deformation of human potentials into the hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and to the shaping of national histories in ways that glorify and legitimate military action. (“Militarization” 320)

As Lutz persuasively argued in *Homefront*, her study of Fayetteville, NC, and its vast US Army base Fort Bragg, militarization also depends on the masking and censoring of longer historical continuities:

Much of the history and contemporary reality of war and war preparation has been invisible . . . to people both inside and outside the military – because it has been shrouded behind simplified histories or propaganda, cordoned off by secrecy laws, or been difficult to assess because so many consequences of running our military institutions are not obviously war-related. And so we have looked away from the costs of being a country ever ready for battle. The international costs are even more invisible as Americans have looked away from the face of empire and been taught to think of war with a distancing focus – “freedom assured” or “aggressors deterred” – rather than the melted, exploded, raped and lacerated bodies and destroyed social world at its center. (*Homefront 2*)

Because of its voracious claims upon us as citizens and its struggle to monopolize the cultural field, tracing the logic of militarization and war culture inextricably involves us in wider questions of politics and economics, of biopolitics and neoliberalism. As Matt Davies and Simon Philpott have argued:

Militarization impacts every aspect of daily life, enriching and rewarding some individuals, interests, regions and nations, immiserating and punishing others. It reconfigures relations of class, gender and sex, and is profoundly racist. However, it is also highly productive of abstract notions of citizenship and patriotism and is a powerful producer of historical narratives, particularly those that serve to justify and legitimize not just the use of violence in global affairs but also the economic and social organization of the polity required to produce the capability for such violence. (49)

One of the dominant strategies of militarization that has shaped contemporary US war culture since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 is that of embedding. Taking its name from the Department of Defense Public Affairs program launched in early 2003 that embedded over 600 journalists with military units during the invasion of Iraq, embedding is associated with

journalists' unprecedented, intimate access to front line military experience that generated vivid and compelling combat footage. Considered as a trope, embedding also helps reveal the particular forms militarization has taken since the end of the Cold War and the 1991 Gulf War in the era of mediatized high tech "shock and awe" warfare waged at a distance by an all-volunteer military. This logic extends to the appropriation of the aesthetic within war reportage, what I have called the embedded sublime, as well as in film, conflict photography, literary narratives and memoir ("Despicable Beauty").

This tendency reinforces the ideological framing of war powerfully challenged by critics like Judith Butler, Susan Sontag, Ariella Azoulay, Alan Feldman, Sylvia Shin Huey Chong or Sinan Antoon, which typically focuses on violent visual images. The militarized logic of embedding that has sought to capture the hearts and minds of US citizens since 2003, however, is both more generalized and more insidious since its power does not depend either on being positioned within the official war narrative or on explicitly reproducing its ideological framing, what Judith Butler calls its "regulation of perspective." It also goes beyond the visual. Like embedded reporting, which blurs the boundaries between the military's framing of the conflict and the "embed" reporter's perspective, the embedding of militarized narratives and images is both seductive and potentially confusing, often producing ethical and political hesitation in readers and audiences.

The embedding of military equipment, strategy and tactics into American policing has a long history that goes back to the 1960s when counterinsurgency tactics and weaponry like tear gas developed to combat guerilla warfare in Vietnam were deployed domestically to counter urban unrest and inner city rioting across US cities (see Schrader and Singh). Police departments have also proved adept at embedding media in offering ride-alongs for journalists, circulating police-camera and CCTV footage, and cooperating in reality TV shows like COPS and America's Most Wanted. Racialized images of young black men positioned as criminal, with facial features blurred for anonymity, are a constant feature. This police-friendly media environment was occasionally interrupted by amateur video, as in the case of the video of LAPD officers beating Rodney King in 1991. The

advent of high definition cellphone camera video and the call for police body cameras has vastly expanded the visual documentation of police activity.

Black Lives Matter and the Limits of War Discourse

The recent protests by the Black Lives Matter movement of the police shootings and deaths in custody of African Americans, have been often referred to as a “war” waged against urban black communities. The journalist Wesley Lowery reported on the unrest that followed the shooting of Michael Brown in August 2014:

While many residents of Ferguson had been deeply outraged by the violence and looting of the previous night, what upset them even more was the nightly militarized response of law enforcement. These suburban families weren’t used to seeing officers in riot gear, which further ingrained the image of a hostile occupying force in the minds of residents whose support would have been vital for the police to maintain order. (57)

This war rhetoric had emerged prominently after the police shooting of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014, as media images circulated of armored vehicles and heavily armed police in combat gear confronting street protests in Ferguson, Missouri (Bosman; Apuzzo). This tense standoff culminated in the deployment of the National Guard in November 2014, after the Grand Jury’s decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson. Investigative reporting in Ferguson by CNN uncovered National Guard internal documents that referred to protestors as “enemy forces” and used highly militarized language, intelligence gathering, and paramilitary tactics to prepare for their deployment against civilian protestors (Starr and Bruer n.pag.).

The language and techniques of war also came to the fore in both the reporting and the policing of demonstrations and riots in Baltimore, Maryland, following the death in police custody of yet another African-American man, Freddie Gray, in April 2015. Media reported on the

deployment of the National Guard and declaration of a curfew as local authorities struggled, somewhat clumsily, to manage perceptions of the images of militarism writ large in the civil authorities' response to the disturbances. After the Mayor of Baltimore closed the high schools on Tuesday, April 28, 2015, which resulted in large numbers of teenagers out on the Baltimore streets, one local resident, Donetta Dixon, was quoted by the *Guardian* as saying, "The police wanted a war, and now they have a war" (Swaine, Lewis, and Laughland n. pag.).

The authorities struggled to manage the undeniable spectacle of military force mobilized in the face of Black Lives Matter protests, which had turned the media narrative away through largely non-violent protests from lawless inner city people of color needing harsh policing to out of control police turning the streets into a war zone.

"This is not martial law," General Linda Singh, the commander of the Maryland National Guard, said at a press conference as troops arrived in armored vehicles. "Martial law means that at that point the military fully takes over, so we have not reached that point." (Swaine, Lewis, and Laughland n. pag.)

As General Singh's observation ironically suggested, the authorities did not need to declare martial law, given the heavy militarization of the police. Nor did they wish to provoke further national outrage.

War discourse is by its nature risky and hard to control. After the shooting of five police officers in Dallas by a lone gunman during a demonstration against police brutality in July 2016, and ambushes against police in Baton Rouge and Des Moines, a "war on cops" narrative circulated especially in right wing media. Despite the tragic shootings and inflamed rhetoric, a criminologist concluded that "the hard data suggest that policing was no more dangerous in 2016 than it has ever been" (Wing n. pag.).

War Comes Home

The rhetoric of a war on black bodies understandably conflates militarism and militarization. This is hardly surprising given the vast asymmetry between

the scale and relentlessness of the use of force by police departments against a largely nonviolent protest movement operating through social media and street protests. The Black Lives Matter movement has responded creatively to this discursive fluidity and blurring of boundaries by attempting to displace war discourse in the name of demilitarization in its Campaign Zero policy proposals. Campaign Zero draws on well-established critiques of the routine use of paramilitary tactics in the War on Drugs since the 1980s, when the Reagan Administration escalated federal funding, the transfer of military hardware and training to police departments, and the forfeiture of seized property (Alexander; Egan; Tierney). As Michelle Alexander has argued in *The New Jim Crow*, the current combination of racialized and militarized policing had its origin in the War on Drugs: “numerous paths were available to us as a nation, in the wake of the crack crisis, yet for reasons traceable largely to racial politics and fear mongering we chose war. Conservatives found they could finally justify an all-out war on an ‘enemy’ that had been racially defined years before” (52). These practices escalated with the end of the Cold War and have been further expanded in the domestic War on Terror and the policing of the anti-globalization and Occupy movements (Alexander 74-7; Baker; Schrader; Apuzzo).

In the wake of Ferguson, the *New York Times* reported that as “the nation’s wars abroad wind down, many of the military’s surplus tools of combat have ended up in the hands of state and local law enforcement” (Apuzzo n.pag). The article noted that small town police departments like Neenah, Wisconsin (pop. 25,000) had received Mine Resistant MRAP vehicles costing around \$700,000 from the Department of Defense’s 1033 program started in 1997: “During the Obama administration, according to Pentagon data, police departments have received tens of thousands of machine guns; nearly 200,000 ammunition magazines; thousands of pieces of camouflage and night-vision equipment; and hundreds of silencers, armored cars and aircraft.” *The Marshall Project* reported that since 1990 “Pentagon largesse included tactical military equipment worth more than \$1.4 billion, disseminated in 203,000 transfers to about 7,500 agencies” (Musgrave, Meager and Dance n. pag.).

These offers of hardware and funding proved irresistible to suburban police departments with strained budgets and already checkered histories of racial

profiling. These policies have also resulted in a proliferation of paramilitary SWAT teams whose use expanded drastically from about 3,000 raids in 1980 to an estimated 45,000 per year by 2000. In its 2014 report, *War Comes Home*, the ACLU noted that the majority of “no-knock raids” are for search warrants for suspected drug possession (62%) and disproportionately targeted people of color: “The use of paramilitary weapons and tactics primarily impacted people of color; when paramilitary tactics were used in drug searches, the primary targets were people of color, whereas when paramilitary tactics were used in hostage or barricade scenarios, the primary targets were white” (ACLU n. pag.). But their use shows no sign of abating and statistics on SWAT raids remain a closely guarded secret since there is no federal requirement to report them (Sack n. pag.).

The outcry about the policing of the Ferguson protests propelled the issue into national politics resulting in President Obama’s Executive Order suspending many domestic arms transfers in May 2015, adopting the recommendations of a federal working group. He observed in a speech in a Camden, NJ community center to an audience including local police officers: “We’ve seen how militarized gear can sometimes give people a feeling like they’re an occupying force, as opposed to a force that’s part of the community that’s protecting them and serving them” (Davis and Shear n. pag.). Obama drew applause when he declared, “So we’re going to prohibit some equipment made for the battlefield that is not appropriate for local police departments.” He closed his speech by noting, “If we as a society aren’t willing to deal honestly with issues of race, then we can’t just expect police departments to solve these problems.”

But the demilitarization was short lived. These limits on the Pentagon’s 1033 program were rescinded by President Trump in August 2018, which Attorney General Jeff Sessions described as providing “life saving gear” (Goldman). The paramilitary SWAT tactics and military gear are fully evident in the widespread ICE house raids enforcing the Trump administration’s controversial anti-illegal immigrant campaign.

Here we need a much fuller exploration of the links between militarization at home and the waging of seemingly distant wars abroad. The links between the “warrior mindset” of paramilitary police forces and SWAT teams across the United States and the strategy, tactics, and

personnel deployed in the military Occupation of Iraq or counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan need further exploration. These connections were briefly glimpsed during the Abu Ghraib torture scandal when it emerged that the military police who supervised the abuse of Iraqi prisoners were placed in charge because they had previously worked as correctional officers in the US prison industrial complex and may have been using violent techniques they had learned in domestic jails (Hersh; Puar 79-86).

In striking contrast, and a demonstration of the ways in which militarization can create unintended counter-narratives and possibilities for resistance by bridging the “civilian-military divide,” some of the more incisive critiques of the use of the “warrior mentality,” racialized policing, and the blurring of boundaries between police and soldiers, for example, have come from veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, some with experience in policing those war zones (Rizer and Hartman; Ahmed; Bello and Alcindor; Weichselbaum and Schwartzpfel).

How far does the reach of Black Lives Matter’s ethical and political demands extend? Their focus on demilitarization challenges us to ask how the racial dimension of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or the Global War on Terror, intersects with the long history of white supremacy or the colonial frontier myth of “regeneration through violence,” which has so often targeted communities of color (Slotkin; Puar; Mirzoeff). The links being forged between Black Lives Matter and the burgeoning high school students #NeverAgain movement for gun reform since the Parkland school massacre have focused attention on US firearms manufacturers, who are marketing AR-15 style assault “weapons of war” to a domestic market. These arms manufacturers depend both on sales to the police and military (fifteen percent and twenty-five percent respectively of \$11.7 billion in domestic sales in 2012) and on exports abroad, often to foreign police forces with \$4.4 billion in total exports in 2012 (Plumer n. pag.). Finally, and more broadly, there is the “elephant in the room” of the US permanent war economy and the vast half trillion dollar annual US military budgets (that continue even after the supposed end of the wars), which entail reductions in spending on social welfare programs, education, or infrastructure renewal, which often disproportionately affect communities of color (Melman; Lutz, *Homefront*; Lutz, “Militarization”).

Disembedding the “Long War”

This sense of the violent palimpsest of American wars coming home through militarized policing and police violence is powerfully visible in Black Lives Matter protests themselves. The constant historical reference point in the protests is not the War on Drugs, but the war in Iraq and the occupation of cities like Fallujah. In the documentary, *Whose Streets?*, for example, a Marine Corps veteran, Dave, comments over scenes of police in army gear using tear gas and armored trucks in Ferguson in August 2014:

It was obvious military tactics. Come in, cut off they communications. Round them up, you know what I'm saying . . . Then, once we got them under control, have the news people, have a combat photographer come in and say like, hey, look they going crazy. Yeah, they going crazy because we just cut off they communications and shot a couple of them . . . And then, later on, everything calm and all that and then everybody home like, oh, hey, they rounded up the insurgents. We in they country, how are they insurgents? You know what I'm saying? That's what was going on in Ferguson, man. (34'07"-34'49")

More recently the movement also extended its reach into the arena of sports and the military in the NFL protests sparked by Colin Kaepernick's refusal to stand during the National Anthem before games. Kaepernick adopted the military gesture of “taking a knee” at the suggestion of a Special Forces veteran, who met with him and subsequently defended his right to protest in the national media. Black Lives Matter has also intervened in the historical memory of the US Civil War in the campaign to remove Confederate memorials that followed the massacre at the Emanuel AME Church, in Charleston, South Carolina.

Beginning with the Ferguson protestors' use of “Hands Up Don't Shoot” chants, calling attention to Brown's shooting by Officer Darren Wilson, the movement has proved remarkably adept at appropriating gestures and imagery that represent their neighborhoods as occupied war zones. That this is done with wit, energy, anger and defiance under the gaze of police officers wearing paramilitary gear, gas masks and riot shields and atop armored cars and US Army MRAP vehicles still painted in desert colors

is all the more moving and remarkable. This is powerfully demonstrated in recent documentaries about the Ferguson protests made by activists, like *Stay Woke: The Black Lives Matter Movement* (dir. Laurens Grant, 2016), *Whose Streets?* (dir. Sabaah Folleyan, 2017) and *Do Not Resist* (dir. Craig Atkinson, 2016).

One powerful tool, as the declaration of the “unnamed rioter” in Baltimore in 2015 I began with suggests – “We’re not playing out here. This is not a war. But we want our rights” – is their ability to intervene in and interrupt conventional racialized and aestheticized narratives around the police killings of young black men and women by inserting vocal commentary into the powerful images and visual culture of street protests. Benjamin Balthaser makes this crucial point about the narration of onlooker Ramsey Orta whose words were captured in the cellphone video of police officers putting Eric Garner in a fatal choke hold on Staten Island while arresting him for selling smuggled cigarettes. Orta can clearly be heard at the beginning of the video as the police force Garner to the ground, leading him to say repeatedly and terribly, “I can’t breathe”:

Once again police beating up on people . . . He didn’t do shit; he didn’t do nothing . . . you all just gonna keep piling up; that’s all he did was break up a fight; you gonna lock him up for nothing; all he did was break up a fight . . . (Balthaser n. pag)

Here Orta’s narration, Balthaser argues, serves a crucial purpose that prevents the cellphone video from becoming part of a naturalized spectacle of violence against black bodies: “Orta also states repeatedly that he ‘lives right here’ and that ‘this is my house,’ staking his right to video Garner’s murder as well as to stand on the sidewalk . . . His commentary makes it impossible for the viewer to regard Garner’s death merely as spectacle or to remove Garner from a community of people for whom his life matters” (Balthaser n. pag.). This inserted commentary, as Balthaser argues, has the effect of politicizing and humanizing the horrifying images of the videos of police killings, like the NAACP captions on photographs of lynchings which circulated as mementoes of white supremacy in the 1920s and 30s. Invoking Walter Benjamin’s reflections on the neutralization and

depoliticizing power of the liberal media on images of violence in “The Author as Producer,” he argues:

Perhaps what is required is a set of practices for critical documentation and radical recirculation. As Benjamin insists, “we must demand from the photographer . . . the ability to put such a caption beneath his picture . . . as will confer upon it a revolutionary use value.” We must acknowledge, as Orta does, that images of violence against African Americans do not speak for themselves. To prevent the national media’s naturalization of violence – its annulment of the radical content of these images – one must articulate both a subject position as well as a counter-narrative to white supremacy (Balthaser n. pag.).

The inclusion of the reflections, commentaries and declarations of protestors can help disembody aestheticized images of violent protest. This is strongly evident in the use of the genres of autobiography and confessional by activists like Patrisse Khan-Cullors in *When They Call You A Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*, or the impassioned first person narrative which frames Washington Post journalist’s Wesley Lowery’s reportage, *They Can’t Kill Us All: Ferguson, Baltimore, and a New Era in America’s Racial Justice Movement*. There has been a tendency to aestheticize some of the highly dramatic scenes from the protest movement, as evident for example in the documentary *Stay Woke: The Black Lives Matter Movement* or in still photographs, like the iconic Antigone-like image of Iesha Evans being arrested, Baton Rouge, July 2016 at a Black Lives Matter Protest about the police shooting of Alton Sterling, a lone black woman in the middle of the street in summer dress and sunglasses being cuffed and arrested by two riot policemen in body armor in front of a phalanx of army uniforms. Although the organizers and activists have insisted on distinguishing themselves as “not your grandfather’s Civil Rights movement,” the iconography of the Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X era has proved a durable visual frame for this new generation of protestors.

The terrifying spectacle of militarized police on the streets of Ferguson is also powerfully represented in Craig Atkinson’s haunting documentary, *Do Not Resist*, which provides invaluable glimpses into the secretive world of SWAT teams, warrior police training culture, and paramilitary raids to

enforce routine drug search warrants. Atkinson's film offers a brilliant and highly informative critique, motivated in part by his family history as the son of a former police officer and SWAT team member, who like many other police officers and military veterans is critical of the turn to a warrior mentality. Yet, in its ride along sequences with suburban SWAT teams, *Do Not Resist* deliberately resembles embedded reportage from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in the ways that offers viewers what I have called the "embedded sublime" of military violence against a racialized other. This risks turning its action sequences into spectacle. The film's frequent lack of commentary and menacing electronic soundtrack often leaves the viewer feeling both informed and overwhelmed by this Orwellian spectacle. This disturbing logic is interrupted, however, by scenes which include overheard voices of protestors on the streets of Ferguson, such as two young women on cellphones who declare amidst the heavily armed officers and their armored vehicles: "They need to stop giving these boys these toys 'cause they don't know how to handle it. Hello?" (9'07"-9'15"). The everyday gesture of saying "hello?" into a cellphone further punctures the display of military style macho swagger. The young woman's also seems for a moment to directly address to the viewer, asking us if we are there and paying attention. In a more melancholy register, the film presents moving scenes of a family dealing with the aftermath of a SWAT raid that has literally broken their windows and left them reeling but seemingly resilient, at least in front of the camera.

This kind of interruptive commentary is brilliantly captured in activist film maker Sabaah Folayan's documentary, *Whose Streets?*, following a group of local Ferguson activists in the year after Michael Brown's shooting. It offers perhaps the most moving and useful entry point into an understanding of the social conditions in a community of color that allowed for Black Lives Matter to capture national attention. By presenting a vibrant and tangled series of personal relationships amongst its protagonists that cut across gender and family lines, *Whose Streets?* also offers a sense of emotional intimacy that offsets its focus on public violence and protest. While the film does include an aestheticized montage riot sequence with a sympathetic and tragic musical soundtrack following the announcement that Officer Darren Wilson will not be indicted, *Whose*

Streets? generally avoids such cinematic strategies in favor of close camera shots of the everyday life of protestors in living rooms, cars and out on the streets facing highly armed police officers. From the first sequences of police on the scene of Michael Brown's shooting, where they left his body in the August heat for four and a half hours, local residents face police carrying M-16 assault rifles as a matter of routine.

In an unforgettable scene on the second day of police occupation, a middle-aged African-American woman with a sign under her arm shouts at a policeman in military gear occupying a gas station after the Police Captain Ron Johnson has announced a midnight curfew and promised an end to the heavy handed police tactics of August 9th 2014, only to use more armored vehicles and tear gas:

WOMAN: This ain't fucking Iraq. This is not Iraq.

OFFICER: Well you guys are treating it like it's Iraq.

WOMAN: This is St. Louis. So, don't tell us you're going to fucking shoot us, okay.

OFFICER: Go on the other side!

WOMAN: Don't fucking tell us you're going to shoot us. We are not in fucking Iraq. This is fucking North County. You guys are the aggressors. You guys are the ones that pushed us. There was a 12 o'clock curfew. There was a fucking 12 o'clock curfew. It is 10:33. What the fuck happened? (30'05"-30'45")

After checking the time on her cellphone she walks off undaunted into the night.

In a later interlude, the rapper and activist Tef Poe addresses a group of protestors in the street as if onstage through a mic: "You ain't gon' out shoot them. It sound good, it feel good, it look good, but you ain't gon' out shoot them. They got more jails, they got more guns, they got more bullets. So, you not gon' win that battle, man."

He captures the sense of urgency and collective agency, of a world watching Ferguson.

"Let's do it the right way, man. Let's influence the world right now. We got the stage, so let's do it. This is it. You want to know what it look like, what it sound like, what it feel like? This is it."

What *Whose Streets?* also makes clear throughout, like Claudia Rankine's ever expanding memorial page listing the victims of police killings in her best-selling book, *Citizen*, is that the Ferguson protests originate in and are sustained by public rituals of mourning and memorialization. As one interviewee comments, "we're trying to mourn and you came here with 300 cop cars, in riot gear and K-9 units. This is the same thing that pretty much got us here."

Towards the end of the film, another activist, Aurellia, riding in a minivan with her daughter, strikes a more hopeful note by reaching beyond the present state of war:

Some people grow up in what they think is like a . . . what we would call like a real war with, like, planes and bombs and guns and stuff . . . but this like a unseen war. Where they wage war on the people without anybody else knowing. This era or generation we are raising activists. You know, we have to create a generation of activists. If there's going to be any change, it starts with our children. (1:29'54" - 1:30'29")

In American culture since 2001, militarization has been remarkably plural and uneven, disorganizing, dividing, and compartmentalizing society to facilitate the projection of violence onto far off nations in the Global South and onto communities of color at home. War discourse proliferates in our everyday lives, but violence is doubly distanced from the majority of American society: socially and geographically. This is the distancing and silencing logic of war culture that the Black Lives Matter movement has defied and interrupted.

Notes

¹ My thanks to this essay's anonymous reviewer for emphasizing this point. For connections between antiwar movements and antiracism, see, for example, Mariani, Singh, Mann, and Rosenwald, ed.

² There were three waves of Ferguson protest: after the August 9th 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown, November 2014 after the Grand Jury refused to indict, and in March 2015 when the Department of Justice's federal investigation resulted in a second decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson.

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