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JUSTICE FOR GEORGE FLOYD: THE TIPPING POINT?

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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ABSTRACT

Through the lens of the justice for George Floyd protests, my dissertation offers a critique, consultation, creation, and contribution to the visual imagery emerging from the digital activism of social movements. Built upon a foundation of counterpublics, critical race counterstory, counternarratives, the Black public sphere, rhetorical-cultural narrative, rhetorical-cultural memory, visual social semiotics, hashtag activism, and media framing and schemas, I engage in a rhetorical-semiotic-technocultural analysis of the justice for George Floyd protests, as a social movement. I position myself as a visual specialist artist, activist, academic, and advisor for social movements engaged in social justice and social change. I argue that culture, as moderator, traversed the rhetorical-semiotic-technocultural messaging of the visual imagery emerging from the digital imagery of the justice for George Floyd social movement which motivated global citizens to take to the streets to demand social justice and social change. Drawing upon the justice for George Floyd movement, I offer artists, activists, and academics *ten activist strategic propositions for the preservation of the cultural narrative, memory, and history of social movements* which may utilize visibility to withstand social movement backlash.

Keywords: George Floyd, visual imagery, digital activism, social movements, rhetorical-cultural narrative, rhetorical-cultural memory, visual social semiotics, hashtag activism

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

Alt-right—Alternative Right

BLM—Black Lives Matter

BLMGNF—Black Lives Matter Global Network Fund

CDA—Critical Discourse Analysis

CORE—Congress of Racial Equality

CTDA—Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis

NFT—Non-Fungible Token

RSTA—Rhetorical-Semiotic-Technocultural Analysis

SCLC—Southern Leadership Christian Council

SNCC—Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee

VR—Virtual Reality

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION— SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, HASHTAG ACTIVISM, SEMIOTICS, AND VISUAL IMAGERY

The fusion of visual imagery with emerging technologies, such as social media networks and camera smartphones, has exponentially empowered the agency of social movements, such as the justice for George Floyd protest, taking their movement message and their impact global (Vera and Krishnakumar 2022). Sarah J. Jackson argues that, “The human brain responds differently to visual images than it does to text. And, unlike text, people don’t even have to be necessarily literate in the language to understand and respond to visual images” (Vera and Krishnakumar 2022). Before Mamie Till Bradley made the choice to share the gruesome images of her son Emmett Till’s corpse, as a Black journalist, Ida B. Wells was publishing images of *lynchings* [a rhetorical-cultural intimation tactic of death by torture], as early as the late 1800s (Raiford 2012). What was once exclusively dependent upon the complex organizational structures of counter-institutions, a unifying voice of leadership, and cooperation from traditional media outlets, such as print, radio, and television, is now empowered by cell phone, social networking platforms, and the hashtag. From the creation of #BlackLivesMatter and LeBron James tweeting photos of the Miami Heat NBA basketball team in 2012 wearing hoodies in remembrance of Black teen, Trayvon Martin, slain by George Zimmerman while Trayvon Martin was walking home, digital activism on social media networks, sometimes referred to as hashtag activism, especially on Twitter, is now considered a critical mainstay in elevating the voice of a social movement.

Moya Bailey argues that, “Having visual proof, visual evidence that something atrocious has happened, really takes it out of the realm of a story that somebody might be telling. It makes it real. It makes it concrete in a way people really have to wrestle with and deal with” (Vera and

Krishnakumar 2022). Advancements in social media networks, together with smartphone camera technologies, have allowed not just still imagery to be used freely, but also make it easy to share video imagery, now both live and recorded. As a result, the use of video with hashtag activism, has become a formidable rhetorical strategic tactic for social movements when amplifying critical race counterstory, *counternarrative* [a narrative counter to the prevailing narrative of the dominant group], and *counterpublic* [discourse that challenges the beliefs of the discourse the dominant group] enclaves of discourse and collective cultural memory. Sarah J. Jackson derives the evolution of the hashtag from the legacy of Civil Rights slogans, such as, “I Am A Man,” from the 1968 Memphis, Tennessee sanitation workers strike (Vera and Krishnakumar 2022). During the Civil Rights era, a movement would have had to rely upon traditional media and grassroots organizing to amplify a message, but with hashtag activism, messaging can be distributed instantaneously within a distributed networked group and amplified far beyond enclaves of counterpublic discourse.

The incessant stream of videos, revealing police violence inflicted upon people of color, have shed light upon systemic injustices and abuses of the state are not limited to big cities or rural areas (Vera and Krishnakumar 2022). Through this visual stream of violence, which Sarah J. Jackson calls ‘creative tension’, Jackson says that, “Black activists (during the civil rights movement) were doing then the same thing that Black activists are doing now, which is that Black activists are savvy about the media. So, Black southern activists were creating media events” (Vera and Krishnakumar 2022). As a strategic rhetorical form of performative dramatic theater and resistance, Civil Rights activists put themselves at risk of being beaten by police, pummeled with fire hoses, or mauled by dogs, with the goal of Northern white photojournalists capturing and sharing the erasure of their *Black humanity* [an acknowledgement that all humans

have humanity, but Black people have been systemically mistreated with absence of humanity] in the Jim Crow south. Sarah J. Jackson stresses that you cannot compare the effectiveness now to that of a movement 50 years ago, such as the Civil Rights movement, until you are able to look back 50 years in the future to today, in order to truly see what meaningful impact and influence a social movement truly had upon society, culture, and institutions.

Social Movements and Hashtag Activism

Originally done by Twitter, using the indexicality of a hashtag to coordinate online digital activism on a social media platform is known as *hashtag activism*. Ideas exist without physical form or shape in the endless ether of possibilities. Hashtag activism is distinctly instrumental on Twitter as a form of digital activism (Zulli 2020, 211). Axel Bruns and Jean Burgess write that hashtags were originally conceptualized by technologist Chris Messina, as a system to contextualize and filter online discourse on a social media network (Bruno and Burgess 2011, 2; Zulli 2020, 200). The hashtag enables a form of *narrative rhetorical agency* [using storytelling to persuade] for social and political rhetoric in networked spaces, coalescing around the hashtag. A unique underpinning of hashtag activism is that it all begins with a hashtag like #Ferguson, #BlackLivesMatter, or #GeorgeFloyd. Digital activism in the form of hashtag activism, allows a social movement, theme, or idea to be easily indexed and categorized on a social media platform. The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter is what elevated the organizational goal of creating a society where all lives matter, including those of people of color, to an infectious, overarching ideal for society and *cultural narrative* [a structured body of knowledge about an issue by a large segment of society]. With respect to the marginalization and stereotyping of images of Black bodies, the discursive nature of digital activism affords the opportunity to reframe the cultural narrative of

Black humanity through the lens of positivity instead of negative stereotypical tropes. The hashtag #GeorgeFloyd, typically used in conjunction with #BlackLivesMatter, helped elevate the cultural conversation of institutionalized systemic racism and police violence to the level of prioritized public discourse.

Although other social media networks allow the usage of hashtags, the way hashtags are utilized and interpreted by the code, design, and culture of each social media platform, hashtags either constrict the sharing of information on the social media network or embolden it. In participatory political protest and digital activism of social movements, Twitter is recognized for its ability to provide liveness from a real-time narrative of events, as they are unfolding (Neumayer and Rossi 2018, 4295). Usage of activism hashtags contributes to collective social movement discourse and can help elevate social movement discourse to public discourse in the traditional mainstream media. Social media digital activism empowers the aims of the social movement and anyone within the movement with the potential agency to empower the movement through digital activism. The ability for anyone to use the #GeorgeFloyd hashtag helped elevate the cultural presence of the justice for George Floyd movement and contribute to the distributed networked counterpublic discourse.

In the latter half of 2022, after Elon Musk's reluctant acquisition of Twitter, Twitter entered a moment of freefall. Some users, celebrities included, publicly announced an abandonment of Twitter altogether and removed their accounts. Celebrities, artists (Ruth 2022), and everyday citizens fled Twitter in fear of what Elon Musk's version of free speech and content moderation reimagined might look like, to smaller platforms, such as the "decentralized, open-source social media platform" Mastodon (Wamsley 2022). No one controls Mastodon and there is no algorithm to emphasize or deemphasize content. After Elon Musk's takeover, Twitter

announced that its content moderation would no longer be policing COVID-19 misinformation posts (Capoot 2022). Donald Trump's Twitter account was also restored, but Trump has yet to Tweet anything, stating that he would continue using his own platform, [lack of] Truth Social (Duffy and LeBlanc 2020). After a rocky start, Elon Musk announced that he would eventually be stepping down as the CEO of Twitter once he finds a replacement (Allyn 2022), and although Twitter fever did not disappear, it did dissipate.

I passionately argue that the creator or owner of technology does not supersede the user of said technology's own personal autonomy. The creator or owner of technology cannot dictate how technology will be used but can indeed passionately persuade people to use it, as the creator intended. Technology is a tool. Twitter was never designed to be the primary tool in the activist's toolkit, but those using Twitter choose to utilize the affordances of Twitter for their own purposes, whether it be for social impact, misinformation, or malevolence. However, tools need rules. Whether it be free speech, handguns, or driving a car, all tools have rules. Public safety and law and order, supersedes the usage of any tool. We have the right to use tools responsibly; not irresponsibly. Technology is not the enemy of the people, but the people who misuse technology, for purposes outside of the purview of the law and ethics, are malevolent forces upon society. The fate of Elon Musk's Twitter is unknown but the autonomy of the activists fighting for social justice and social change will most certainly continue. Whether the fight for social justice continues on Twitter, another existing platform, or undoubtedly from some other emerging technology that does not yet exist, the fight for social justice will continue.

Semiotics and Social Movements

Visual semiotics plays a pivotal role into my interdisciplinary research into the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd protests, as a social movement. Visual semiology points to the greater connoted meaning behind the cultural context for a symbol (Barthes 1977). Through semiotics, we can examine relationships of meaning of the visual imagery of the justice for George Floyd social movement. We can connect the meaning of the imagery, as a *social movement counterpublic* [discourse from a social movement that challenges the positions of official institutions] to the narrative of the culture of the dominant ideology, and as a critical race counterstory that situates the meaning of the imagery from the standpoint of the epistemic autonomy of a marginalized group. *Epistemic autonomy* recognizes an individual's ability to distinguish knowledge (Code 2006b, 164). Sometimes advocacy, especially with marginalized groups, fails to recognize the individual as their own *autonomous knower*—capable of translating their own lived experiences into knowledge (195–96).

Through rhetorical-semiotic-technocultural analysis, we can move beyond the cultural meaning of the visual imagery produced from social movements to understanding how the imagery is being strategically used with agency to turn the narrative of counterpublics and counterstories into strategic rhetorical narrative, that both includes existing public narratives, yet simultaneously creates new strategic rhetorical narratives. Narrative is temporal, focuses upon specific events, and is governed by intentions (Bruner, 1991). A story begins with an “inciting incident” (a break from the normal), is interpretive and interpreted, and is accepted as truth, if it looks and feels like truth. Artificial structural organization in the form of genres plays a key role in narrative, thus positioning storytelling as a construct that is considered normal. Most importantly, narrative is impacted, informed, and influenced by both context and culture. The

mind and cognition are influenced by culture. Some skills in each domain of the mind are universally shared by all members within a culture, such as narrative and narrative genres. Social beliefs are stored in the brain through narrative organization and widely spread throughout a culture, but not necessarily agreed upon by everyone within a culture. The affordances of narrative provide agency to the digital activist to affect the perception of reality in the mind of a #GeorgeFloyd digital activist and the audience. The mind utilizes narrative to organize memories and experiences. Narrative is a crafted artistic cultural construct. The imitation of art and life and vice versa becomes an endless feedback loop. Bruner's research into narrative lays the foundational framework for a more articulated case to be made for how narrative influences reality through *autobiographical and cultural memory narrative* [narrative about one's self and cultural memories and histories] (Nelson 2003, 125). Narrative is the main ingredient of both semiotic meaning and narrative rhetorical agency. Narrative offers a greater meaning, and through that meaning, one is able to strategically persuade an audience. It is through narrative that semiotic meaning and narrative rhetorical agency are able to afford agency to the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd social movement. The visual imagery, hashtags, and social media platforms are technology-based texts that may be read as digital artifacts. Discourse and network analysis can provide another layer of examination that can refine the meaning and interrelationships between the visual imagery, hashtags, and social media platforms.

Similar to the concept of interdisciplinarity in Texts and Technology, in academic scholarship, semiotics interprets systems of meaning that span multiple communication modalities and epistemologies to create a composite cultural meaning and narrative. These narratives can occupy the general culture of the dominant ideology as a public, counterpublic of

discourse that challenges a public, counterstory of epistemic autonomy from activists, and strategic rhetorical narrative that affords one group agency. These disparate narratives and systems of meaning coexist within a singular visual digital artifact from the justice for George Floyd movement. The notion that visibility is worth a thousand words is not a cliché, but rather a pinnacle of truth. A single image is an evocative connection to culturally and historically specific volumes of meaning and how those meanings interconnect with one another. Meaning and story are inextricably interrelated and can be strategically used in context to create new meanings. “The expanded cultural context of a connoted image can present a vast narrative that encompasses the historical cultural narrative of the semiology” (Odom 2020, 133). Through visual semiotics, an image is able to access a lexicon of meaning and cultural narrative that exists outside of the image (Barthes 1977, 33). The image serves as a signifier to access this greater cultural meaning (Barthes 1977, 37).

Social Movements and Visual Imagery

Rhetorically, social movements persuasively effectuate dynamic change (Crick 2020, 3; L. M. Griffin 1952, 1). Stephen Brown and Charles Morris argue that social movements are rhetorical (Crick 2020, 3) because “they organize symbols to persuasive ends; they address unsettled issues of public importance; and they seek to change not through violence or coercion but through force of argument and appeals” (Morris III and Browne 2013, 1). Thus, to “study the rhetoric of social protest is to study how symbols—words, signs, images, music, even bodies—shape our perceptions of reality and invite us to act accordingly” (1). Both social movements and counterpublics include collective discourse outside of the dominant ideology (Crick 2020, 11–12). However, in terms of modern rhetoric, where a social movement and counterpublic differ is

in the social movement's ability to move beyond phenomenology and effectuate dynamic change.

While much of social movements encapsulate the visual performance of dramatic resistance, Neumayer and Rossi submit that scholarship within the field of media studies and social movement research has presented limited research that relies upon the analysis of social media visual data from protest events (Neumayer and Rossi 2018, 4293). Visual imagery is key to the digital activism of social movements and political protests in communicating autonomous social movement or protest cultural narrative, as well as real time activities and events (4294). Bolette Blaagaard, Mette Mortensen, and Christina Neumayer argue that digital activism has dramatically changed the landscape of visibility in social movements (Blaagaard, Mortensen, and Neumayer 2017, 1113; Neumayer and Rossi 2018, 4295–96). Nicholas Mirzoeff frames visibility as a “discursive practice for rendering and regulating the real that has material effects” (Mirzoeff 2011, 476; Neumayer and Rossi 2018, 4298). Especially with the case of political protest, framing and self-representation from decentralized multiple social actors, creates competing imagery for the cultural narrative of the social movement. The visibility of the justice for George Floyd social movement amongst digital activism significantly contributed to building a cultural imprint of the movement in public discourse.

Visual digital activism, such as hashtag activism on Twitter, in protest events and social movements, allows the camera to serve as technological eyewitness, delivering a narrative which can run contrary to the normalized or circulated narrative of the authority and hegemonic institutions (Neumayer and Rossi 2018, 4293). A decentralized network of digital activists is able to share their own images of self-representation within the social movement when hegemonic *normalized* and *naturalized* [everyone's story is just like mine; white, male, and

straight] cultural narrative of the traditional mainstream media may not coalesce with the narrative of the social movement. Traditional institutional and sociocultural structures of social movements throughout history, relied upon organizational structures and media tools, whether it be word of mouth, flyers with images, or the written and printed word to spread movement messaging and organize movement protests and events. A decentralized network of digital activists, through hashtag activism on Twitter, can utilize the indexicality affordances of Twitter to organize around a social movement theme, through a hashtag, effectively leapfrogging ahead of the media communications and organizational structures that would have been required fifty years ago to reach a fraction of the size of an audience that a successful hashtag can reach in a relatively short span of time, sometimes within hours.

Whether an *exemplification* [when the news chooses which stories to highlight regardless of statistical significance] of police violence by the imagery shared by activists, or violence that erupts at the protest in the form of rioting and looting, shared by the traditional media and police social media presence, violence is a theme that tends to emerge in the visuals of many social movements' protests. However, Donatella della Porta asserts that in political protests, police violence can be characterized, as a result of the social movement challenging hegemonic authority (4298). On a more macro scale, a preponderance of police violence, and perceived unnecessary police violence, often permeates daily life as ubiquitous par-for-the-course. Justice for George Floyd protestors were met with significant police show of force, with many times protests devolving into violence, often initiated by the police, and documented by first-person testimonial accounts by protestors, both after the fact and streamed in real time utilizing smartphone camera technology.

William A. Gamson and Gadi Wolfsfeld write that, historically, protest has been challenged by the hegemonic authority as not being a legitimate form of public discourse (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993, 117; Neumayer and Rossi 2018, 4296). The sit-ins and marches of the Civil Rights era, now seen as a recipe for social change, were then considered by some as radical, vile, and terrorist-like activities that challenged authority by the cultural narrative norms of the Jim Crow south. A dance between the balance of power and narrative between the movement and the traditional mainstream media defers to the media for the public framing of the social movement. Gamson and Wolfsfeld argue that when examining the visual imagery of a political protest and social movements, such as images of police violence, it is important to look at the arrangement and relationship of the semiotic meaning of the imagery in relationship to the larger discourse about the movement and cultural narrative (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993, 117; Neumayer and Rossi 2018, 4298–99). The collective visual narrative of the justice for George Floyd protests, whether one supported or disagreed with the aims of the movement, universally depicts a struggle between the ordinary masses with the armed confrontation of authoritarian hegemonic rule in the form of heavy police presence. The police, usually dressed in riot gear, visually connotes soldiers on the battlefield; the enemy of the police is depicted as the citizens crushed beneath the police's authoritarian rule.

Jeffery S. Juris argues that through this symbiotic preference for spectacle by the mainstream media and provocateurs, performative violence and rioting is most often what gets exemplified by the traditional media, with said provocation undermining perceived confidence in both the social movement and social movement rhetorical strategies for the movement's core aims (Juris 2005, 414; Neumayer and Rossi 2018, 4297–98). Saša Petrović, Miles Osborne, and Victor Lavrenko demonstrated how the structural dynamics of a social media platform in

conjunction with a user's characteristics, such as the number of connections and likes, can have a huge impact on whether or not a post is reshared (Neumayer and Rossi 2018, 4297; Petrović, Osborne, and Lavrenko 2011, 586). However, in Bastos, Raimundo, and Travitzki's study of Twitter, they discovered that political hashtags seem to carry more influence when a shared post carries with it semiotic connections between the hashtag, post, and political discourse (Bastos, Raimundo, and Travitzki 2013; Neumayer and Rossi 2018, 4297). The hashtag #GeorgeFloyd did not carry with it solely the message of justice for George Floyd, but rather #GeorgeFloyd was a metaphor to end institutionalized systemic racism, racial inequality, police violence and a rallying cry for the implementation of social justice and social change.

Thomas Poell and José van Dijck note that whether through algorithmic bias or public penchant for the macabre, participatory social media activism also tends to elevate the visual imagery that symbolizes violence over the raw aims of the social movement (Neumayer and Rossi 2018, 4298; Poell and Van Dijck 2015, 520). Alice Mattoni and Simon Teune mark *performative violence* [intentional violent interactions as a form of protest rhetorical dramatic theater] as a form of protest that challenges official institutions and raises awareness about the social movement (Mattoni and Teune 2014, 877; Neumayer and Rossi 2018, 4298). Conversely, Bart Cammaerts chastises performative violence as indigestible for mass consumption, pushing public sentiment and cultural narrative away from the aims of the social movement (Cammaerts 2012, 120–21; Neumayer and Rossi 2018, 4298). Like Mattoni and Teune, Donatella della Porta conceptualizes the symbolism of violence of political protest as the negotiation of power between the social movement and the *hegemony* [dominant group in power] (Della Porta 2013, 15; Mattoni and Teune 2014, 877; Neumayer and Rossi 2018, 4298). Although actual militant-minded activists initiated theatrical performative violence at justice for George Floyd protests,

not all violence, rioting, looting, and other criminal acts were choreographed dramatic resistance. I argue that performative violence will not advance the aims of the movement in the long run, unless like during the Civil Rights era, the violence is performed by the hegemonic authority upon non-violent citizenry, and its imagery captured for all the world to see and critique.

In Neumayer and Rossi's examination of the visual imagery of the Blockupy protest in Frankfurt, Germany held in opposition to the 2015 opening of the European Central Bank, the police and traditional media used primarily imagery of violence, while images without violence were produced primarily by the Blockupy social movement activists (Neumayer and Rossi 2018, 4303). Gamson and Wolfsfeld argue that the power of the police and public authority is reaffirmed by *priming* [media that uses some sort of stimulus that could cause the audience to have a reaction], *framing* [news media that tells you how you should think about the news], and exemplifying cultural narrative and public discourse, which maintains the hegemonic position as the (un)natural order of things and besmirches the aims of the social movement as illegitimate and violent (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993, 125; Neumayer and Rossi 2018, 4306). Although digital activism provides a platform for the autonomous narratives of social movements, the narrative rhetorical agency of social media and the traditional mainstream media is also afforded to the hegemony which continually offers *counterstory* [stories that conflict with the personal stories amongst individuals in the movement] and *counternarrative* [an explicit story about what the movement really means] to the autonomous narrative of the social movement (4306). Martinez defines *critical race counterstory* as a rhetorical research method for examining counterstory through the lens of *critical race theory* [which maintains that race was a factor at the time of the establishment of hegemonic institutions] (Martinez 2020, 2). Martinez identifies the work of Richard Delgado, Derrick A. Bell, and Patricia A. Williams as "counterstory

exemplars,” specifically, through the use of “narrated dialogue, fantasy/allegory, and autobiographic reflection,” as rhetorical counterstory methods (2). Critical race counterstory was the lifeblood of justice for George Floyd protests on social media which rapidly spread the movements messaging and support.

In political protests, social movements, and events related to police violence and *extrajudicial* [outside the bounds of written law] murder, the police post on Twitter with hashtags in order to rhetorically submit their own narrative and memory of events (Neumayer and Rossi 2018, 4298). A thorough examination of the practices and results of digital activism in social movements, as well as the media-communicated narrative of the hegemony, will better inform activists of which practices, techniques, and strategies within the social movement yield the best and worst results for the aims of social movements. In spite of the mainstream media’s willingness to cover justice for George Floyd protests, violence, looting, and rioting was frequently depicted in the news media even when protests were largely peaceful. Many times, peaceful protestors had tear gas and rubber bullets fired at them unprovoked. Justice for George Floyd social movement textual and visual digitally networked counterpublic discourse often served as the most accurate accounting of the order of events in occasions like these.

The Tipping Point

Peering through the looking-glass at the visual imagery of the justice for George Floyd social movement, and seated at the intersection of visual multimedia culture and rhetoric and digital activism, my research offers critique, consultation, creation, and contribution to the visual imagery emerging from the digital activism of social movements for social justice and social change. As counterpublic, counternarrative, and critical race counterstory, the visual social

semiotics of the imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd social movement rhetorically reframed a voyeuristic modern-day digital lynching story of another dead Black man accused of a crime, into an enduring global thirst to enact immediate change. Social media hashtag activism, as a distributed networked counterpublic, provided visual narrative agency to justice for George Floyd digital activists through the circulation and rhetorical amplification of calls-to-action to recognize George Floyd's Black humanity and grant George Floyd posthumous justice.

Built upon a theoretical framework that includes counterpublics, critical race counterstory, counternarratives, the Black public sphere, rhetorical-cultural narrative, rhetorical-cultural memory, visual social semiotics, hashtag activism, and media framing and schemas, I construct a rhetorical-semiotic-technocultural analysis of the justice for George Floyd social movement. In that analysis, I explore how the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd social movement, which had broad goals for sweeping racial justice and institutional cultural reform, contributed to an atmosphere for the ultimate arrest and conviction of former police officer Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd.

I argue that culture moderated the rhetorical-semiotic-technocultural messaging of the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd social movement which motivated global citizens to take to the streets to demand social justice and social change. The visibility of the justice for George Floyd movement presented the unfettered reality of injustice; this made it difficult for numerous people to deny the injustices inflicted upon people of color by the abuses of power and the brutality of the police and hegemonic authority. Specifically, critical race counterstory, rhetorical-cultural memory, technocultural discourse, and visual imagery, helped expand a rhetorical counterpublic, counternarrative, and critical race counterstory of the murder

of George Floyd, opposite the standard hegemonic messaging of law enforcement and the legal system, that challenged the dominant ideology's perception of race and policing and resonated with the global public. Through a series of extrajudicial murders circulated on social media, in conjunction with a growing and more organized Black Lives Matter (BLM) social movement, George Floyd's murder cumulatively marked "a *tipping point* for race-relations in the United States" (Moody-Ramirez, Tait, and Bland 2021, 37).

Author Malcolm Gladwell likens a tipping point to a viral epidemic; it's contagious, a little thing that can have a big effect, and instead of gradual change, it happens in one dramatic fell swoop (Gladwell 2000, 7, 9). By October 2020, George Floyd protests took place in over 70 countries across the globe with at least 8,700 protests linked to Black Lives Matter (Kishi and Jones 2020; Moody-Ramirez, Tait, and Bland 2021, 374). Approximately 15-26 million people in the United States alone participated in George Floyd protests, prompting the *New York Times* to print "Black Lives Matter may be the largest movement in U.S. history" (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020; Cowart, Blackstone, and Riley 2022, 677). In 2020, justice for George Floyd was joined by many other movements calling for justice in what seemed to be an extrajudicial murder spree upon people of color. All of these movements shared commonality with #BlackLivesMatter, with variations of BLM hashtags being used in all of these social movements. In a span of 16 days following the murder of George Floyd, the Pew Research Center reported that #BlackLivesMatter had been used 47.8 million times on Twitter (Anderson et al. 2020; Cowart, Blackstone, and Riley 2022, 680). #BlackLivesMatter went on to become the second most used hashtag in 2020 on Twitter (Cowart, Blackstone, and Riley 2022, 690; Anderson et al. 2020). Companies began to issue statements, hire diverse labor, and remove iconic imagery and racial tropes that signified a different time and place (Moody-Ramirez, Tait,

and Bland 2021, 373). Government institutions began removing Confederate statues and other symbols that commemorated a racist past and some renamed streets with various iterations of Black Lives Matter. Police departments were subjected to ridicule and review.

Built upon the strategic rhetorical critical race counterstory and rhetorical-cultural memory of past social movements, especially from the Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter movements, the visual imagery of the justice for George Floyd social movement led to a kairotic tipping point for civic action for social justice and social change. Centered in transdisciplinary scholarship, my research into the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd movement is significant because it embraces traditional and generative scholarship that seeks to advance visual rhetorical strategies in social movements for social justice and social change ([see image 23](#)). My family history includes Civil Rights activists and my professional history includes filmmaking and social media content creation, both as a practitioner and graduate school instructor. Positioning myself as a visual specialist artist, activist, academic, and advisor for social movements, I conclude by offering artists, activists, and academics *ten activist strategic propositions for the preservation of the cultural narrative, memory, and history of social movements* which may utilize visuality as a tool to withstand social movement backlash.

Research Questions

RQ1: How were cultural narratives in the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd social movement rhetorically framed in different media outlets and in social media discourse?

RQ2: What role did rhetorical counterstory play in the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd social movement?

RQ3: What is the relationship between rhetorical counterstory and rhetorical-cultural memory with digital activism and how people responded to the visual imagery of the justice for George Floyd social movement?

RQ4: What is the implication of digitality as a rhetorical social semiotic tactic in the visual imagery of the justice for George Floyd social movement?

RQ5: Through the rhetoric of digital activism and the visual imagery of social movements, post ‘justice for George Floyd’, what other visually based counterstories could build upon this cultural shift in social justice, social change, and the overall improvement and advancement of society?

Research Design

There are myriad ways to study social movements. I have chosen to examine the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd movement. My primary interest is the meaning of iconic imagery in the movement and its relationship to motivation for people around the world to protest in the streets during the middle of a global pandemic. Within that atmosphere, former police officer Derek Chauvin was found guilty of the murder of George Floyd, even though bringing charges against a police officer in our legal system are extremely rare. Whereas the multiplicity of social media research is almost entirely centered upon text-based discursive research methods (N. Doerr, Mattoni, and Teune 2013, 35:x–xi), some researchers might focus upon a textual analysis of the George Floyd movement and then look to the accompanying imagery as a secondary afterthought.

However, as a social media practitioner, I argue that it is typically the imagery which first arrests a user’s attention and then determines if a user reads the accompanying text and engages

with the content. Twitter users engage more frequently with posts with meaningful photos and visual imagery (Cowart, Blackstone, and Riley 2022, 677; Rogers 2014) that influences a user's emotions, understanding, and response to an event or issue (Joffe 2008, 84–86). As a space and place for counterpublic and counternarrative protest, through visual imagery, written text, and conceptual frames, Twitter is a digital technological tool than can shape public perception and set the traditional media's agenda for social significance (Cowart, Blackstone, and Riley 2022, 677). After the indexing and filtering influences of a hashtag or keyword (Zulli 2020, 200), I argue that the most true-to-life re-creation of a social media user's experience must begin with the visual imagery in order to establish a better understanding of meaning and context.

As an artist, activist, academic, advisor for the visual rhetorical strategies of social movements, my dissertation research offers its consultation, creation, and contribution in the form of a traditional academic paper, artist-activist short documentary film, and collection of generative artistic scholarship interactive experiences from my own portfolio body of work. The accompanying analysis from my research offers a critique of the visual imagery of social movements through the lens of the justice for George Floyd social movement. As advice for artists, activists, and academics the documentary short film addresses *ten activist strategic propositions for the preservation of the cultural narrative, history, and memory of social movements* which may utilize visibility as a tool that can withstand the velocity of social movement backlash ([see image 23](#)):

1. Organize online and offline enclaves for counterpublics, counternarratives, and counter-institutions that may withstand the rhetorical velocity of backlash;
2. Create content for rhetorical listening and extended embodiment;
3. Craft visual stories about culture that provide impact;

4. Engage in citizen photojournalism, creating, and sharing iconic imagery;
5. Use digital technology with social movements to create agency;
6. Build living archives and maintain virtual spaces;
7. Expand archival growth into emerging technologies like blockchain and by growing with future technologies;
8. Run for office within counter-institutions and hegemonic institutions: e.g. city council, county commissioner, police oversight board, etc.;
9. Empower social movements through participatory democracy via virtual and real-world protest; and
10. Engage social movements through artistic and academic activism.

The interactive portion of my research, like the documentary, is an enacted extension of examples of generative artistic scholarship for social movements. The interactive experiences include: 1) a StoryMap visualization of an analysis of the online media representation of the visual imagery of the Capitol Riot versus the George Floyd protests ([see image 21](#)); 2) an interactive poetry remix of Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise,” commemorating victims of police violence ([see image 22](#)); and 3) a “Social Justice and Social Change” curatorial-code interactive museum experience for Black Lives Matter versus Blue Lives Matter ([see figures 3-4](#)).

Methodologies

To analyze the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd social movement, I constructed a research methodology which I call *rhetorical-semiotic-technocultural analysis* (RSTA) [pronounced ‘rah-stuh’] which is comprised of two primary methods—rhetorical counterstory and rhetorical-cultural analysis. Through rhetorical counterstory, RSTA

adapts: 1) critical race counterstory; while through rhetorical-cultural analysis, RSTA adapts: 2) rhetorical-cultural memory, 3) critical technocultural discourse analysis [CTDA], and 4) visual social semiotic analysis. A rhetorical-semiotic-technocultural analysis is applied to select imagery that emerges from the justice for George Floyd movement study included within the traditional portion of the three-article dissertation.

RQ1 adapts the research methodologies of critical technocultural discourse analysis and visual social semiotic analysis. After using visual social semiotic analysis to read select imagery, critical technocultural discourse analysis is applied to the corresponding text, context, and technology to examine interconnections with semiotic systems of meaning and the visual imagery.

RQ2 adapts of the research methodologies of visual social semiotic analysis and rhetorical embodiment as a tactic of critical race counterstory. After coding the visual imagery collected for a dataset, a reading of select visual imagery from the justice for George Floyd social movement is examined through the lens of visual social semiotic analysis. Specifically, the reading of select visual imagery is examined for evidence of rhetorical embodiment through embodied *ēthe*, *métis*, and rhetorical listening, as well as how rhetorical embodiment contributed to semiotic meaning of the visual imagery of the George Floyd social movement which may have played a factor in motivating global citizens to protest.

RQ3 adapts the research methodologies of rhetorical-cultural memory, rhetorical counterstory, and visual social semiotic analysis. After applying a reading of select images from a dataset and analyzing the imagery with visual social semiotic analysis, the reading is examined for the usage of rhetorical-cultural memory in shaping and influencing the cultural narrative and memorialized framing of the murder of George Floyd.

RQ4 adapts the research methodologies of visual social semiotic analysis and critical technocultural discourse analysis. After applying visual social semiotic analysis to select imagery, critical technocultural discourse analysis is applied to the imagery and its context to examine the implications of visual digital rhetorical tactics upon the justice for George Floyd social movement.

RQ5 is explored holistically through data compiled from the rhetorical-semiotic-technocultural analysis of the justice for George Floyd social movement. Collectively, the research is used to help construct digital rhetorical strategies for the visual imagery of social movements, for social justice and social change, that can optimize movement success and advance society at-large. Additionally, RQ5 is addressed through artistic academic generative scholarship in the form of a documentary short film ([see image 23](#)) and curatorial online collection of previous code-based generative works for social justice and social change.

Rhetorical-Semiotic-Technocultural Analysis

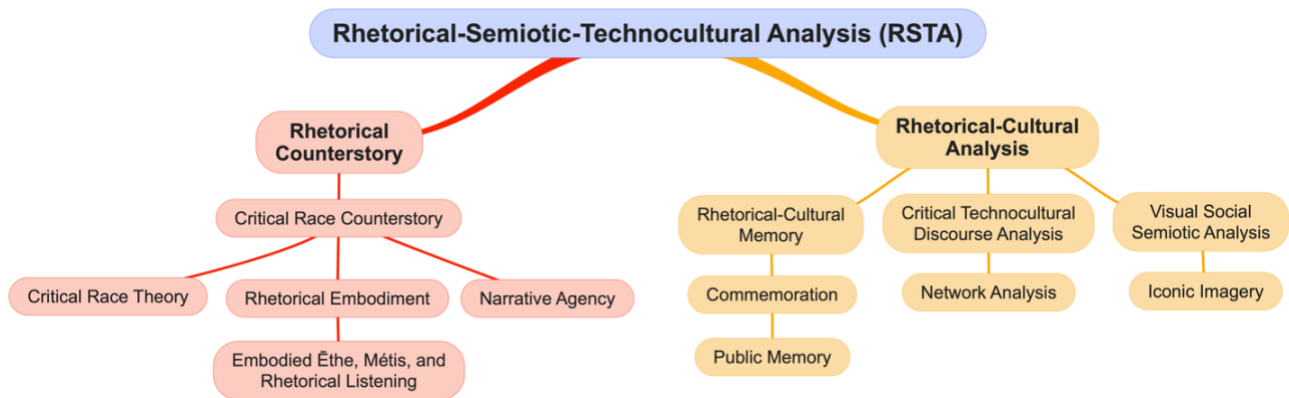


Figure 1. Rhetorical-Semiotic-Technocultural Analysis

Rhetorical-semiotic-technocultural analysis (RSTA) is a research methodology that I constructed to analyze specifically the visual imagery emerging from the digital activism of

social movements ([see figure 1](#)). RSTA centers visual digital artifacts that can be read both as texts and technology. The two are inseparable. Core to RSTA are both culture and technology, ergo technoculture. Like oxygen that exists within the atmosphere and all spaces, culture exists in all spaces and places and is the ultimate moderator between reality and the perception of the perceiver. Whether rational, irrational, emotional, detached, ideological, or principled, culture influences both the input and output of all ideas and how they are received and perceived. Within any given public, counterpublic, narrative, or counternarrative discourse, strategic rhetoric is utilized for the persuasive presentation of ideas and potential conversion of thought. Specifically, in the spaces of discourse for marginalized groups, strategic rhetoric is central to achieve the aims of social justice and social change. RSTA, as a research methodology, is focused upon rhetorical counterstory and rhetorical-cultural memory, specifically through the adaptation of critical race counterstory, rhetorical-cultural memory, critical technocultural discourse analysis, and visual social semiotic analysis.

As a strategy of rhetorical counterstory, RSTA adapts critical race counterstory. On a more granular level, tactics of critical race counterstory that I examine include narrative rhetorical agency and rhetorical embodiment in the form of embodied *ēthe*, *métis* and rhetorical listening. When analyzing the counterpublic discourse of marginalized groups, critical race counterstory allows me center race as a primary cultural factor for how society perceives people and information and takes into the lived experiences of marginalized groups as autonomous knowers. Critical race counterstory makes George Floyd's race, identity, and Black humanity inseparable from analyzing the justice for George Floyd social movement. As rhetorical counterstory, centering the murder of George Floyd and the justice for George Floyd movement through the point of view of George Floyd and marginalized groups offers a sobering dichotomy

from the original police narrative which presented George Floyd and his loss of life as no more than a statistical footnote. Specifically, the counterstories offered through the justice of George Floyd movement are providing strategic rhetoric through narrative rhetorical agency afforded by counterstory to provide an alternative interpretation of events which recognizes and prioritizes Black humanity. Additionally, rhetorical embodiment can be viewed as another tactic of critical race counterstory. George Floyd's pleas for help, "I can't breathe," embody his desire for the recognition of his Black humanity and are strategically repeated and reconfigured in the many iterations of sharing on social media within the network of users within the justice for George Floyd movement both online and in the physical world.

Interrelated with rhetorical counterstory, RSTA utilizes rhetorical-cultural analysis through the adaptation of rhetorical-cultural memory, critical technocultural discourse analysis, and visual social semiotic analysis. Similar to counterstory, rhetorical-cultural memory allows me to examine the framing of the murder and the memory of George Floyd. A moment happens in an instant, but a memory is eternal. (His)tory is written; usually written by the hegemonic forces of the culture of the dominant ideology—white, male, heteronormative. History is an attempt to influence what, when, where, and how something is remembered. How a moment is remembered affects the meaning and the significance of that moment. Culture is the continual moderator of interpretation and perception of the moment, while rhetorical-cultural memory, as a strategy, attempts to mold the memory of the moment which is wrapped in the rhetorical counterstory that frames the memory of the moment. Like critical race counterstory, critical technocultural discourse analysis situates culture at the precipice of understanding, as well as technology, particularly when examining the networked counterpublics of marginalized groups. Adapting critical technocultural discourse analysis provides the framework for examining visual

digital artifacts as both texts and technology and their inextricable relationship to both culture and technology. The adaptation of visual social semiotic analysis is the glue that combines all facets of rhetorical counterstory and rhetorical-cultural analysis as pillars of the RSTA research methodology. Visual social semiotic analysis specifically affords a methodology for deriving meaning and cultural significance in the visual imagery of the justice for George Floyd movement.

Rhetorical Counterstory

Critical Race Counterstory. Critical race theory (CRT) challenges the hegemony's position that institutions and the social construction of society are already neutral and equitable (Dixson et al. 2006, 4; Solorzano and Bernal 2001, 313; Martinez 2020, 11). Among the many tenets of CRT, Martinez (9) highlights eight. Within those eight include, "Challenge to dominant ideologies," "Race as a social construct," "Centrality of experiential knowledge and/or unique voices of color," and "Commitment to social justice" (Cabrera 2018, 211–13; Delgado and Stefancic 2017, 20:8–11; Dixson et al. 2006, 4; Kynard 2015, 4; Ladson-Billings 2013, vii–viii, 37–42; Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 25–27; Wing 2003, 5–7). Parker and Lynn encapsulate CRT with three primary goals: 1) the utilization of narrative to examine race and racism, 2) the end of racial marginalization and the recognition of race as a social construct, and 3) understanding the relationship and power dynamics between racial discrimination and marginalization (Moody-Ramirez, Tait, and Bland 2021, 376; Parker and Lynn 2002, 10).

Critical race counterstory is a rhetorical research methodology that views counterstory through the lens of critical race theory (Martinez 2020, 2). Critical race as a methodology positions people of color as autonomous knowers (Code 2006a, 29) of their lived experiences

over the normalized, naturalized, and rational imaginary of the culture of dominant ideology (3). The video of the murder of George Floyd provided a counterstory to the narrative of George Floyd's murder that was in direct conflict with the narrative of the official police report. As a person of color, George Floyd's repeated cries of "I can't breathe," challenged the interpretative narrative of the police and the culture of the dominant ideology. Martinez presents the case for counterstory as a research methodology for writing and rhetoric (Martinez 2020). Through an examination of the work of Richard Delgado, Derrick Bell, and Patricia J. Williams, she argues that counterstory provides a vehicle for marginalized voices in dialogue to share their narratives and contribute to hegemonic conversations. Digital activism surrounding the video of the murder of George Floyd offered a critical race counterstory to the typical hegemonic police narrative that all violence and homicides committed by the police are always justified. Without critical race counterstories and counterpublics, the hegemony would reign unchecked in perpetuity.

Narrative Rhetorical Agency. Narrative rhetorical agency can be thought of as a tactic of rhetorical counterstory. Social movements have narrative structure which utilizes rhetoric as a strategy to achieve the aims of the movement (Bogost 2007, 2–3; Cathcart 1978; Feldpausch-Parker et al. 2013, 23; C. J. Griffin 2003; L. M. Griffin 1952; L. M. Griffin 1969; Yang 2016, 14). Rhetorical agency embodies the ability to act in a way that influences society (Campbell 2005, 3; Yang 2016, 14). Campbell contextualizes narrative rhetorical agency with five propositions; agency 1) "is communal and participatory," 2) "invented," 3) "emerges in artistry or craft," 4) "is effected through form," and 5) "is inherently, protean, ambiguous, open to reversal" (Campbell 2005, 2; Yang 2016, 14). Agency is both responsive to the social condition and an articulation of social issues (Campbell 2005, 3; (Yang 2016, 16).

Digital activism, including hashtag activism, surrounding the video of the murder of George Floyd, through narrative rhetorical agency and critical race counterstory, helped motivate people to take civic action to demand social justice and social change. Yang applies Karlyn Campbell's take on rhetorical agency to #BlackLivesMatter digital activism (Yang 2016). The hashtag enables a form of narrative rhetorical agency for social and political rhetoric in networked spaces coalescing around the hashtag. In addition, imagery, as rhetoric, is a powerful tool to inform, influence, and impact public opinion, and has played a formidable role in the messaging of the Black Lives Matter movement (Edrington and Gallagher 2019). The imagery of the video of the murder of George Floyd, although consumed through different political ideologies and cultural frames, through digital activism, offered narrative rhetorical agency for a critical race counterstory, rather than the normalized messaging of the culture of the dominant ideology [traditionally white, male, and heteronormative in western society].

Expanding upon the work of Richard Delgado, Derrick A. Bell, and Patricia J. Williams in critical race theory, Martinez borrows foundational counterstory exemplars: narration, allegory, and self-reflection (Martinez 2020, 2). Counterstory intentionally blurs the lines of theory and method. Scholarship framed with critical counterstory methodologies empowers and elevates the narrative of marginalized groups over public and cultural narrative of the dominant ideology (Martinez 2020, 3). As members of the dominant ideology are not always cognizant of or recognize the experiences of marginalized groups, counterstory introduces the realities of the lives of marginalized groups and challenges normalized and naturalized cultural narrative and the rational imaginary (Martinez 2020, 15). RSTA looks at narrative with more broad strokes. Not all narratives of marginalized groups are counterstories to the culture of dominant ideology. Critical race theory combined with counterstory, as a narrative research methodology, strives to

expand social justice research that will eradicate sexism, racism, and poverty and empower marginalized groups (Martinez 2020, 17). The official police narrative of the murder of George Floyd was one of criminality and the provoking of the use of force.

The justice for George Floyd movement offered critical race counterstory that described a narrative of institutionalized systemic racism, statistically unbalanced police violence towards people of color, and of yet another Black person living their ordinary life until they were murdered by the police. Modern-day publics and counterpublics, especially with social media platforms like Twitter, can provide the rhetorical narratives of the publics' agency (Warner 2010). Networked counterpublics, such as hashtag activism on the social media platform Twitter, afford agency to digital activists operating within the network of the hashtag to impact and influence cultural ideology and narrative, especially with narrative counterstories in counterpublics (Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles 2020, xxxviii). Twitter provided the agency and digital space and place for the justice for George Floyd movement to grow as a networked counterpublic offering critical race counterstory narratives to the hegemonic narrative.

Rhetorical Embodiment: Embodied Êthe, Métis, and Rhetorical Listening. Another tactic through which rhetorical counterstory may be achieved is through rhetorical *embodiment* [the ephemeral essence of a person's being]. Métis is embodied knowledge that resists the cultural narrative of the dominant ideology which equalizes the embodiment of intersectional identities (Pilloff 2020). It's what enables the rhetorical listener to hear that all intersectional identities of Black humanity matter equally to all manifestations of humanity. Because of the many dimensions of intersectional identity, Lorin Shellenberger presents the concept of *embodied êthe*, with êthe representing the plural form of ethos. Embodied êthe is in direct correlation and

acknowledgment of all of the intersectional ēthe that is embodied within every person which forms a complex, rich identity (Shellenberger 2020). The embodiment of ēthe is subjective and moderated by cultural narrative and intersectional identities. Although George Floyd’s body is no longer alive and among us, his embodied ēthe lives on, indeterminately through visual multimedia culture and rhetoric that has impacted public memory and the cultural narrative of Black humanity. Embodied ēthe recognizes the importance of cultural narrative and identity, not just in the ethereal body, but also with how the physical body and all its intersectional identities affects narrative.

When *rhetorical listening* [listening beyond what cultural narrative might first dictate] alone becomes ineffective as a rhetorical strategy, embodied *epistemic autonomy* [recognition of knowledge accumulated through the lived-experiences of the individual] can offer agency to bridge the gap in understanding of intersectional identities for the listener through the introduction of *mētis* (Pilloff 2020). As a rhetorical strategy, *mētis* invites shrewdness to the conversation. Building upon the work of Krista Ratcliffe, through *mētis*, a hashtag can be embodied and afford rhetorical agency (Pilloff 2020; Ratcliffe 2005). *Mētis*, by itself, is trickster rhetoric. However, when combined with embodiment and rhetorical listening, *mētis* affords agency through autonomous cultural narratives to overcome the *bie* [brute force] of cultural narratives, such as institutional racism and marginalization. *Mētis* is at the forefront of the rhetorical argument of the Black Lives Matter and justice for George Floyd social movements.

Rhetorical-Cultural Analysis

My dissertation research engages rhetorical-cultural analysis through the lenses of rhetorical-cultural narrative, rhetorical-cultural memory, and visual social semiotic analysis.

These three strategies are interrelated because they explore and explain how narrative, memory, and imagery connotes a greater meaning than what is denoted at face value. These larger meanings can be used strategically as persuasive tools, specifically in activism, counterpublics, and counterstories advocating for social justice and social change.

Rhetorical-Cultural Narrative. Understanding cultural narrative is key to the construction of a rhetorical-cultural analysis. An image is rhetorically powerful when it can move an audience from apathy to activism (Gallagher and Zagacki 2007, 116; Lubin 2003, 7). For an image to be iconic, it must have the transformative power to make semiotic connections of meaning beyond what is literally denoted in the image, and interconnect with cultural narratives and histories, while simultaneously using the world of meaning to weave together a new rhetorical narrative that propels one to enact change. *Life* magazine capitalized upon the affordances of visual culture to influence cultural narrative during the Civil Rights Selma protest marches of 1965 (V. J. Gallagher and Zagacki 2007, 118). Similarly, digital activists embedded within the network of online users advocating for justice for George Floyd, utilized the world of semiotic meaning that could be told visually through stills and video to offer George Floyd embodied ēthe and justice from the great beyond. Within the justice for George Floyd movement, visual activism offered a critical race counterstory as an alternative to the traditional blame-the-victim narrative of the police, institutions, and the normalized and naturalized cultural narrative of the hegemony.

Previously held perceptions of cultural narrative and identity directly influence how someone's embodied ēthe is interpreted (Shellenberger 2020). Both the perception of the self and how others perceive the self are affected by cultural narrative and identity. Anyone who exists outside the naturalized and normalized narrative of national American identity has limited authoritative agency. When a member of a marginalized groups enacts self-agency that is not an

extension of agency granted by hegemonic structures, the hegemony perceives that self-agency as negative and deviant behavior. Activism and protests, whether digital or in the physical world, are all forms of self-enacted agency that can be perceived negatively.

The more George Floyd attempted to assert his narrative rhetorical agency—“I can’t breathe”—the more it became necessary for Derek Chauvin to neutralize this deviant behavior from the cultural narrative of the (un)natural order of things. The justice for George Floyd movement both on and offline, was moderated, and expedited through *signifyin’* [“nonverbal components of Black digitality” (Brock, Jr. 2020, 77)] that offered a uniquely Black cultural narrative of the murder of George Floyd that challenged the initial hegemonic police narrative. Instead of painting the narrative of a menacing, threatening thug [thug is a frequently used dog whistle on the alt-right to connote that a person is Black] who was out of place and space, the justice for George Floyd movement centered George Floyd’s Black humanity as needlessly and callously stricken from him.

In Brock’s definition of Black culture, he argues, “Blackness as a dynamic core of narrative gravity (pace Yancy) sustained through intentional, libidinal, historical, and imaginative Black agency in the context of navigating American racial ideology” (Brock, Jr. 2020, 22). Racism, as a construct, is wrapped in the semiotic Black historical cultural narratives (Brock, Jr. 2020, 151) from slavery to the Tulsa massacre to the murder of George Floyd. Counter to institutional historical narratives framed from the positionality of the dominant group, the cultural narratives of marginalized groups provided reliable empirical data directly from the autonomous epistemologies of marginalized groups in lieu of the social imaginary (Brock, Jr. 2020, 251).

The master narrative of United States historical cultural narrative situates the Civil Rights movement as eradicating racism and social injustice (Martinez 2020, 5). And although the Civil Rights Movement did eradicate racism and systemic injustice in its immediate form at that time, it did not eradicate it altogether. Cultural narratives from counterpublics and counterstories challenge the naturalized and normalized master narrative with the cultural narratives that reflect the modern-day realities experienced by marginalized groups every day. Through counterstory, stereotypes are challenged and debunked in the normalized cultural master narrative and social imaginary for the life of marginalized groups, and replaced with the narratives of the true lived experiences of marginalized groups (Martinez 2020, 17). A side effect of perceived social movement success, especially when a version of the narrative of the social movement is adopted as official public memory, history, and national identity of the institutionalized authority, is the perception that the social movement has been one hundred percent successful. In the case of racism and systemic injustice, in his interview with Fox News host Chris Wallace, Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina suggested that systemic racism did not exist, as evidenced by the elections of the first African American President, Barack Obama, and the first female Vice-President, Kamala Harris, who was of African American and Indian heritage (McEvoy 2021). This argument was definitely ammunition from the *alternative right* [alt-right] and Fox News who offered backlash activism against the justice for George Floyd protests. Backlash proponents argued that Derek Chauvin's action could not have been racially motivated, nor an abuse of power, because racism had ceased to exist and the battle for Civil Rights had already been won. Although there are indeed meaningful accomplishments for social justice and social change over long stretches of time, we are far from living in a utopian society where injustice, inequality, and marginalization has been fully eradicated.

Rhetorical-Cultural Memory. Rhetorical-cultural memory is interrelated to the construction of a cultural narrative. Andrea R. Roberts's examination of the cultural narratives of the descendants of slaves in Shankleville, Texas uncovers counterstories that challenge the veracity and reliability of the local master cultural narratives of the regional history (Roberts 2018, 148). Leone Sandercock suggests that cultural narrative and cultural memory is key in forging foundational stories which are the cornerstone of identity and the associated behaviors that are reproduced through generational attachment (Roberts 2018, 152; Sandercock 2003, 16). Foundational Black cultural narratives illuminate the presence of Black place and space. Katherine McKittrick argues that Black cultural narratives reveal the historical relationship between the individual, community, and the land. Bjorn Sletto argues that storytelling is a form of performative cultural memory transfer that affords the narrative rhetorical agency to bind a community together through identity (Roberts 2018, 153; Sletto 2014, 362). Memory performance serves as a discourse between place, social issues, and community.

The cultural memory narratives of the African American community were able to make the historical connections of systemic injustice and trauma in the video of the murder of George Floyd. Thus, justice for George Floyd protest communicated this easily recognizable collective cultural trauma embedded in the video of the murder of George Floyd that might not have had a profound impact upon people not raised in the African American experience. The justice for George Floyd social movement both responded to the collective cultural memory of racial terrorism and police violence, but through digital activism, also contributed to the autonomous justice for George Floyd memory, narrative, and history for future generations to understand in the movement's own voice and to inspire a new general aim to fight for justice and equality for all.

Victor Villanueva stresses the need for people of color to connect cultural narratives with memory to adequately portray the lived experiences of marginalized groups over the social imaginary presented from the cultural narrative of the dominant ideology (in Martinez 2020, 89). Counterstory preserves the cultural wealth by preserving the memory of the true lived experiences of marginalized groups and fortifies a resistance of discourse to oppression and injustice (Martinez 2020, 114). Without the counterstory offered by participatory protest in the justice for George Floyd movement, the original official police department narrative of the murder of George Floyd would have stood as factual for public memory and historical narrative. Despite the official narrative of the authority, counterstory keeps counter memories alive and part of collective cultural memory.

In Shankleville, Texas, Roberts described the Black cultural narratives as an embodied sense of place with physical semiotic places of meaning that preserved the identity of its Black community and histories through the oral tradition of performative memory narrative (Roberts 2018, 148). Through performative oral tradition, physical landmarks were imbued with the embodied ethos of cultural memory narrative, while at the same time offering a counterpublic to the white normative regional cultural narrative (Roberts 2018, 149). Today, George Floyd Square ([see image 19](#)), the corner of 38th and Chicago, marks such a physical semiotic place and space of memorial and commemoration not just of the loss of life and denied Black Humanity of George Floyd, but also as a place of national cultural identity signifying a collective unifying human struggle for the fight for justice and equality.

Rhetorical Vernacular Memory

Rhetorical *vernacular memory* (Haskins 2007, 403; Hess 2007, 814–16; Zelizer 2004, 164), is a more modern phenomenon that seeks to archive a social movement activist collective cultural narrative, memory, and history with shared memories of dissent and violence, both past and present, in order to create video archives of collective memories, such as commemorations, that will inspire future generations of activists to become part of the social movement (Askanius 2013, 13). Particularly in academia, the verbal written word is revered with iconic character over the value of a visual. However, as illuminated by the video of the murder of George Floyd, versus the original written, official police statement, visuality has increasingly become an iconoclast competing as an artifact that can be read with the same agency, or greater, as the written word (Bleiker 2018, 4; Cappelli 2020, 326; Groarke 2002; Mitchell 1986; Mitchell 1994). Like the written word, visuals may be read as texts and as cultural and digital artifacts. Especially with the advent of emerging digital technologies, what was once held sacred in the power of written word is now challenged by the power of the image. Notwithstanding, just as the truth can be faked with the written word, so can visuals and digital artifacts, particularly with deep fake digital visual technology that creates imagery that does not actually exist, in the same manner that the technology of writing may write things that do not exist and are not true. Digital video memory, such as video collections on YouTube, bridges the chasm between traditional institutional memory, and the autonomous memory narrative of participatory protest articulated by video amateurs embedded within a social movement (Askanius 2013, 16; Haskins 2007, 401). The widespread penetration of smartphone camera technology amongst the masses with the modern landscape, has created a deluge of participatory protest collective archived public memory on platforms like YouTube (Cammaerts 2010). Widespread video footage of justice for

George Floyd protests with participant comment and context permeated YouTube, creating both living and future archives of the justice for George Floyd protests meanings and goals for the present and distant future. It should be noted however, that particularly with controversial subject matter, sometimes platforms block or remove comments and content. It is essential in academic research, and in the preservation of the history, memory, and narrative of a social movement, that movements regularly document and preserve the digital discourse surrounding the movement, to be available as archives for future generations.

Most specifically, YouTube has become commonplace to mourn and memorialize the death of others, as well as contribute to the rhetorical vernacular commemoration and remembrance surrounding the loss of life associated with social movements and protest public memory archives. Online amateur video vernacular remembrance and commemoration collections of protest public memory (Askanius 2013, 17) allow a social movement and its individual participants to “make the past work for the present” (Zelizer 2004, 161). The visual social semiotic connections of iconic imagery transcend space and time (Askanius 2013, 18; Barthes 1981). Iconic imagery utilizes the preexisting memories, histories, and narratives in culture to communicate a richer and vastly more complex message within an image in the present which draws upon the memories, histories, and narratives of the past. It uses the past to inform, impact, and influence the present and the future. The memory practices of video vernacular commemoration provide meaning and purpose to complex collective traumatic events of the past, creating a catharsis for people in the present and future. The sharing of the video evidence of the murder of George Floyd, conjoined with social commentary and reflection, provided a vernacular memory, remembrance, and commemoration of the needless loss of life of George Floyd, as well as a recognition of his Black humanity which resonated with global

citizens, as the physical manifestation of the knee of the hegemonic authority choking the lives of ordinary people to death through authoritarian rule, which inspired people to resist and take kairotic action for social justice and social change.

Collective Memory

Nations have national collective memories stemming from instrumental political events (Foucault 1977; Halbwachs 1992; Robinson 2022, 186) but it is also argued that some events can transcend transnational space and resonate in a universal moral space and place (Levy and Sznajder 2002, 88; L. Ryan 2014, 504; Saito 2020, 222; Volkmer and Deffner 2010). Social media networks allow for transnational participatory protest, co-creation, and horizontal public memory formations (Reading 2011; Robinson 2022, 186), as well as oppositional social movement backlash in the form of strategic counter-memories (Birkner and Donk 2020, 368). Collective memory is formed through a relational process of the individual and the collective public (Halbwachs 1992, 40; Robinson 2022, 186). Many modern-day public collective memories are formed by witnessing the event solely through some form of media (Garde-Hansen 2011; Robinson 2022, 187). Counter-memories and counternarratives are usually the fodder of a social movement challenging the official hegemonic authoritarian official narrative (Foucault 1977, 160; Medina 2011, 12). The narrative of the justice for George Floyd movement was essentially a counter-memory narrative in opposition to the official Minneapolis Police Department's narrative of the murder of George Floyd. Who, what, how, and whom is remembered is often directly influenced by power structures and relations (Brendese 2014; Robinson 2022, 187) which ultimately impacts society and culture (Misztal 2005). In Europe, public memory of the Holocaust evolved into a transnational "cosmopolitan memory" of

universal moral themes forged by the narratives of multinational media in film, print, and television (Levy and Sznajder 2002, 89; Robinson 2022, 187).

Anna Reading proposes six modes for how modern memory is formed in the digital space: 1) *Transmediality*—from what medium was the memory acquired, 2) *Velocity*—the speed at which a memory is created, 3) *Extensivity and Modality*—how broadly is the event known and how is the memory communicated, 4) *Valency*—how does a memory connect with other memories, 5) *Viscosity*—how adaptable is the memory into other versions, and 6) *Axis*—is the memory communicated person-to-person, horizontally, or vertically through hegemonic mediums such as the press (Reading 2011; Robinson 2022, 188). The collective public memory narrative of the murder of George Floyd, popularized through justice for George Floyd counterpublic digital discourse, was able to transcend transnational cultural lines because it resonated with people as a universal moral narrative and personal memory assemblage, through the personalization of participatory protest in the form transnational local demonstrations (Robinson 2022, 196; Levy and Sznajder 2002, 92; Misztal 2005, 1327; Octobre 2020). Justice for George Floyd social movement backlash can be defined by what Philip J. Brendese describes as a “segregated memory” (Brendese 2014, 63; Robinson 2022, 188). Alt-right counter-memories have created a collective public history of white victimhood. Segregated memory is responsible for the ilk of Fox News pandering of white victimhood which has evolved into a form of “post-racial rhetoric” (Banks 2018, 716), which villainizes Black Lives Matter and George Floyd protestors as the actual racists.

Technocultural Discourse Analysis. Critical technocultural discourse analysis provides a theoretical framework to explore emerging media culture and cultural artifacts (André Brock 2016). Semiotics may be explored through information communication technologies (ICT) by

centering the analysis around culture, audience discourse, and the technological artifact and its meaning. CTDA recognizes marginalized groups as possessing technological capabilities (Brock, 2009; Steele, 2017). CTDA allows for the study of cultural artifacts in conjunction with cultural means and how an audience might perceive itself in relationship to the artifact (André Brock 2016). The rationale for CTDA is to combine the technology social media platforms, social media culture, culture at-large, and on and off-line social structures together for analysis holistically. In Gillian Rose's exploration of visual culture, she stated that discourse analysis enables researchers to "...explore how images construct specific views of the social world...[and] how those specific views or accounts are constructed as real or truthful or natural particular regimes of truth" (Massanari & Chess, 2018; Rose, 2007, pp. 146–147).

Brock conceptualize Black digital practices as Black cyberculture which he frames as a holistic relationship and interconnectedness between the semiotic meanings of Black identity and Black technology (Brock, Jr. 2020, 5). Brock's critical technocultural discourse analysis allows the Black digital artifacts found within social media to be analyzed both as Black culture as technology and the Black culture of technology (8). Black cyberculture, although never completely free from obstructions, affords Black identity a fighting chance to flourish by creating Black publics for Black voices (228). Brock proclaims that Black cyberculture inhabits three distinctive tenets: "1. Technology as text 2. Identity as the tension between the self and the social 3. Blackness as a dynamic, protean of narrative gravity and weightlessness" (37). Moreover, Blackness in Black cyberculture is an informational identity moderated by discourse, technology and the embodied ēthe of the narrative rhetorical agency of a technocultural networked counterpublic.

Visual Social Semiotic Analysis. Visual social semiotics analysis focuses upon the audience's social interpretation of an image (Pennington, 2017; Rose, 2016). Semiotic representation within the imagery can provide cultural and contextual meaning that is denoted beyond the literal connotation of the image (Barthes 2009). Rick Iedema categorized the semiotic meanings of film into three primary categories: 1) representational, 2) interactive, and 3) compositional ; Iedema 2001, 10–11; Jewitt and Oyama 2004, 10–22; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). Representational refers to visual content that is both the denoted and connoted meaning of the image. It includes narrative, symbolism, place, action and reaction processes, and people. Interactive refers to the relationship between whom or what is in the image and the audience, as well as how the audience should interpret the image. It includes distance, perspective, engagement. Compositional refers to the physical composition of the framing of the image or how the image is presented to the audience. It included color, focal points, and salience. The rationale for using visual social semiotics analysis is to explore how visuality is still narratively rhetorical and can inform, impact, and influence meaning for an audience.

Within the visual digital activism of social movements, it is important to stress the differentiation between an *image* and *symbol* (Nicole Doerr and Milman 2014, 419–20). At the denoted level, these might be used interchangeably, but in terms of semiotic connotations, although an image still accesses semiotic cultural meaning, a symbol would refer to *iconic imagery* [imagery that carries with it historical and cultural significance] which transcends ordinary cultural narrative for an even higher meaning and purpose that resonates with both the history and culture building up to the aims of the social movement. Based upon the work of Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky, Marion G. Müller and Esra Özcan define *political iconography* as the study of the semiotic meanings and relationships of a visual at a given point in time (Doerr

and Milman 2014, 426; Müller and Özcan 2007). *Iconological interpretation* involves forging an iconographic description, content analysis, and interpretation of the visual. In their study of political iconic images in Muhammad cartoons, Müller and Özcan found a correlation between a symbolic semiotic relationship between images and rational argument between printed text (Doerr and Milman 2014, 421; Müller and Özcan 2007, 287–286; Panofsky 1983, 40–1).

Procedures

For the rhetorical-technocultural-semiotic analysis of the visual imagery for the justice for George Floyd protests, I began with a Google image search for [“George Floyd” AND “Protests”] using Boolean operators to crawl 8 selected news media websites and 5 social media websites. What gets remembered matters. Meaning is intertwined with memory. Although social media is socially relevant in the present, Google search, which comprises over 80% of the world market share of internet searches (Bianchi 2023), mathematically is what is most culturally relevant to the future and ultimate meaning derived from public memory and commemoration. I then selected the first 10 images that appeared with each query and coded them. After coding the images, I searched for emerging themes and patterns. Next, I analyzed the imagery and accompanying textual discourse for narrative, cultural, and rhetorical influences upon memory and meaning.

Data

Google Image Search

Google image search is a derivative of the world’s largest internet search engine—Google. It crawls every site on the internet, even barring some search results that do not adhere

to Google's set of standards. The Google search algorithm is propriety and thus private. However, Google engineers do leave behind clues to how the algorithm works in the form of public white papers written by Google engineers. Although Boolean operators can be used to fine tune search results, they are still ordered and ranked by Google's algorithm.

News Media Websites

DailyKos.com, RawStory.com, CNN.com, APNews.com, Reuters.com, RasmussenReports.com, FoxNews.com, and DailyWire.com are all online news websites running-the-gamut from +hyper-partisan left to center to +hyper-partisan right in political ideologies and belief systems. As online news platforms, news media sites use current events and trending topics as contextual themes, story headlines, and the underlying meta descriptions and keyword tags to facilitate each story's ability to rank at the top of Google search. Engaging in discourse about the most popular and current topics presumably gives an online media news website an algorithmic advantage to rank in Google search which enables the platform to reach a wider audience. This same algorithmic weight to stories also applies within each news media website's search engine, but the power of the Google search engine is more powerful and can typically find results on each news media website that cannot be found using the native search on each website. Search enables users to find content they prefer to consume, however, the general way that people interact with a news media website is via the front page and the featured headlines.

Social Media Platforms

YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit are social media platforms. Like an online news media outlet, social media platforms may contain discourse about the most popular and current events, as well as more niche and personal commentaries that are not relevant to large groups. Social media platform users create a profile, in conjunction with the user's content, that helps the platform's algorithm to assist in ordering and ranking content to serve up to each user's social media feed. Google's search engine can crawl some of this content very easily, and in other instances, by design of the platform, Google's search may have difficulty crawling a platform or may not be able to crawl it at all. Similar to visiting a news media website that provides stories that are framed through the lens of a particular ideological belief system, social media platforms are able to utilize algorithms to provide even more laser-focused niche content that match a user's ideological beliefs based upon the patterns of content that each user posts or engages with on the platform.

Primary Data

The primary data source was a collection of 104 pieces of imagery from the Google image search term ["George Floyd" AND "protests"]—collected from an array of social media platforms and online media outlets, running the gamut from far left, to neutral, to far right in April of 2021. Media outlets included: DailyKos.com, RawStory.com, CNN.com, APNews.com, Reuters.com, RasmussenReports.com, FoxNews.com, and DailyWire.com. These online media outlets were selected as a collection of hyper-partisan left, skews left, middle, skews right, and hyper-partisan right outlets based upon the Ad Fontes Media, Media Bias Chart 7.0 (Otero 2021) ([see figure 2](#)).

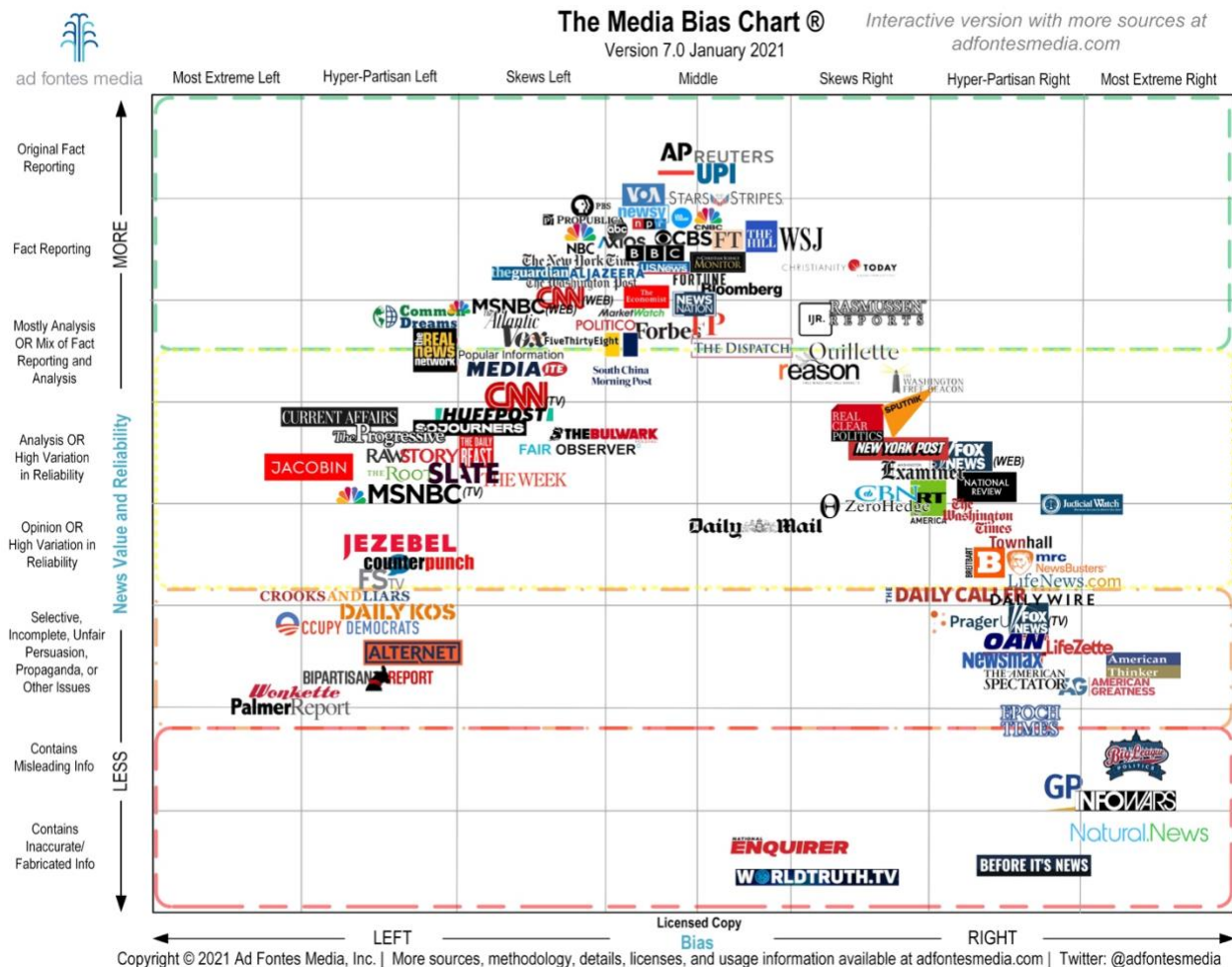


Figure 2. Otero, Vanessa. “Media Bias Chart 7.0 - Static Version.” *Ad Fontes Media*. January 2021. <https://www.adfontesmedia.com/static-mbc/>.

The Ad Fontes Media, Media Bias Chart is frequently circulated on social media and somewhat problematic in labeling the cultural left, right, and center. Although the study uses the Media Bias Chart to select online news outlets for examination, the analysis of the visual information and its associative context is independent of perceived cultural bias and analyzes the information at face value, offering insightful comparisons and contrasts to the perceived bias of both the Media Bias Chart, as well as external cultural perceptions. Social media outlets used to collect

imagery from included YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit. From the set of 104 pieces of imagery, one image was selected from George Floyd protests for a close reading.

The dataset was created through the lens of a Google image search. I used Boolean operators to crawl each news website and social media platform to search specifically for the combination of ["George Floyd" AND "protests"]. For each website and social media platform, I selected the first ten images that appeared to be related to the respective query. All the queries had some form of variation of recent imagery, but primarily imagery that was posted right around the time of the two respective events. Given the nature of what information Google can crawl on a given site, SEO, keyword usage, and Google's algorithm, it was interesting to see what did or did not show up at the top of each Google image search, or what showed up at all, as a search result in a given search. What appeared in the Google search results did not always conform with what might be culturally expected. However, it should be noted, that the specificity of an algorithm is so granular, that even searching on a different device, such as a mobile phone versus a computer, and even with a different operating system, can influence search engine results.

CHAPTER 2: VISUAL ANALYSIS OF THE GEORGE FLOYD PROTESTS

Statement of Positionality and Disclosures

First and foremost, although I am providing an analysis and close reading of select visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd protests, I wish to disclose that my worldview is that all people, regardless of race, gender, class, identity, or origin, should be treated equal. I recognize that often, this is not the case in the world, for various reasons. My beliefs in equity and equality fine-tune my perspective and vantage point. I also wish to disclose that Civil Rights era leaders were part of my immediate family while growing up and that my immediate family includes a police officer. In addition, one of the news websites used in this study is APNews.com which is a website owned by the *Associated Press* (AP) newswire service. I have worked as a paid freelance field producer for AP in the past. Furthermore, this research references the Lorraine Motel at the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee. I have previously screened work at the museum. In addition, please be advised that the following chapter contains historical visual imagery of a disturbing graphic nature that epitomizes *amoral* inhuman behavior in the form of images of death by torture [Immoral suggests that a person does not know whether an act is right or wrong; however amoral means that a person does know that an act is wrong but chooses to do it anyway with total disregard for morality. Specifically, such was the case with former Minneapolis Police officer and convicted murderer, Derek Chauvin. Furthermore, whether it be biblically or culturally-based, alt-right society has not convinced me that they do not know right from wrong, but rather willfully chooses to evade morality with reckless abandon—amoral.]

Background

COVID-19

The World Health Organization (WHO) notified the world on December 31, 2019, that a mysterious pneumonia-like illness had infected numerous people in China (Schumaker 2020). Less than two weeks later, China, on January 11, 2020, shared with the world the first official death from a novel ‘coronavirus’. The origin of coronavirus was believed to have been in a Wuhan open animal market. The novel coronavirus was dubbed COVID-19 on February 12, 2020. COVID-19 evolved into a global pandemic by March 24, 2020. Japan had no choice but to postpone the 2020 Summer Olympics. The worldwide COVID-19 death count reached 335,000 by May 27, 2020, and throughout the world, governments, schools, and companies made the transition to remote work wherever possible. Face mask mandates in public places became commonplace. Stay-at-home-orders and lockdowns were rolled out all over the world. Fear and trepidation of death-by-coronavirus, global economic collapse, and tense domestic partisan politics ignited an atmospheric powder keg amongst a cacophony of extrajudicial murders of people of color. Although not every person of color who was extrajudicially murdered received media attention, numerous cases of Black people being killed by the police, or by stand-your-ground predatory vigilantes, were given attention in counterpublic discourse on social media platforms which caused the media to pick up those stories and elevate them to the level of mainstream public discourse.

Some of the standout extrajudicial murders of Black people that rose to mainstream media attention ([see image 22](#)) because of counterpublic discourse on social media platforms includes:

- Black teenager, #TrayvonMartin, who was murdered by self-proclaimed vigilante George Zimmerman in February of 2012, while Trayvon Martin was walking home in the evening [Zimmerman was ultimately found not guilty of murder] (Vera and Krishnakumar 2022)
- #MichaelBrown, who was murdered by police officer Darren Wilson, in August of 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, after witnesses said Michael Brown complied with Wilson's commands to put his hands in the air, and after doing so, Wilson shot and murdered Michael Brown [Wilson was ultimately found not guilty of murder]
- #PhilandoCastile, who was murdered by police officer Jeronimo Yanez, in July of 2016 in Minnesota, when ordered by Yanez during a traffic stop to show his driver's license, but once Philando Castile informed the Yanez he had a legal firearm in the car (as required by law), Yanez shot and murdered Philando Castile [Yanez was ultimately found not guilty of murder]
- #AhmaudArbery, who was murdered in February of 2020 while jogging, whose self-proclaimed vigilante murderers, Travis McMichael, Gregory McMichael, and William "Roddie" Bryan, post-conviction of former police officer Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd, were later found guilty of murder and racially motivated hate crimes in 2022 (Andone and Spells 2022)
- #BreonnaTaylor, who was murdered in March of 2020 in Louisville, Kentucky, during her sleep, by police officers Joshua Jaynes, Kyle Meany, Brett Hankison, and Kelly Goodlett, who were serving a no-knock warrant to the wrong address for a suspect who was already in police custody [None of the officers were ultimately

found guilty of murder in the state of Kentucky but are currently awaiting trial for federal charges] (Bowman 2022)

George Floyd

On Monday, May 25th, 2020, police officers arrested George Floyd after a store manager placed a 911 call that implicated George Floyd as suspected of buying a pack of cigarettes with a counterfeit \$20 bill (Hill et al. 2020). This encounter would lead to George Floyd's murder, as former Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin, placed his knee on Floyd's neck, with George Floyd outstretched face down on the ground and George Floyd's airflow constricted. As George Floyd repeatedly screamed, "I can't breathe" and would eventually cry out, "Mama," Derek Chauvin kept his knee on George Floyd's neck, as Chauvin nonchalantly remained calm with his hand in his pocket, as if he were sitting on a park bench reading the Sunday paper.¹ Junior police, Thomas Lane, asked Derek Chauvin twice if they should turn George Floyd on his side so that George Floyd could breathe but Chauvin emphatically denied Lane's requests (Sullivan 2022). Even when the EMT's arrived, Chauvin still initially refused to remove his knee from George's Floyd neck. Chauvin kept his knee on George Floyd's neck for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds [originally thought to be eight minutes and forty-six seconds] (Levenson 2021a), even

1. Frazier, Darnella. "Video shows Minneapolis cop with knee on neck of black man who later died. Via New York Post." *YouTube* video, 10:21. May 20, 2020. <https://youtu.be/FGCFHQ4yfdg>.

when Floyd vomited on the ground, unconscious, until Chauvin finally released his knee and George Floyd was eventually pronounced dead.²

After digital activists gained access to the video of the murder of George Floyd that was recorded and uploaded by then, 17-year-old Darnella Frazier, as well as multiple sets of personal cell phone video and security camera footage of George Floyd's murder, the world witnessed a *digital lynching* recorded in real time. Lynching was not a new cultural phenomenon in the United States, or worldwide, but watching a digital lynching in real time was becoming a new phenomenon through the surge of police and self-proclaimed vigilante violence and extrajudicial murder videos being circulated on social media platforms by digital activists and the media. From the murder of Emmett Till to the popular KKK-fueled lynching postcards (Kasra 2017) ([see image 6](#)) of the early 1900s, the social semiotic cultural narrative of the pain and suffering of the injustice of lynching or the wanton indifference, depending upon one's own cultural memory narratives and perception of the world, digital lynching had already been built upon a storied and mired history. The iconic imagery of Emmett Till's corpse became part of the canon of "critical Black memory" that would further empower the spirits of those fighting for racial justice during the Civil Rights era (Ore 2019, 79).³ Four months after the murder of Emmett Till, the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott was launched (Tufekci 2017, 140). As a counter-

2. Frazier, Darnella. "Video shows Minneapolis cop with knee on neck of black man who later died." <https://youtu.be/FGCFHQ4yfdg>.

3. Barber, Rebekah. "Sixty-one years ago, the brutal sight of what white supremacy did to Emmett Till shook America. Today there is still a need to witness how racism plagues the nation. (Images of Till via Wikipedia.)" *Facing South*. August 26, 2016. <https://www.facingsouth.org/2016/08/living-legacy-emmett-tills-casket>.

rhetorical tool against lynching, the act of naming victims helps humanize Blackness (Ore 2019, 93). Memorializing the victims of lynchings and antiblack violence offers a moral lesson through public memory that counters the original purpose and intent of lynching rhetoric and redefines the definition of civic belonging (96).

George Floyd was not the first, nor the last, Black victim of systemic racism, systemic injustice, and police violence, to scream those spine-tingling words, “I can’t breathe.” On Thursday, July 17th, 2014, Eric Garner previously, as many others have, screamed those same fateful words, “I can’t breathe” ([see image 1](#)).



Image 1. New York Daily News. “Choking of Eric Garner [WITH UNSEEN FOOTAGE] - Staten Island, New York - July 17th 2014. Via Getty Images.” Police Shootings, *YouTube* video, 14:43. September 24, 2016. <https://youtu.be/z0j-7L094d0>.

Ironically, once again, cigarettes were the impetus and the main ingredient for murder-made-simple (Associated Press 2019). Garner had been accused of attempting to sell a “loose

cigarette,” meaning a single cigarette out of a personal pack which would be untaxed, unregulated, and illegal, and for that accusation, the result was murder at the hands of the police.⁴

The digital activist rallying cries of #ICantBreathe, surrounding the circulated video of Eric Garner’s murder, were yet another social semiotic cultural narrative, etched in stone, scaffolded in the pyramid of systemic racism and systemic injustice, boiling over to the civic unrest which would build up to George Floyd—the tipping point. George Floyd’s murder and pleas for help were posthumously amplified through extended embodiment by digital activists with demands and rallying cries of #JusticeForGeorgeFloyd, #BlackLivesMatter, #DefundThePolice, and social justice and social change. The cultural narrative of the George Floyd murder video became a rhetorical visual argument for the extended embodiment of a marginalized group and its allies who took to the streets worldwide ([see images 2-3](#)).

⁴ Krieg, Gregory. “The Prosecutor Who Failed to Indict in the Eric Garner Case Could Be Headed to Congress.” <https://www.mic.com/articles/107456/the-prosecutor-in-the-eric-garner-could-be-headed-to-congress>.



Image 2. de Luca, Cesar Luis. "How George Floyd's death reverberates around the world. Via dpa, Alamy Live News." *The Economist*. June 8, 2020.

<https://www.economist.com/international/2020/06/08/how-george-floyds-death-reverberates-around-the-world>.



Image 3. Anadolu Agency. “Paris protest on Tuesday, June 2. Via Getty Images.” *GQ*, June 5, 2020. <https://www.gq.com/story/international-george-floyd-protests>.

Material culture shapes social interaction. The video of the murder of George Floyd helped shape the narrative of Floyd’s murder and its contextual significance, interpretation, and media, as a cultural artifact and its positionality in the #BlackLivesMatter movement, as well as the larger story of centuries of systemic racism and systemic injustice ([see image 4](#)).



Image 4. Parisienne, Theodore. “Fulton Street, from Marcy Avenue to Brooklyn Avenue, is painted yellow with the words ‘Black Lives Matter,’ on Sunday June 14, in Brooklyn. Via Pacific Press, Getty Images.” *New York Daily News*. June 14, 2020.

<https://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/ny-mural-brooklyn-fulton-street-black-lives-matter-20200614-2twr4k4adfuhjg2uemoyj37ea-story.html>.

Narrative contributes to how we perceive and interpret reality. The video of George Floyd embodied not only the digital activists engaging in a larger goal for social justice and social change at the systemic level but extended the embodiment and agency of George Floyd’s cries for help from beyond the grave. Through social media platforms, digital activists can scaffold the effects of George Floyd’s cries for help into an agentic force, far beyond the ability of George Floyd and the moment that Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd ([see image 5](#)).



Image 5. Magana, Jose Luis. “Demonstrators kneel as police officers in riot gear push back, outside of the White House, June 1, 2020 in Washington D.C., during a protest over the death of George Floyd. Via AFP, Washington Post, Getty Images.” *Business Insider*. June 7, 2020. <https://www.businessinsider.com/protests-activism-professor-why-george-floyd-movement-is-different-2020-6>.

George Floyd’s plea for justice was off-loaded into the cell phone videos and security camera footage that captured his murder. The indexicality of hashtag activism allows an idea to organically spread with virality when users include a hashtag, such as #JusticeForGeorgeFloyd, in their posts, commentary, and sharing of personal thoughts and experiences. The idea becomes the beacon that coordinates likeminded ideas and criticism. Formal institutions, such as the Black Lives Matter organization proper, participated in the sharing of collective narrative surrounding #JusticeForGeorgeFloyd. [The BLM organization proper is comprised of BLM chapters in many cities and states (“BLM Transparency Center” 2023). In addition, the BLM organization is also

affiliated with the Black Lives Matter Global Network Fund (BLMGNF) which is responsible for charitable fundraising and social investments. The BLMGNF is overseen by a board of directors. Although there are other organizations that use the term “Black Lives Matter” in their name, such as the “Black Lives Matter Foundation,” the “Black Lives Matter Foundation” is not affiliated with the BLM organization, neither the BLMGNF (Sung 2020).]

In the social media platform space, users with large followings have *content authority* [content that an algorithm promotes and gives preference to, meaning that the content appears at the top of the list of search results, over other content that lacks authority] and may further impact how fast and how far the idea behind a hashtag like #GeorgeFloyd may spread. Formal counter-institutions are not standalone contributors to the virality of a hashtag but are helpful influencers, in terms of spreading the idea and offering structure and guidance, for the direction of a social movement that the idea of the hashtag supports. Although George Floyd is no longer alive, his extended embodiment lives on through the collective cultural memory and critical race counterstory that was strategically offered through justice for George Floyd activists who believed that Black lives do matter. In an endless stream of cultural narrative that sent the message that Black lives do not matter, people not just in America, but around the world, had enough. They took to the streets and demanded change. Derek Chauvin was ultimately found guilty of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder, and second-degree manslaughter on April 20, 2021 (Wamsley 2021).

George Floyd: From Lynching and Rhetorical-Cultural Memory to Audiovisual Activism

Lynching and Rhetorical-Cultural Memory, Publics and Counterpublics, Public Sphere, and the Black Public Sphere

Lynching and Rhetorical-Cultural Memory

“*Lynching* is a racialized practice of civic engagement” that establishes those who belong and those who do not, through the murder and mutilation of those not deemed a part of the normalized and naturalized citizen race—whites (Ore 2019, iv). Lynching memorabilia, whether in photographs, postcards, or burned body parts, helped white citizens in the Jim Crow south establish themselves as those who belonged (22) ([see image 6](#)).

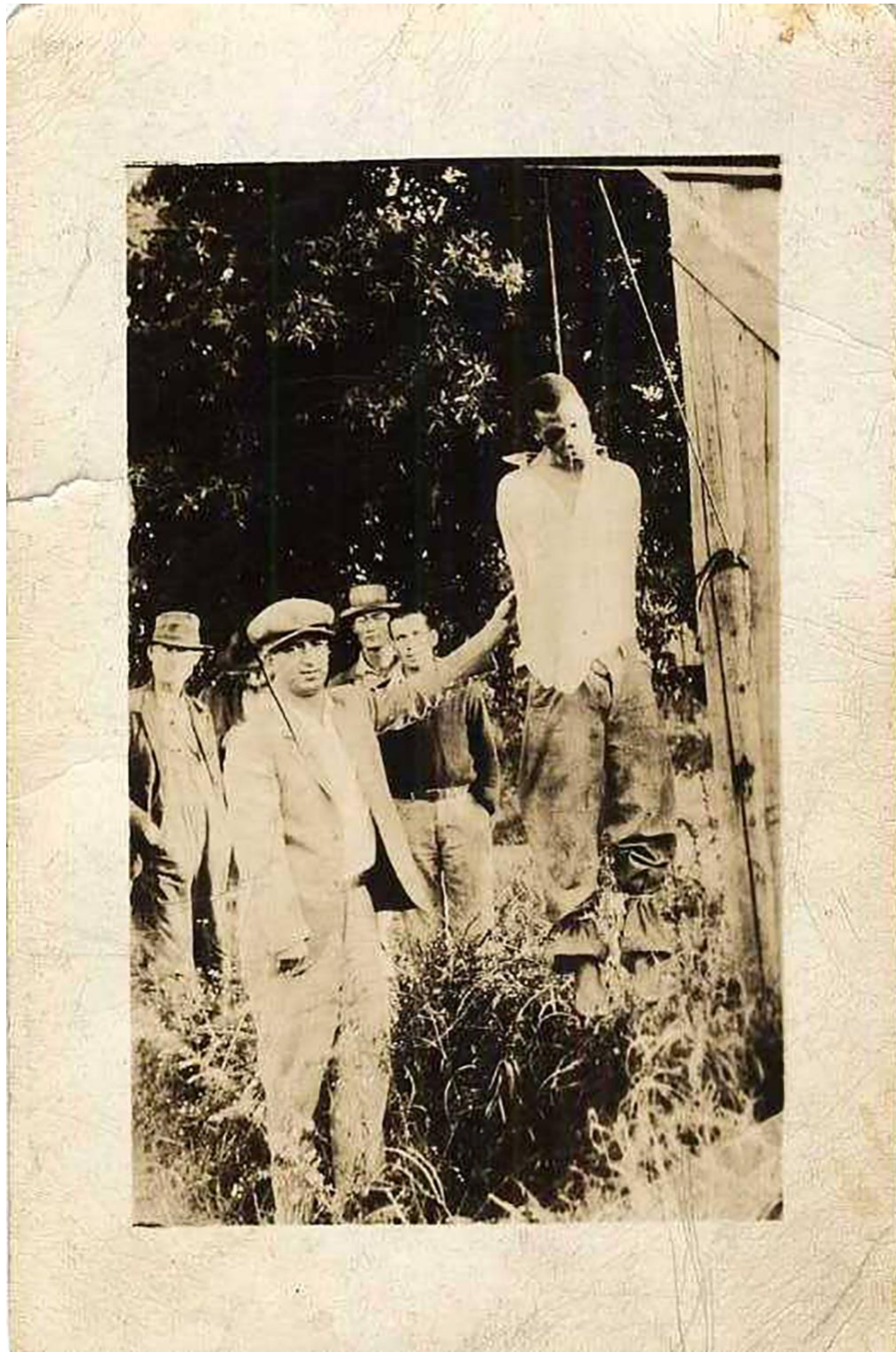


Image 6. Brian L. Bossier Collection. "Hanging in Georgia (Black man hung by a white mob)."
Curt Teich Postcard Archives Digital Collection (Newberry Library). 1920/1929.
https://collections.carli.illinois.edu/digital/collection/nby_teich/id/7660/rec/1.

As a form of othering and civic engagement, a version of lynching, whether it be extrajudicial killings, or the assassination of character, continues to be a regularly engaged rhetorical tool and cultural intimidation agent (26). Lynching and the circulation of rhetoric around and about the actual acts, as a rhetorical practice of civic belonging, seeks to codify white solidarity by delegitimizing Black humanity (33). The iconic imagery of lynching champions white supremacy through the presentation of antiblack violence, a natural practice of civic belonging for whites, and not belonging for others (55). Lynching photographs typically depicted corpses after they had been lynched, but rarely as an active depiction of a Black person who was still alive and dying from the torturous act of being lynched (58). The video of the murder of George Floyd was somewhat of an outlier, even for modern-day social media, because it showed the entire murder of George Floyd in real time until the moment of presumed death.

Similarly, in order to justify their extrajudicial killings, far right-leaning narratives for Emmett Till, Trayvon Martin (Ore 2019, 7), and George Floyd all used visual imagery to besmirch the character of the victim, instead of the authoritarian murderers. Mamie Till Bradley's decision to share the gruesome photos of Emmett Till's mutilated corpse helped remove the veil of secrecy covering the realism of torture and murder (75). Lynching effigies in the age of Obama were an attempt to recapitalize upon the lynching rhetoric of the Jim Crow south as a battle cry for modern white solidarity. As President, Donald Trump's alt-right friendly rhetoric made him the unofficial de facto 'lyncher-in-chief' and let it be known that "...the White House was a space for whites only" (121). Meaning and memory are inextricably tied together (Barthes 1973, 127; Rose 2016, 131). Through memory, a construction of ideas is denoted in the meaning of an image as a sign, and through a greater semiotic lexicon of cultural

narrative, an even more complex meaning can be connoted to the image from memory, as a signifier. As a rhetorical strategy and tactic, George Floyd and Black Lives Matter protests have blended the theater of dramatic resistance “scenes of collective recognition” through “die-ins” (Hesford 2015, 552–53; Maraj, Prasad, and Roundtree 2018, 2). Die-ins are a form of rhetorical protest whereby protestors occupy public spaces and simulate their death as a means of commemoration and solidarity with those who came before them.

Emmett Till’s mutilated corpse became an integral part of Black collective memory, as a metaphoric harbinger of continuous danger that every Black American need be aware of in the Jim Crow white supremacist south; remember Emmett Till (Harold and DeLuca 2005, 279). Even today, the visual social semiotic meaning of the corpse of Emmett Till still haunts those who can remember and still serves as omen of danger in the collective historical memory of the Black community (266). Images of police murders of unarmed Black men permeate social media platforms and carry with it the same resonance and fear of the absence of justice, as it did in 1955 when Emmett Till was murdered. The murder of George Floyd and the onslaught of numerous extrajudicial murders of people of color in 2020, going back hundreds of years, called upon the collective historical memory of the Black experience and contributed to the trauma and warnings to future generations to be cautious and stay safe and aware [woke].

Lynchings were intended to be rhetorical physical deterrents to Black humanity, as well as celebratory events to rhetorically memorialize white supremacy in the Jim Crow south, as many whites gathered in their Sunday best with their children and hacked away body parts from lynched Blacks. both while they were alive and after death, to savor as keepsakes (Harold and DeLuca 2005, 268). This perverse pleasure and show of force to subjugate African Americans would ultimately lead to the downfall of Jim Crow, as Mamie Till Bradley opened the door to

reverse the rhetorical meaning of lynching to help shock northern whites into the reality of the brutality of white supremacy, via the iconic visual imagery of the Civil Rights era, soon to emerge. The nonchalant demeanor of Derek Chauvin’s digital lynching of George Floyd in front of public witnesses, including a minor, which was a not so distinct echo of lynchings past, created the *situational exigence* [immediacy] that forced people globally to digest and react to state sanctioned murder by a regent of the authority—a police officer. Julian Bond, former SNCC communications director and NAACP chairman, said in reference to seeing Emmett Till’s corpse, “My memories are exact—and parallel those of many others my age—I felt vulnerable for the first time in my life—Till was a year younger—and recall believing that this could easily happen to me—for no reason at all. I lived in Pennsylvania at the time” (273).

Although lynching was a commonplace spectacle for whites in the Jim Crow south, its memory was intended to be a hidden secret with rhetorical whispers to intimidate Blacks, and white sympathizers, for Blacks to occupy their role as unequal marginalized others in the American landscape (Harold and DeLuca 2005, 276–77). However, after the open casket memorial for Emmett Till, as well as the widely circulated photos from the mortician, the image of Emmett Till’s corpse was integrated into the public memory, as both warning and motivation to mobilize today for a better tomorrow.

Jacqueline Goldsby wrote:

The mutilation of Emmett Till’s body—a child’s body—demonstrated to us how uncivil we could be to one another, and it impressed upon us the social cost of systematically denying the political rights of the least amongst us. In that sense, this lynching commands such a prominent place in our collective memory because it performs the function of political myth as described by Roland Barthes (Goldsby 1996, 247; Harold and DeLuca 2005, 280).

Goldsby is referring to Roland Barthes's framing of myth as "a political proposition" (Barthes 1991, 128). Specifically, Goldsby refutes historian Stephen J. Whitfield's assessment of the murder of Emmett Till (Whitfield 1991), as being a political myth and inaccurately categorized as a lynching (Goldsby 1996). Goldsby could not more vehemently disagree. Mamie Till Bradley was able to reverse both the rhetorical messaging and collective public memory around the lynching of Emmett Till. Instead of communicating a rhetorical message to keep southern Black people in their place, it became a battle cry to embolden opposition to white supremacy in the Jim Crow south. Similarly, the circulation of the digital lynching imagery of George Floyd throughout social media, also emboldened global resistance against hegemonic systemic injustices against people of color. Along with a growing trend of circulating murders of people of color on social media, counterpublic and counterstory discourse of the murder of George Floyd repositioned lynching, not as a warning for others [non-whites] to know their place, but as an illumination of amoral systemic injustice, particularly in matters of race, and a rallying cry for social justice and social change.

Public Sphere

Habermas interpreted the *public sphere* as a singular ephemeral public space and place where private citizens could engage in public discourse about issues of society which at times could be contrary to the popular opinion of the state (Habermas 1991; Squires 2002, 446). Asen believed that counterpublics were anything that was excluded from the broader public sphere of discourse (Asen 2000, 440; Squires 2002, 453). Felski and Felski described marginalized counterpublics as overlapping subcommunities joined together by fighting the many gradations of oppression (Felski and Felski 1989, 171; Squires 2002, 450). Fraser expanded the public

sphere to apply to multiple publics based upon broad categories of identity (Calhoun 1993; Fraser 1990, 62). The public sphere is thus comprised of multiple publics and counterpublics. Within those counterpublics are many that pertain to the discourse of marginalized groups (Squires 2002, 446). Due to the vagueness in academic scholarship for the definitive explanation of what makes a counterpublic ‘counter’, Squires classifies the publics of marginalized groups into three broad categories—“enclave, counterpublic, and satellite” (448). An *enclave* public is a “protected public” (Mansbridge 1996) that keeps counterhegemonic thought secret from the dominant group, thus providing agency for a safe space that enables the enclave to create rhetorical strategies that challenge the hegemony (Chávez 2011). A *counterpublic* engages with other publics and utilizes traditional activist strategies such as non-violent protests and boycotts. A *satellite* public is one that is not formed from oppression, yet is separate from the dominant group public sphere, and sometimes engages with the general public sphere. Although broad and generalized, Squires’ classification of the publics of marginalized groups is useful in the examination of the visual imagery of the justice for George Floyd protests, within social media, because marginalized groups do not behave or think like a monolith. An enclave public offered a safe space for George Floyd activists to strategize tactics to implement moving forward. Front-facing activist organization on Twitter for public protests would be categorized by Squires as a counterpublic. A general discussion and commentary about the George Floyd protests, not necessarily from a position of subjugation, would be categorized as a satellite public for general discourse.

Habermas’s original theory of public sphere is based upon the *sociolinguistics* [the study of social differences in language] of the hegemony and does not include physical embodiment as visual grammar (Beech and Jordan 2021, 4). Within the public sphere, *stranger sociability*

provided for a dialogue amongst intellectually evenly yoked participants in the discourse of the public sphere. However, this public sphere was modeled upon the bourgeoisie of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Beech and Jordan argue that Habermas's theory of the "ideal speech situation" (Habermas 1985, 1:25) does not apply to people who exist outside of the normalized hegemony—white, male, heteronormative. Through visual social semiotics, visual grammar [or perceived visual grammar] can contribute to the dialogue of a counterpublic. The Black Lives Matter movement's engagement of the justice for George Floyd movement helped expand the discourse of the public sphere when hegemonic media began commenting on the discourse of the #BlackLivesMatter counterpublic on Twitter and social media. In addition, the Black Lives Matter movement helped expand the concept of public sphere with the inclusion of perceived visual grammar as legitimate discourse. The radical rhetoric of the dramatic theater of the Black Lives Matter movement, in the form of toppling symbolic statues of white supremacy to shutting down bridges, is a direct challenge to the public sphere theory's requirement for normalized rationality (Beech and Jordan 2021, 6). Habermas's original theory of public sphere was applicable only to critical-rational discourse which did not include gender or identity. The gender and identity of the public sphere on which Habermas's original theory was based would have been white, male, heteronormative, property owners in late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century Europe. Nancy Fraser extends the concept of the public sphere beyond information and opinion to "social identities" (Beech and Jordan 2021, 10; Fraser 1990, 68). Black Twitter has become a formidable "digital counterpublic in a networked public sphere" (Borda and Marshall 2020, 136) that offers narrative rhetorical agency for marginalized voices (Yang 2016, 14). Black Twitter, although a corporate platform, has helped the hegemonic media to incorporate identity-

based discourse as legitimate critical-rational forms of discourse which have become widespread conversations adopted in the public sphere.

Black Public Sphere

Habermas's original theory of public sphere is limited to a singular public sphere that was comprised entirely of members of the dominant ideology. It did not account for discourse not amongst the dominant group, nor alternative, subaltern, or counterpublics. Dawson suggests that the modern day *Black public sphere* is built upon the counter-institutions and Black counterpublics of the past, such as the Black church and Black press (Dawson 2013, 210; Squires 2002, 451). Using Habermas's theory of public sphere for counterpublics would result in placing all counterpublic discourse for marginalized groups into a singular counterpublic. Squires maintains that instead of viewing the Black public sphere as a monolith, it should be thought of as multiple public spheres, or counterpublics, which share a common racial identity but are subdivided amongst many categories, such as gender, age, sexuality, and ideology (Squires 2002, 452). Social media platforms have allowed the Black public sphere to expand beyond formal counter-institutions into enclaves of online networked publics, unified via a hashtag. It was this type of networked Black public sphere that allowed participatory protest to gain momentum online for the justice of George Floyd movement. Justice for George Floyd eventually coalesced with more concrete forms of counter-institutions, such as the growing leadership and organizational capabilities of the evolving formal Black Lives Matter organization.

Obstacles over time, for people of color participating meaningfully in the public sphere of the dominant ideology, have allowed the Black public sphere to thrive in areas of emerging media, such as Twitter, at a faster rate of impact than the mainstream media (Beech and Jordan

2021, 8–9). The Black public sphere, as a counterpublic, exists as a critique of traditional forms of media. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, the *Black church* became a focal point for democratic political discourse and public issues (Brown 1994, 110; Higginbotham 1994, 10), as both a counterpublic and counter-institution. The Black church was the central hub of the African American community for everything from meeting halls, schools, and bulletin boards. Voices within the Black public sphere, such as the Black press, have called out the use of ideological terms in the media, such as “riot,” as a dog whistle to suggest that a protest is in fact an unnaturalized irrational argument and not a valid form of public protest, whether or not an actual riot has transpired (Foucault Welles and Jackson 2019, 1701–2; Jacobs 2000, 140–41). As a counterpublic, distributed networked participatory protest, such as the justice for George Floyd protests, now occupies the space the Black church and Black press once did, in terms of affecting large masses of people. The main differentiator is, however, that in terms of finely articulated social movement aims and impact upon institutions, those accomplishments are best achieved by a social movement, with the assistance of the organizational leadership of definitive counter-institution structures.

Publics and Counterpublics

Whether public or private, networks of discourse can yield impact and influence. Feminist scholarship identifies the discourse amongst early Victorian women’s networks of gossip and conversation as having influence over Victorian ideals (Warner 2010). Publics are the fabric of cultural narrative and the social sphere. A public inhabits the space which Louis Althusser describes as the *ideological state apparatuses* (ISA) (Althusser 1971, 142–43). ISAs are institutions, both public and private, such as religions, educational systems, family, the legal

system, political parties, trade unions, traditional media communications, and cultural institutions where the dominant ideology, or rather the ideologies of the state, exist as a public. Warner offers seven propositions for what comprises a public:

1. A public is self-organized...2. A public is a relation among strangers...3. The address of public speech is both personal and impersonal...4. A public is constituted through mere attention...5. A public is the social space by the reflexive circulation of discourse...6. Publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation...7. A public is poetic world making (Warner 2010, 65–124).

While publics are the fabric of the master narrative of the dominant group, counterpublics are the core of marginalized groups, as well as alt-right revanchist groups. Cohen defined *marginalized groups* as those lacking in basic societal resources whose identity is perceived inferior to members of dominant group (C. J. Cohen 2009, 38). “*Hegemony* is a form of power based on leadership by a group in many fields of activity at once, so that its ascendancy commands widespread consent and appears natural and inevitable” (S. Hall 1997, 259). As a result, members of the hegemony exploit or marginalize members of the perceived inferior group (Felski and Felski 1989, 171; Squires 2002, 467). A counterpublic has an awareness within its networked group, of a marginalized status, in relationship to the general public sphere of the culture of the dominant ideology (Deem 2002, 451; Warner 2010). Counterpublics are formed when crisis and conflict arise from the normalization of the culture of the dominant group which runs counter to the realities of members of a counterpublic, such as marginalized groups. At times, a counterpublic can be considered an aberration of normative practices and ideologies (Deem 2002, 444). An *ideology* can be considered a network of interpretation. Counterpublics immediately formed regarding the narrative and interpretation of the murder of George Floyd in opposition to the official police narrative and retelling of events. As the video circulated of the

murder of George Floyd through social media, the visual evidence was contradictory to the police version of events and synonymous with a storied history of racial police violence and extrajudicial murder. The murder of George Floyd was a modern-day digital lynching amongst an onslaught of what appeared to be racially motivated extrajudicial murders being circulated continuously on social media.

In opposition to Habermas (1989), Rita and Joseph Felski (1989) and Nancy Fraser (1990) argue for the existence of multiple counterpublics, comprised of “critical oppositional discourses” to the dominant public sphere (Palczewski 2001). Counterpublic social movement digital activism allows the study of rhetoric to reframe the notion of the state. In order for rhetorical theory to acknowledge digital activism, as part of a social movement, counterpublic theories of digital activism must expand in the ways in which emerging technologies and digital activism may influence counterpublic and social movement discourse. Prior to the Arab Spring in 2011, digital activism had not yet played a large enough role in social movements for theorists to take significant interest. Social movement and counterpublic theory accounts for how they offer meaningful discourse in the formation of identity which offers an oppositional definition of identity, as offered by the state (Diani 1992; Flores 1996; Habermas 1985; Lake 1983, 1991, 1997; Melucci 1985; Palczewski 2001; Scott and Smith 1969; Tucker Jr 1989). Based upon the counterpublic theory of Rita and Joseph Felski and Nancy Fraser, Catherine Helen Palczewski describes counterpublics as ‘safe spaces’ in which:

- 1) alternative validity claims may be developed;
- 2) alternative norms of public speech and styles of political behaviors can be elaborated;
- 3) oppositional interpretations of identities, interests and needs can be formulated;
- 4) cultural identities can be constructed through idiom and style; and
- 5) activists can regenerate their energy to engage in political battles in the political and public spheres (Palczewski 2001).

Counterpublics offer alternative discourse, critical awareness, and discursive counter resistance that has been largely excluded from larger publics of the dominant group (Asen 2000, 424, 426). Nancy Fraser argues that both formal and informal social inequalities and exclusions within the dominant group of larger publics forces the need for the existence of counterpublics (Asen 2000, 428; Fraser 1990, 64). Discourse may flow freely in counterpublics in the absence of dominant group control of communication. Fraser describes counterpublics as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1990, 67). Functioning as publicist-oriented safe space, counterpublics afford the opportunity for oppositional discursive practices to the dominant ideology, the ability to thrive and expand (Asen 2000, 428–29). Embracing the publicity aspects of a counterpublic gives people not already engaged in discourse the opportunity to advocate for the counterpublic (Asen and Brouwer 2001, 9–10). Specific interests outside of the universality of the large publics, such as gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, may exist as discourse within a counterpublic space. The publicity aspects of the justice for George Floyd protests, as a counterpublic, both depicted and brought into the fold diverse advocates of the counterpublic, who were not members of a marginalized group, nor specifically African American.

Not all members of marginalized groups identify with a counterpublic and not all members of a counterpublic discourse belong to a marginalized group (Asen 2000, 439). The counterpublic provides a collective space for likeminded discourse on a specific issue or identity that is excluded from the dominant larger publics. It is common for counterpublics to position themselves directly in opposition to a wider public but still be in control of the substance of their own discourse (440). Cultural advances, obtained as a result of a counterpublic, are never

guaranteed to be permanent (442–43). When larger publics of oppositional ideologies perceive, even when not fully realized, counterpublic gains, backlash to the counterpublic is amplified and expanded upon with the larger public discourse. Counterpublics may also engage to direct opposition to ideologies of the state. Emerging technologies and globalization influence the interactions between the counterpublic and the state (Asen and Brouwer 2001, 2–3).

Counter-Institutions, Networked Publics and Counterpublics, and Networked Protests

Counter-Institutions

A common critique of the Black Lives Matter and the justice for George Floyd movements are that they are not positively perceived as mimicking the tactics and organizational leadership structures of the counter-institutions of the Civil Rights era, such as the Southern Leadership Christian Council (SCLC), Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) (Banks 2018, 713; Dennis and Dennis 2020, 14; Hooker 2016, 450). This “deployment of public memory” has been a rhetorical tactic of right-wing media pundits, such as Bill O’Reilly [former Fox News host], who actively sought to delegitimize the Black Lives Matter social movement, as violent protest tactics that Dr. Martin Luther King would disapprove. Public memory romanticizes the non-violent protests of the 1960s as the exclusive reason for racial change, disparaging all other efforts, as negative and ineffective. Public memory rhetoric from Fox news suggests that state violence upon Black Lives Matter protestors is justified and warranted (Banks 2018, 714–15). Fox News overlooks that what was perceived as non-violent respectable protests in the 1960s was considered repugnant and illegal at the time in the Jim Crow south (716).

However, it should be noted the use of children in SCLC protests was, at the time, seen by proponents of anti-civil rights, as a shameful act by subjecting children to the expectation of state-sanctioned violence (Berger 2011, 84). Non-violent protest alone in a vacuum does not bring about social change. It requires the willing partnership of the oppressors to change the oppressors' own cultural perception of what the oppressors are doing to those they oppress. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., through the SCLC, focused upon this strategy to move white cultural perceptions of white supremacy, segregation, and the Jim Crow south to a perception that embraced social change (102). Bayard Rustin's and James Farmer's CORE was able to gain ground in small communities in the 1940s and 1950s through the principals of non-violent protest, but at that time, did not have willing partnership from national mainstream media to cover their protests and were subsequently unable to spread progress beyond each unique community where a protest was organized (103). Historians, at the time of King, rated the activism of King in the latter half of the 1960s as his least successful. Condemning the Vietnam war, targeting issues of economics, and moving protests to the north, alienated suburban white liberals from Dr. King's new message and movement trajectory. In addition, his non-violent tactics and organizing did not resonate with many younger African Americans who became electrified by the organizing of the more radical messaging of counter-institutions like the Black Panthers, SNCC, and the Nation of Islam (11). The justice for George Floyd movement, along with Black Lives Matters, more directly parallels the younger African Americans during the 1960s who broke away from the movements focused upon non-violent, peaceful protests, to engage other counter-institutions, such as the Black Panthers and SNCC (Dennis and Dennis 2020, 15).

The now highly favored public memory of the enormously effective Civil Rights era counter-institutions, focuses exclusively upon individual leaders, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. However, much of the success of the counter-institutions was built upon the undertakings by a massive network of supporters utilizing whatever mode of communication was available to them, whether through flyers, the pulpit in the Black church, or electronic *public announcement* (PA) systems at marches and protests (Tufekci 2017, 62). The digitally networked public sphere affords massive organizational and communication capabilities to a modern-day social movement with a fraction of the resources of the past. What could now be accomplished with marginal resources and high intellectual currency through the digitally networked public sphere, during the Civil Rights era, would have required a massive undertaking of organizational resources and supporters (63). Whereas television became the key game-changer for the Civil Rights era, the digitally networked public sphere has become key to modern-day social movements (134). I argue that in the study of social movements, the digitally networked public sphere should not be directly compared to the activism of the counter-institutions of the Civil Rights era, whereas the digitally networked public sphere, as we know it today, does not yet have a 50-year history to look back upon. Each should be looked upon uniquely for their own set of affordances, but more importantly, I argue that the formal organizational structures and leadership of counter-institutions, working in concert with the digitally networked public sphere, offer more formidable agentic value than each operating independently of one another. Although the participatory protests of the justice for George Floyd movement were the arrow of the social movement, the quickly evolving leadership and organization of counter-institutions, such as Black Lives Matter and other activist organizations, became the arrowhead.

Networked Publics and Networked Counterpublics

When discourse deviates from the norms of the culture of the dominant ideology, it is usually a strong indicator that a counterpublic has formed (Deem 2002, 444). These new rhetorics separate the discourse from the norms of stranger sociability within the general public sphere (Warner 2010, 54). Through transformations in stranger sociability in publics and counterpublics, Warner theorizes that new forms of public life may emerge (Deem 2002, 444). The agency of digital activism and hashtag activism are prime examples of new forms of rhetorical publics and counterpublics, such as the #JusticeForGeorgeFloyd counterpublic. Warner saw Habermas's poetic-expressive discourse as a way for a counterpublic to challenge the critical-rational discourse of dominant group larger publics (445). The visual imagery of the George Floyd protests, as a networked counterpublic shared on social media, which included personal counterstories and context, offers a requisite example of new forms creative poetic-expressive life made possible as rhetorical discourse through emerging technologies.

Initial criticism of social movement counterpublic digital activism discourse included barriers of entry and access, particularly for subaltern marginalized groups (Palczewski 2001). In the earlier days of internet access and smartphone penetration, access to technology was not widespread. From 2010 to 2020, smartphone ownership amongst US citizens climbed dramatically from 35% to 80% ("Mobile Fact Sheet" 2021). With the proliferation of smartphone technology and smartphone camera technology, the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd movement, a networked counterpublic, was able to quickly go viral and become a transcontinental social movement, with its visual imagery creating collective cultural memories and narratives for documentation and inspiration for future generations. Modern-day digital activism, social movements, and networked counterpublics, like the justice for George Floyd

protests and Black Lives Matters social movements, have demonstrated that social movements in the physical world can occupy the same conceptual and activist space, working together towards accomplishing the aims of a singular social movement.

Systemic injustice and cultural exclusionary practices are frequently the driving force behind the development of counterpublic spaces (Felski and Felski 1989, 167). Exclusion from political discourse, as well as political power, also drive the need for the existence of the counterpublic (Asen and Brouwer 2001, 2–3). Discourse within a counterpublic is usually projected outward towards society at-large. In societies with vast inequalities, culture and institutions tends to serve the benefit of the dominant group which creates the need for marginal groups to have a counterpublic space for discourse (Asen 2000, 431–32). Counterpublics are frequently characterized by the unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources available to dominant groups in public discourse (Asen and Brouwer 2001, 8). In the earlier days of internet availability and smartphone technology, emerging technologies were not widely accessible to underprivileged groups. In addition to engagement of exclusionary topics, counterpublic discourse adapts the communications styles (Asen 2000, 438) and counterstory personal narratives of members within the counterpublic. As access to emerging technologies has increased, it has allowed the proliferation of networked counterpublics, like the justice for George Floyd movement, to exploit the affordances of digital technologies. Hashtag activism on Twitter helped justice for a George Floyd, as a networked counterpublic, to go global.

Online virality for justice for George Floyd as a networked counterpublic, was able to expand the counterpublic beyond domestic shores and transcend cultural boundaries with a transcontinental reach. People of many cultures were able to identify with the universal themes within the George Floyd networked counterpublic and the counternarrative of the ordinary

citizen, versus the abuses of power by the representatives of the state. However, when counterpublic opposition to the ideology of the state becomes too confrontational and institutional, the state may take actions to remove agitators from the public view (Asen and Brouwer 2001, 19). Emerging technologies, such as social media networks, have exacerbated the confrontation and agitation aspects of counterpublic conflict with the state (21). A prime example of this was when George Floyd protestors were tear-gassed on June 1, 2020 in Lafayette Park, across from the White House, just moments before Donald Trump walked through the Park to Saint John's Church and took a picture of himself holding a bible ([see image 7](#)).



Image 7. Semansky, Patrick. "President Donald Trump holds a Bible as he visits outside St. John's Church across Lafayette Park from the White House Monday, June 1, 2020, in Washington. Part of the church was set on fire during protests on Sunday night." *Associated Press*. June 1, 2020. [https://newsroom.ap.org/editorial-photos-videos/search?query=june 1, 2020 Trump Bible&mediaType=photo&st=keyword](https://newsroom.ap.org/editorial-photos-videos/search?query=june+1,+2020+Trump+Bible&mediaType=photo&st=keyword).

Papacharissi's theory of *affective attunement* (Beech and Jordan 2021, 10; Papacharissi 2015, 118) may be applied to the networked protests of the justice to George Floyd social movement. Affective attunement allows a person to evocatively feel their way through political situation and exigence. After the broad circulation of Darnella Frazier's video of the murder of George Floyd, counternarratives and personal testaments were utilized, from ordinary citizens to celebrities, to enact anti-racist rhetoric. If one were to ask, "Why George Floyd," it would be appropriate to respond, "Why not George Floyd?" The murder of George Floyd is amongst an endless list of racial violence and extrajudicial killings (Beech and Jordan 2021, 12). At some point, a culture reaches a critical boiling point and enough is enough. Twitter has flourished as a digital tool for networked counterpublics and marginalized groups traditionally excluded and underrepresented in the mainstream media for discourse on issues such as racism, identity, and police violence (Foucault Welles and Jackson 2019, 1699–1700). Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira write that Twitter has developed a reputation of breathing life into new networked publics, during times of crisis and civic unrest (Foucault Welles and Jackson 2019, 1702; Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012, 3), although Twitter equally affords potential agency to all ideas, even hate speech. Through affective attunement, networked counterpublics gain collective force through the indexing affordances of the hashtag on Twitter (Papacharissi 2015, 34).

For example, both #GeorgeFloyd and #BlackLivesMatter, as networked counterpublics, directly impacted the public sphere of the mainstream traditional media to interject discourse on race and racial justice (Foucault Welles and Jackson 2019, 1703). But not all discourse that has arisen around the conversation of race and racial justice has been positive or productive. The

Blues Lives Matter and All Lives Matter movements were spawned essentially as alt-right counter-movements to the Black Lives Matter movement. During the Capitol Riots, Blue Lives Matter flags were flown by the alt-right, while at the same time the crowd attacked those same blue lives, which resulted in five deaths that were attributed to the riot [insurrection].

#GeorgeFloyd and #BlackLivesMatter as networked counterpublics, differs with networked protests of counter-institutions from the past because all of the Civil Rights era organizations had definitive organizations and organizational leadership, whereas participatory democracy and networked protest can exist with or without hierarchal leadership through means of connection via a hashtag (Dennis and Dennis 2020, 16). The leadership style of the counter-institutions of the Civil Rights era, whether ministerial and graceful, or radical and dramatic, where all reminiscent of W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of the "talented tenth"—the embodiment of educated, organizational leadership. The leaders of the official Black Lives Matter organization reject this concept and push for more of an inclusive egalitarian style of participatory networked protest and activism. Digitally networked counterpublics offer a new form of agency that brings with it advantages and disadvantages. Now, more than ever, through digital participatory cultures, such as Twitter, anyone has the potential to yield effectual agency, without the legitimization of hegemonic structures, or the assistance of the traditional leadership and organization of the counter-institutions of the past. However, now every citizen potentially possesses the digital agency of an intellectual nuclear bomb, that introduces misinformation, disinformation, recklessness, and chaos into the participatory agency equation. All tools are not created equal and the aims of the users of all tools are not always moral, ethical, or logical. Regardless of the tool creator's intent, a tool can be used for negative or positive purposes. The

freedom to use tools and technology, as the user chooses, provides equal agency for noble and malevolent purposes.

Networked Protests

With regard to networked publics and protests, Tufekci defines *networked* as, “the reconfiguration of publics and movements through the assimilation of digital technologies into their fabric” (Tufekci 2017, x). These digital technologies allow large numbers of protestors to coalesce rapidly, but frequently lacks the direction and benefit of unified, direct, organizational leadership (xxiii). Networked public spheres are susceptible to abuse and harassment from hegemonic institutions, such as the government or the police (xxix). The 21st century public sphere is a “digitally networked” or “networked” public sphere (6). However, the use of digital technologies exists within the larger public sphere and are not limited to space and place online. Ubiquitous technologies bestow the average citizen with the potent ability to amplify their voice when combined with the voices of many others, unified via a hashtag on Twitter. Castells illuminates the role of mobile phones and social media networks as influential tools for organizing networked protests and disseminating information to supporters (Aarts 2013, 40; Beech and Jordan 2021, 9). As with the protests that came before it, the justice for George Floyd protests in both the physical and virtual world were synonymous with its digitally networked public space and place.

Facebook was one of the first platforms to significantly bring the power of the networked public sphere to ordinary citizens, whereas previously, only smaller numbers of people were politically active within the networked public sphere (Tufekci 2017, 19–21). The digitally networked public sphere blurs the lines between what is public and what is private (26). Uniform

with the greater public sphere, the networked public sphere is also inhabited by the institutions of the hegemony (39). With an overabundance of information free-flowing in the network sphere, it presents challenges in discerning fact from fiction (40). The digitally networked public sphere enables modern social movements to gain momentum and communicate tactics and logistics to protesters, rapidly (70). As a result, most protestors who exist within the digitally networked public sphere are political protest novices (99), such as Darnella Frazier, who earned a 2021 Pulitzer Prize special citation, “For courageously recording the murder of George Floyd, a video that spurred protests against police brutality around the world, highlighting the crucial role of citizens in journalists’ quest for truth and justice” (Forliti 2021). However, the power of the digitally networked public sphere is not exclusive to counterpublics and the voices of marginalized groups.

Hegemonic forces exist within the digitally networked public sphere with full access to the power and affordances provided by emerging technologies (Tufekci 2017, 162). The formidable scale and influence of the digitally networked public sphere means that some old paradigms and theories may no longer apply or be useful as a predictive model (179). The goal of hegemonic forces within the digitally networked sphere is to obfuscate and sow doubt about information being disseminated that might challenge the status quo (228). This obfuscation is often personified by delegitimizing the entire digitally networked public sphere as questionable and immaterial (241). Although digital technology has changed communication empowerment, human beings are fundamentally the same, thus human behavior is still fundamentally predictable (268). As networked protests are rooted in participatory democracy and philosophically and fundamentally often leaderless, in the absence of definitive leadership, in-

fighting exists to be the one true voice of the movement and confusion of the aims of the social movement can emerge (270).

Pre-2020 justice for George Floyd protests, the Black Lives Matter movement had widespread criticism, as a leaderless, disorganized movement with unclear aims, whereas anyone could invoke the essence of #BlackLivesMatter online and organize their own real-world demonstration. With varying viewpoints on strategies to achieve meaningful change, violence, looting, and other antisocial behavior emerged from some of these protests, although not necessarily from the majority of legitimate protestors or protest organizers. The justice for George Floyd protests emerged very quickly in extremely large numbers within the mired credibility of the Black Lives Matter movement. However, both the expedience and exigence of the justice for George Floyd movement, which also called upon the usage of #BlackLivesMatter when protesting both on and offline, began to fuel support for both movements, especially once it received the assistance and direction of counter-institution leadership.

Critical Race Counterstory and Narrative Rhetorical Agency

The justice for George Floyd movement could be described as spontaneous global *ecological thinking* [like in the ecology of nature, humans living in harmony with society as your habitat (Code 2006b)] in direct response to the video of the murder of George Floyd being circulated by media and digital activists. The instituted situated social imaginary would dictate that the victims of social injustice aspire to the same moral rational imaginary as the dominant group autonomously demands for itself (Code 2006a, 20). However, in the dominant's group's manifest destiny to have dominion over the earth, that dominion means above all others. Others is the cognitive clause that denies marginalized groups from obtaining equal treatment from the

dominant group because they are classified as other, and therefore not entitled to the same rights and privileges of the same moral rational imaginary as the dominant group. At a minimum, treating all persons with the same treatment as those in places of privilege and power, would eradicate social injustice, or at least greatly diminish it. Instead, we have a system that labels itself already equal and just, therefore there is nothing to change because universal equality and justice for all is already the naturalized standard. Through ecological thinking, the purveyors of knowledge would draw not upon their own naturalized conclusions and moral imaginations but rather listen and learn from the autonomous epistemological truths of marginalized groups in order to instill systemic and cultural course corrections to effectuate truth equity, equality, inclusion, and justice for all without exception. The narrative rhetorical agency of the video of the murder of George Floyd inspired people worldwide, through the spirit of ecological thinking to reject the normalized and naturalized messaging of the culture of the dominant ideology in order to protest for justice for George Floyd.

The critical race counterstory of “I can’t breathe,” uttered over and over again in the video of the murder of George Floyd, encoded and decoded an alternative narrative, germane to a people of color, that offer a critical race counterstory to the initial narrative put forth by the official police report. The creator of a message encodes the message with meaning which is influenced by the hegemonic-dominant culture (S. Hall 2012). That message is then decoded by the recipient but is not necessarily decoded from a point-of-view of the same cultural context as the hegemonic-dominant position. In addition to George Floyd’s autonomous epistemology, the video of the murder of George Floyd was encoded with the narrative voice of the hegemony via Derek Chauvin as proxy for the authority. The graphic homicide decoded on social media through marginalized groups took on a completely different message whose narrative rhetorical

agency was shared through digital activism which motivated in and out groups to demand social justice and social change.

The video of the murder of George Floyd offered narrative rhetorical agency and critical race counterstory in the imagery, audio, immediate representational context, and greater cultural context. Imagery has a historic tradition of being at the crux of social movements (Mattoni and Teune 2014). As technology has changed for both the creators and consumers of visual phenomena, academic scholars also need to change the ways in which media and visual media from social movements is analyzed. The video of the murder of George Floyd shared by digital activists was annotated, shown in pieces, or configured and accompanied by other myriad emerging media phenomenon. The video of the murder of George Floyd became the narrative rhetorical agency critical race counterstory tipping point for the demand for justice for George Floyd and social justice and social change.

Digital activism surrounding the circulation of the video of the murder of George Floyd provided the narrative rhetorical agency for change. Digital activism within the discourse amongst marginalized groups has been able platform critical race counterstories to the hegemonic normalcy through the power of the hashtag in a tweet on Twitter (Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles 2020). From #GirlsLikeUs to #MeToo to #BlackLivesMatter, the hashtag has provided a nexus of discourse for marginalized groups for a “new civil rights movement.” Amidst the background of cultural division during the Trump administration, the stressors of the coronavirus global pandemic, and a documented culture of police violence on social media, the network and methodology to capitalize upon the inherent narrative rhetorical agency in the video of the murder of George Floyd had already been created, forged from previous digital activism

movements which laid the ground work to make the video of the murder of George Floyd the tipping point for civic action for social justice and social change.

There was no realistic justice in the video of the murder of George Floyd, and as a result, there was a widespread collapse of order, as people took to the streets in recognition of the collapse of truth and justice. Above all else, the character Socrates in Plato's (2009) *Crito* prioritizes order over justice. Order is the ultimate episteme; order is knowledge, responsibility, society, truth, and justice. From a modern western viewpoint, today some might prioritize truth and justice over order. In *Crito* though, Socrates is essentially suggesting that without order, there would be chaos. And with chaos, there can be no truth and justice. By ranking order at the top of the hierarchy of Socrates' values system, it allows for any system of society, be it authoritarian or cannibalism, to sustain as long as it brings order. I argue though that without truth and justice, there can be no order, and without order, there can be no truth and justice. Members of a society that does not prioritize truth and justice as the first priority in a value system, will be unable to comply with a society's social contract because a lack of truth and justice breeds chaos and disruption to order. There must be justice for truth to bring forth order. The rhetorical narrative agency of the video of the murder of George Floyd engaged people worldwide to take civic action because of the collapse of order amongst the authority, with Derek Chauvin as proxy, in the transparent absence of truth and justice, as revealed by the video.

A normalized or naturalized belief that all people, and hence the authority, are inherently moral, is what empowered Derek Chauvin to take the life of George Floyd. Aristotle (2009) perceives a person or thing as having inherent virtues, which we later see repeated in more modern thought, such as in the *theory of affordances* (Gibson 2015), whereby an object affords an innate purpose. Collectively, Aristotle positions the soul at the center of universal truth and

knowledge. Aristotle posits that morality is governed by choice. But what happens when there is no general consensus on what is believed to be moral or true? With a lack of consensus, Plato (2009) defers to the order of the state as the truth and morality that binds a society. Aristotle sees humanity as possessing a soul and with all human beings being able to access and come to consensus upon an ultimate universal truth through wisdom, scientific knowledge, rational intuition, practical wisdom, and artistic skill. Although through different perspectives, both Plato and Aristotle hold some type of belief in what Foucault, in more modern-day times, would define as the natural *order of things* (Foucault 2005). As with the video of the murder of George Floyd, the danger in perceiving society through a natural order, is that it has been used as a means of justification for societal injustices that were not natural and pure, but rather systems designed and implemented by human beings to perpetuate inequality which could not exist without active implementation and maintenance.

As proven by both the civic response to the narrative rhetorical agency of the video of the murder of George Floyd, as well as Derek Chauvin's guilty verdict, there can be no truth without justice. Augustine (1955) was interested in truth. He defined truth by the divine with God representative of the supreme truth. Like Plato (2009) and Aristotle (2009), Augustine perceives a natural order of things that has been preordained by God. Again, this train of thought can be used to rationalize the systems and societies created by humans as just and preordained. Deferring to the order of the divine authority as preordained, empowers the amoral to crush marginalized groups with wanton disregard, as Derek Chauvin did when he unnecessarily knelt on George Floyd's neck for nine minutes and twenty nine seconds until Floyd was eventually pronounced dead (Levenson 2021).

The narrative rhetorical agency of “I can’t breathe” provided the critical race counterstory for millions of people worldwide to embrace George Floyd’s autonomous epistemology to understand his self-acknowledgement of endangerment and his desire to live. Lorraine Code’s (2006b, 2) interpretation of ecological thinking presents an opportunity to disrupt the hegemonic social construction of society. When many voices unite as one for a singular purpose, the perceived bad behavior of the elites, which would otherwise go unpunished, can result in true punitive damages, if there’s a groundswell of support challenging the authority, thus bringing forth the prospect of diminished profits, which is the crux of our capitalist society. Code references how a mixture of rice plants varieties made the rice more resistant to diseases (7–8). With that same ecological premise, when a mixture of people with different ideologies and backgrounds join together of one accord, it can empower the common people to be resistant to the injustice of the bad behavior of the power elites left unchecked. With regard to digital activists and media contextually circulating the video of the murder of George Floyd, with the narrative rhetorical agency of Floyd’s words, “I can’t breathe,” as a critical race counterstory frame, many voices united worldwide to demand justice for George Floyd.

In the absence of justice in the video of the murder of George Floyd, a global upswell of togetherness sprang forth to demand social justice and social change for marginalized groups. That which has been, that which is, and that which will be, is all interconnected amongst everyone and everything—ubuntu (Ramosé 1999, 49–50). We are all connected whether we choose to see, acknowledge, embrace, and interact with the knowledge and responsibility about the universal truth of the existence of our global society. Quite poetically, in Senghor’s conceptualization of negritude as the essence of pan-African civilization in its entirety (Senghor 1998, 440), for a system to be just, equitable, and advance a civilization as a whole, the system

must take steps to account and compensate for those who choose not to live by the system. Derek Chauvin is an example of a free radical within the system not operating within the alleged ideals for said system. The video of the murder of George Floyd is what it means to be a member of a marginalized group personified in the physical manifestation of a digital lynching shared around the world through digital activism.

The video of the murder of George Floyd was an assault on morality worldwide. If a society has yielded its primary option for self-preservation to the sovereign (Hobbes 2005, 74)—the government—and the sovereign is corrupt, or not working in the best interests of society at-large, the system doesn't work if it's a system that is not working for all of the people. A collective moral injury is a wound inflicted when the authority violates fundamental moral values and ethical behavior expectations within a society (Barbot 2020). The video of Derek Chauvin torturing George Floyd to death for nine minutes and twenty nine seconds (Levenson 2021), inflicted a moral injury amongst the collective consciousness of people around the world.

Derek Chauvin broke the social contract between the authority and society in the video of the murder of George Floyd. In Hobbes (2005) *Leviathan*, we see an embracement of some sort of social construction that creates order. A responsibility to the self is best achieved through all participants partaking of a responsibility to the society which enhances life for everyone (55). Hobbes' fifth law of nature is problematic though in that we should all accommodate the rest (64). In the context of a social contract, what if we are already part of a social construction that lacks truth, justice, and equality. With this line of thinking, the jury would have acquitted Derek Chauvin of the murder of George Floyd, because as a police officer and representative of the authority, the assumption of morality and ethics for the good of the society would inherently favor the authority as incapable of doing wrong.

The narrative rhetorical agency of the video of the murder of George Floyd provided a critical race counterstory that was embraced over the narrative of the hegemony. To truly know the thoughts and experiences of others means not to draw your own conclusions from analogous machinations of your own lived experiences, but to acquire knowledge from the source, with that source being the autonomous epistemology from the person of interest (Code 2006a, 29). People around the world listened to the autonomous epistemologies of the lived experiences of marginalized groups and were moved through the narrative rhetorical agency critical race counterstory of the video of the murder of George Floyd and thus inspired to take civic action for justice for George Floyd.

Critical race counterstory made available through digital activism utilizing the narrative rhetorical agency of the murder of the video of George Floyd, made it a moment in time that became a tipping point for civic action for social justice and social change that resulted in the conviction of former police officer Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd. The ecological thinking of global ubuntu caused many voices to unite together to repair the broken social contract of the authority as depicted by Derek Chauvin in the video of the murder of George Floyd. Truth had to be acknowledged to heal the wounded collective moral consciousness for order to resume and justice to be served. Future research should be conducted on other digital activism social movements for how narrative rhetorical agency through the research methodology of critical race counterstory might explain or assist future digital activism and social movements.

Visual Rhetoric, Embodiment, and Multimedia

Visuality and Embodiment

Through the embodied ēthe of George Floyd in the imagery of Floyd’s murder and subsequent protests on social media, George Floyd’s own story, “I can’t breathe,” provided his own narrative as opposed to experts in media, intuitions, law enforcement, and contrary public opinion. Whereas the mainstream media presents one cultural narrative for discourse about the Black community, through social media, the Black community can engage and propagate its own cultural narratives and document its own public memory (Maraj, Prasad, and Roundtree 2018, 4). Visual imagery from the justice for George Floyd social movement presented its own cultural narrative and public memory of the murder of George Floyd, as a counternarrative to the standard police narrative that suggested that George Floyd was yet another justified, legally sanctioned murder.

What we don’t see in a visual is indeed a valid visual argument, and what we do see in an image is sometimes strategic misinformation with visuals offered in a skewed context or sometimes an outright false pretense. The Greenville News was a South Carolina newspaper that vehemently argued in its articles and editorials for the importance and continuance of segregation to maintain order (O’Rourke 2012, 685–86). The New Year’s Day march of 1960 upon the Greenville Airport utilized strategic rhetoric for selective imagery to cast the march as poorly attended and inconsequential for the Civil Rights movement. However, this characterization of the March was completely fabricated and the exact opposite of what actually occurred. Strategically selected news media visuals may be from an event but may not capture the essence and meaning of the event (688). In the James Wilson collection in the Upcountry History Museum, at least 7 photos survived taken by photojournalists at the Greenville Airport

protest (690–91). Five photos that were circulated by the newspapers in Greenville show distant shots of the march with low attendance. However, all of the non-circulated photos show a protest 4 to 5 times the size of the depictions in the circulated photos. The Minneapolis Police Department attempted to borrow from the notion that what we cannot see matters more than what we can see. The police attempted to release additional bodycam and security camera footage of George Floyd interacting with police before he was murdered. However, instead of garnering more support for the official police narrative, the additional footage showed the police, in effect, terrorizing a very traumatized, confused, scared, and claustrophobic George Floyd before his amoral extrajudicial murder.

During the Selma Civil Rights marches of 1965, the visual imagery featured in the photography of *Life* magazine captured the embodiment of marginalized voices of color that had the audacity to challenge the authoritative identity and cultural narrative of the Jim Crow south (V. J. Gallagher and Zagacki 2007, 113). In a post-racial world that asserts that equality and equity already exist within national identity and institutions, 17-year-old Darnella Frazier stood her ground and recorded Derek Chauvin murdering George Floyd which provided visual evidentiary material of the social imaginary of equality and equity in America. There's a reason the American dream is poetically identified as a dream and neither a goal nor a mandate. Through embodiment, the *Life* magazine photography of the Selma marches challenges the cultural narrative of the Jim Crow south by visualizing the Civil Rights movement with universal humanity and challenging the narrative of universal access to the rights and privileges of democracy for all (118).

Rather than send the rhetorical message to people of color to know their place within the mired injustice of the Jim Crow south, Emmett Till's mutilated body embodied the essence of the

loss of innocence amidst a sea of oppression (Harold and DeLuca 2005, 278). The effect of the imagery of Emmett Till's mutilated face speaks to both rhetorical power of the physical body and extended embodiment (266). Just as the visual imagery of the death of Emmett Till marked an accumulation of events for a pivot point in embodied *ēthe*, *metis*, and rhetorical listening, so too did the visual imagery of the justice of George Floyd movement mark a shift in consciousness, enacting global citizens to take to the streets to demand social justice and social change for people of color.

Grace Elizabeth Hale writes that people who identified as white recognized it to be the default national identity and thus made whiteness invisible to the eye (Gallagher and Zagacki 2007, 126; Hale 1998, 8). That which was invisible became visibly personified and materialized in the visual imagery of the Civil Rights movement, and white Americans were able to see the derisiveness and inhumanity of white supremacy in the Jim Crow south. The work of Grace Elizabeth Hale showed how historically, the media at-large was responsible in part for the promulgation of stereotypical imagery and racist tropes, but ultimately helped rhetorically redefine Black humanity and Black American national identity, when the visual technological testimony of raw truth helped sway hearts and minds on issues of race and the shared human experience (Gallagher and Zagacki 2007, 121; Hale 1998, 7–8). W. Fitzhugh Brundage argues that power and its accessibility are core to the framing of historical memory (Brundage 2000, 22; Gallagher and Zagacki 2007, 113–14). The Civil Rights era marked a persistence amongst Black Americans to be included in cultural narrative and identity on their own terms. Like the corpse of Emmett Till, the video of the murder of George Floyd made Black humanity, and the denial of it, visible to those who were willing to see. The justice for George Floyd movement helped

circulate visual narrative with accompanying context in both on and offline public space and protest.

Visual Technology and Extended Embodiment

With visual technology pervasive throughout society, the smartphone has become a form of extended embodiment (R. H. Jones 2020, 19). The embodied smartphone which affords agency through social media, challenges traditional concepts of visual grammar, as the differences between seeing and being seen, have become more nebulous (20). Digital media has expanded the spectrum of multimodal communication which has led to the narrative of the embodied self to moderate physical experiences (22). Smartphones communicate the embodied experiences of the visual through technology in ways that words cannot compare. To read that George Floyd could not breathe does not equivocate the same evocative visceral impact of both hearing and seeing George Floyd cry out, “I can’t breathe.” The situation and exigence of the audiovisual medium transports the consciousness to the given moment and forces the mind to choose a cultural and ideological narrative conclusion from the immediacy of the audiovisual digital experience. Don Ihde argues that once technologies afford embodiment, perception and subjectivity is materially influenced (Ihde 2002, 2012; Jones 2020, 23).

Rodney H. Jones argues that embodiment must be positioned in visual semiotic systems of meaning to integrate both the physical body and the technological body to create a cogent semiotic meaning and narrative of the individual (R. H. Jones 2020, 24). Visuality is a post-*phenomenological* [perceived phenomenon] way of seeing through embodiment, meaning that visuality communicates more than what is denoted with sight and also communicates what is connoted and experienced through what is seen. Jones suggests four key aspects of embodied

visual semiotics. First, technology allows us to examine a highlighted aspect of a physical experience. Second, through embodiment, technology enables or limits our ability to see or perceive the physical experience. Third, technology allows us to see who a person may be culturally and phenomenologically. Instead of seeing a person in a visual, how that person is depicted tells us more about who that person is as a being. A well-composed image has the ability to communicate the embodiment of that person's being through the details of what is included in the frame, the construction of the frame, the setting, etc. And fourth, through technology, what we choose to examine, what we are able to see, and who technology enables us to be, is inextricably tied to our identity and cultural narrative, as well as the culture of the dominant ideology and public memory. With embodied visual semiotics, the physical body can communicate meaning, and thus the medium is the message. Derek Chauvin's knee pressed against George's Floyd's neck, until George Floyd lay dead, transformed both Chauvin's and Floyd's bodies into two rhetorical messages: one of oppression and subjugation and another with an agentic cry for the recognition of Black humanity.

Rodney H. Jones highlights four ways in which citizens commonly engage with their smartphone camera during police confrontations: 1) witness, 2) verbal commentary, 3) non-verbal commentary, and 4) conversation (R. H. Jones 2020, 27–29). The video of the murder of George Floyd traverses all 4 of these typical digital media interactions with the police. The video of the murder of George Floyd bore witness to what transpired through the visual record and embodiment of both Derek Chauvin and George Floyd. Bystanders, who also bore witness to the murder, offer commentary throughout the video, “Stop.” Both George Floyd's Black body prostrate beneath Derek Chauvin's knee, and Chauvin's hand lackadaisically tucked away in Chauvin's pocket, communicate non-verbal commentary about the meaning and significance of

the encounter. Life-consequential conversation between George Floyd, Derek Chauvin, the other officers, the innocent bystanders, and the EMTs, takes place, as all appeal to Derek Chauvin to remove his knee, yet Chauvin refuses; ergo, Black people must know their place. Visuality is not relegated to what is and is not seen, but interpreted through the lenses of who we are, who we are able to be, and the expansiveness or limitations of our embodied relationships to technology (34).

Physical Embodiment and Technological Embodiment

Visual rhetoric and multimedia culture in the digital age must be reimagined for textuality, particularly in the case of physical embodiment, technological embodiment, and the camera as technological eyewitness. Visuality may be read as textual artifacts. In the video of the murder of George Floyd, it was the reading of the video as a textual artifact of both the murder and the textural discourse of the social movement that ultimately had the most weight in comprehending what actually happened. The reading of the video refuted the false reading of the textual narrative originally presented by the Minneapolis Police Department. The video told us more about the embodiment of both George Floyd and Derek Chauvin. George Floyd was a human being in physical distress who was compliant with the police and pleading for his life. Derek Chauvin was fully aware of his own actions, annoyed, and refused to render assistance when asked to do so by a fellow officer and the EMTs initially. Chauvin was amoral. He was aware that his actions were bereft of morality but chose to do them anyway.

Don Ihde argues that embodiment and technology are regulated by two bodies: the physical body and the technological body, reflected back at us through cultural practices; ergo the body is brought through the technological experience, while technology experiences the body (Ihde 2002, 5:17; R. H. Jones 2020, 23–24). The internet, in conjunction with emerging graphical

interface digital imaging technologies in the 1990s, brought with it an interest in sociolinguistics, multimodal communication, and visual signs, amongst discourse for power and social identity (R. H. Jones 2020, 19). Through emerging visual media technologies, like smartphones and security cameras, we are encompassed by visual ubiquity and feel compelled to share our visual selves in body and ideology (20). Joanna Zylińska writes that the pervasiveness and portability of digital visual media devices has created a culture of photography to create, or be impacted and influenced by, visual narratives of society and the self (Zylińska 2017, 2–3). Visual digital media interconnects the social semiotic meanings of image, body, and media to create a composite meaning (Barad 2007; R. H. Jones 2020, 22), as well as the combined embodied *ēthe* of the individual meanings. The video of the murder of George Floyd, through circulation of both public and online participatory protest, helped extend the technological embodiment of George Floyd's posthumous cries for justice, as well as his advocates' pleas for justice embedded within the justice for George Floyd social movement.

Visual Culture and the Camera as Technological Eyewitness

Technology affords digital embodiment when engaging in encounters with the police where police exhibit aberrant behavior in contrast to the highest moral values of the cultural narrative of national identity (R. H. Jones 2020, 27). Whether a smartphone or police bodycam, visual digital technology has broken the *third wall* of physical interaction [the imaginary plane that divides the viewer from the real world and the world as presented in the third person on a screen] and allowed the camera to provide a vantage point of narrative in contrast to the police interpretation of meaning. The police are now trading places with being the observer to being the observed. From smartphones to police bodycams to security camera footage, we live in a

networked society of virtual eyewitness testimony. Neither Darnella Frazier's original video of the murder of George Floyd, nor the edited bodycam and security camera released by the Minneapolis Police Department, adequately provided an observer narrative that could reasonably support the police version of events to justify George Floyd's murder. Conversely, the video released by the police department only highlighted the lack of humanity on the behalf of the Minneapolis Police Department, which also created conflict with the values and morals of our national identity which I broadly define as "to be something greater."

The imagery being circulated on social media platforms of the video of the murder of George Floyd was taken from a widely available 9-minute video of the murder in real time. With 9 minutes of truth in the raw, it makes it difficult to focus upon what was not seen in such a vast amount of audiovisual evidence. This cultural narrative was also the topic of debate during the justice for George Floyd protests, when violence and illegality erupted during protests; the argument being, that either in support or against justice for George Floyd, it was outside agitators with ill-will who lit the fuse to spark the proverbial and literal fires, although alt-right agitators were frequently arrested for acts of violence and looters were mainly opportunists. Contrarian right-wing opinion submitted that what we can't see is the truth, and what we can see are the lies. It's worth noting that the term *outside agitators* carries with it the historical linguistic social semiotics of the language used by the Jim Crow south and white supremacy. This historically loaded term was used by right wing opinion as a dog whistle to label legitimate protests as outside agitators, such as ANTIFA and woke radical leftists. Woke is also another term that carries with it a greater social semiotic meaning. Appropriated as a positive term for awareness from progressives, woke in right wing circles has now become a pejorative.

Crispus Attucks, Emmett Till, Civil Rights, and Iconic Imagery

Crispus Attucks and Commemoration

Throughout human history, organized remembrance has been affectionately embraced to enshrine who and what we remember (Arendt 1998, 176–77; Browne 1999, 169) to ensure that we matter. Ritualistic commemoration makes a historical memory rhetorically significant (Browne 1999, 169). Commemorative collective memory presents itself as a unified collective cultural narrative, when in reality, moments of cultural commemoration typically point towards moments of cultural clash, even complete devastation (Gillis 2018, 5). Who does the remembering, of what and of whom, determines both the object of commemoration and the specificities of the act of organized remembrance. Historical collective public memory is at the crux of society, power, politics, past, and present providing the cultural interpretation of reality (Bodnar 1991, 14; Browne 1999, 169). The story of Crispus Attucks is a prime example of how who does the commemorating can result in the erasure of the significance and history of the person, object, or event being commemorated, when adopted as an official state collective memory, devoid of the clarity of historical details.

The memorialization of Crispus Attucks in the form of a monument built in 1888, commemorating the Boston Massacre of 1770, aptly commemorates the contribution of Crispus Attucks, as part of our national collective identity, cultural heritage, and public memory. However, the commemoration conceals the nearly one-hundred-year effort to exclude Crispus Attucks from any such memorial, an aspect of the memorial which obfuscates the full legacy and tradition of our national history, cultural heritage, and collective memory (Browne 1999, 185–86). The official police narrative of the murder of George Floyd contributed to a public memory narrative that was in direct conflict of the video evidence that was being circulated, with context,

through the collective public memories of participatory protest online and in the physical world. [The original statement from the Minneapolis Police Department posted on the internet was entitled, “Man Dies After Medical Incident During Police Interaction” (Levenson 2021b). The full Minneapolis Police Department statement about the murder of George Floyd was scrubbed from their servers, but can still be viewed online because it was preserved by the Internet Archive Wayback Machine (Elder 2020).] With the commemorative and collective memory practices of ordinary citizens, it is certainly possible that the world would have never heard of the murder of George Floyd, if the police account of memory was left to stand as the official cultural memory.

Emmett Till

Two historical events that became part of social movements designed to demand social justice and social change for people of color were the murder of Emmett Till in the pre-digital age and the murder of George Floyd in the age of digital and social media today. Both influenced by visual and multimedia culture, the murders each involved vigilantism or law enforcement in extrajudicial killings. The lynching of people of color, or the public spectacle or speculation of murder, of people of color, which I will broadly categorize as lynching, was a *visual rhetorical semiotic message* [the interconnected meanings and relationships of cultural and historical stories created to persuade for a specific viewpoint] to communicate to the Black person to “know your place” and to not step out of that place. I argue that in both the murder of Emmett Till and the Civil Rights social movement, and the murder of George Floyd and the justice for George Floyd movement, visual activism, multimedia culture, and rhetoric materially contributed to flipping the rhetorical strategic message of lynching from a warning to the Black community to a national

call for the embodiment of Black humanity throughout society. With both Till and Floyd, the traditional mainstream print and television news media played pivotal roles in capturing social movement messaging for Black humanity. The Black press, in the case of the murder of Emmett Till, and the social media, in the case of the murder of George Floyd, both served as counternarratives and counterpublics to the cultural narrative of dominant ideology that were able to lift the message of Black humanity to the platform of a national public through the traditional news media.

As a form of racial terrorism, lynchings served as a strategic rhetorical ominous warning for people of color to know their place and remain in it (Harold and DeLuca 2005, 269). Lynching and the torture of Black bodies was such powerful strategic rhetoric in the Jim Crow south that even the absence of a Black body, reported as missing, still carried the *visual rhetorical message* [imagery designed to persuade to a specific viewpoint] to know your place to Black people. The visual social semiotics of the tortured and mutilated Black body was rhetorically created to instill fear and submission into people of color, but through rhetorical embodiment in the visual imagery of the Civil Rights movement, the rhetors of racial terrorism became their own best counterargument in favor of Black humanity. Modern-day extrajudicial police murders, which litter social media as digital lynchings enacted and extended, carry a mixture of rhetorical messages, as well as community impact. On the one hand it elevates police violence to the level of national public discourse. Conversely, it reinforces the original lynching rhetorical underpinnings of fear. Due to the voracious velocity of digital lynchings spreading across social media, in many cases, the victim fears the police as impending mortal danger which helps provoke the victim to flee from the police for fear of loss of life. This survival instinct ends

up becoming the justification for Johnny-on-the-spot, judge-and-jury-by-cop, extrajudicial, and usually legally-sanctioned, after the fact, murder.

At the funeral of Emmett Till, the visual imagery of Till's mutilated body carried with it different semiotic meanings to different groups of people (Harold and DeLuca 2005, 276). Within the Black community, Till's Black body in the casket at the funeral was a form of visual communion with both Till's physical body and embodiment. Mamie Till Bradley said that the state of Mississippi sent her Emmett's body sealed and padlocked and required that she, the funeral director, and undertaker all agree not to open the casket, in order to receive the body (278). The state of Mississippi apparently had no interest in communicating the visual rhetorical message of white supremacy that was inscribed upon her son's mutilated corpse. The story of Emmett's body was rhetorical statement enough. However, Mamie Till Bradley had plans of her own for her son's body to be culturally renegotiated with new cultural narrative, as a visual argument for the embracement of Black humanity. Visual imagery of Emmett Till's dead Black body circulated throughout the Black press and story of it throughout the Black community, with the rhetorical sociopolitical message to fight for Black humanity (265, 271). The continuous circulation of imagery of and related to George Floyd's murder, within the digital counterpublic discourse of the Justice for George Floyd movement, activated cultural collective memory of lynchings in the Black community, and served as both a cautious warning to beware the police, while as the same time, acted as a fervent cry to stand vigilant and demand reform, change, and justice.

Sixty-five years later, after the murder of Emmett Till, and almost 6 months after the discovery of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus, George Floyd was arrested on Monday, May 25, 2020 when a store employee placed a 911 call alleging that Floyd was suspected of using a

counterfeit \$20 bill to buy a pack of cigarettes. The police confrontation that would ensue resulted in former Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin, kneeling on Floyd's neck, restricting airflow, and denying medical attention, for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds. Floyd was murdered. In a burgeoning culture of the social media sharing of police violence videos, when media and activists began sharing the different versions of cell phone video, security camera video, and police bodycam footage of the murder of George Floyd, the world witnessed a digital lynching in real time. Chauvin's knee on Floyd's neck was both the symbolic and literal representation of the system kneeling on the necks of people of color.

Notwithstanding, many of people of color felt the dichotomy of eight years of the President Barack Obama administration, contrasted with over three years of a hard right swing to the President Donald Trump administration, as a journey backwards in time with the Trump administration intensifying the pressure of its knee on the necks of people of color. Lynchings were not new to America, nor the world. The circulation of horrific imagery of the lynching narrative [murder] of Black bodies is deeply embedded in the social semiotic narrative of the cultural artifacts our culture, such as with the murder of Emmett Till and even the lynching postcards of the early 1900s that were fueled by the Ku Klux Klan ([see image 6](#)). Shown in real time on screens around the world, the digital lynching of George Floyd became a tipping point for civic action for the Black Lives Matter social movement, social justice, and social change. In an endless stream of cultural narrative that sent the message that Black lives do not matter. People not just in America, but around the world, had enough. They took to the streets and demanded change. Derek Chauvin was ultimately found guilty of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder, and second-degree manslaughter on April 20, 2021.

In the case of the murder of Emmett Till, in a Jim Crow south already beleaguered and brow-beaten by hundreds of years of injustice and the absence of humanity, the iconic visual imagery of the savage brutality bestowed upon Emmett Till was still an evocative visual that culturally resonated and made heads turn (Harold and DeLuca 2005, 274). To see is to believe and the visual imagery of Emmett Till's ravaged remains reverberated with the strategic rhetorical narrative of a natural truth; racism is brutal (277). Publications from the Black press, such as *Jet*, *Crisis*, and the *Chicago Defender*, widely distributed pictures of the open casket of Emmett Till's brutally-beaten Black body, adjacent to an image of a vibrant, young, happy Emmett Till in his Christmas suit (273). In addition, the most conservative estimates approximate attendance at the funeral at 10,000 people, although it is argued that true number of mourners who came to see the body were as high as 100,000 to 600,000. Whether via direct consumption of the Black press, traditional mainstream media, or word of mouth jumpstarted from mourners at Till's funeral, the visual imagery of Emmett Till's dead Black body helped shape and expand counternarrative and counterpublic discourse and rhetoric against racial terrorism and white supremacy. Elizabeth Alexander maintains that the visual imagery of Emmett Till's corpse helped create an African American cultural narrative for a collective trauma, reminding people of color of the continual mortal danger for a Black person in America (276). The visual imagery of the murder of George Floyd adds to what seems to be never ending continuance of collective trauma in Black public memory of institutionalized racism and police violence that seems as though it can never truly be eradicated. The sadness and bitterness of that sentiment contributed to the impassioned participatory protest support in the justice for George Floyd movement that transcended race, gender, identity, and even national boundaries.

Muhammed Ali recalls seeing the juxtaposition of photos of Emmett Till as a happy teenager with photos of Till's mangled corpse. Both photos, taken in the same year, for Muhammed Ali, created his shift in consciousness to consume and digest that Ali was a Black man living in racist America (Harold and DeLuca 2005, 272). George Floyd was not the first Black man to yell "I can't breathe" beneath the jackboot of police brutality, nor will he be the last. However, the visual of George Floyd in empathetic context, being nonchalantly murdered in real time, in public, on video, was the rhetorical embodiment that was able to impact, inform, and influence the public perception of events. Although we now think of high-tech as defining emerging technologies of today, for 1955, Jaqueline Goldsby defines the visual imagery of Emmett Till's corpse as a "'high-tech' lynching" of that moment, that played out publicly, not in front of a lynch mob, but in the traditional news media in print and television. In the video of the murder of George Floyd, in the absence of empathy, a portion of society became the lynch mob on social media who supported Derek Chauvin in murdering George Floyd. In a CBS News-YouGov poll, taken after the verdict of the Derek Chauvin trial, 46% of Republican respondents indicated that they believed that Derek Chauvin was wrongfully convicted of the murder of George Floyd (Mastrangelo 2021).

In the age of digital and social media today, Derek Chauvin's knee on George Floyd's neck resonated as a digital lynching that was lockstep in sync with the roots of American identity and strategic intolerance. As Christopher Benson writes, "[Mamie Till Bradley] had opened a casket and opened our eyes" (Harold and DeLuca 2005, 280). Behold, the corpse of a Black innocent, as opposed to the American historical cultural narrative of the imagery of Black bodies as something monstrous and to be feared. As many people began to wake up to the pre-digital photography visceral reality of Jim Crow southern racism and white supremacy, the visual

imagery of Emmett Till's brutally-beaten, dead, Black body circulated through the Black press and traditional mainstream print and television news media, awakening awareness to extrajudicial violence, murder, and systemic injustice, history repeated itself as people watched the digital lynching of George Floyd and the loss of his Black body and embodiment in real time on video. Mamie Till Bradley's choice to share her son's open casket and circulate the photos of Emmett Till's mutilated corpse strategically flipped the rhetorical cultural narrative of lynchings as a warning to keep Blacks in their place, to a symbol of the absence of Black humanity in Jim Crow white southern racism, and the argument to offer humanity universally.

Comparatively, Darnella Frazier could not have known what the final outcome would be between the encounter between former Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin and George Floyd would be, but in a climate of a surge of viral police violence videos on social media, she was able to make a thematically similar decision as Mamie Till Bradley did with Emmett Till's open casket iconic imagery; Darnella instinctively thought that George Floyd's life matters, guilty or innocent, and that George Floyd's encounter with Derek Chauvin should be shared with the public as digital eyewitness testimony of truth in the raw. Through visual activism, multimedia culture, and rhetoric, the counternarratives and counterpublics of the murder of Emmett Till and the murder of George Floyd challenged the naturalized and normalized cultural narrative of Black humanity.

Visual Imagery and the Civil Rights Movement

The rhetorical visual imagery of the Civil Rights era evoked the concept of Black humanity by challenging the moral values of white America—"certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (M. Hall 2019) —by giving face to

the Black experience in the Jim Crow south, at a time when people of color were typically depicted as abstract and monstrous by hegemonic authorities (V. J. Gallagher and Zagacki 2007, 114–15). The collective rhetorical visual imagery thus offered the proper commemoration for Black humanity fixed in the collective public memory and cultural historical narrative. Historically, although white males have been the creators of white on Black violence (Berger 2011, 66), it lives on primarily in the “traumatized collective historical memory” of the Black community at “contemporary sites of conflict” (*New York Times* 1963, 201). White America lacked presence of communal memory to experience the same magnitude of terror that was communicated through the collective memories of the Black community (Berger 2011, 66). By the same token, not all Americans were able to draw upon the collective trauma of the Black experience, neither to recognize George Floyd’s rights, nor to view Black humanity as being violated or withheld.

Specifically, the Civil Rights era photos published in *Life* magazine during the 1960s, forged a permanent collective cultural public memory into the minds of the viewers of the imagery (V. J. Gallagher and Zagacki 2007, 128–29): “Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image. In an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it. The photograph is like a quotation, or a maxim or proverb” (Sontag 2002, 87). Today, the visual imagery of the Civil Rights era from *Life* magazine appears as commemorative portions of our collective cultural heritage, such as in museums, newspapers, and books (V. J. Gallagher and Zagacki 2007, 130). The visual imagery produced during the justice for George Floyd protests, both on and offline, operated in the same manner, offering a freeze frame of collective trauma to advocate for justice now and empower the resolve of future generations.

Although television was growing as a form of media in the 1960s, the photographs displayed in newspapers and newsmagazines still carried the most influence for the rhetorical public memory of the Civil Rights movement (Thornton 2013, 460). The rhetorical power of the image during the Civil Rights era was not limited to photojournalism and television. Victoria Gallagher and Kenneth Zagacki demonstrated how the Civil Rights artwork of Norman Rockwell helped make Black humanity visible and painted the picture of a moral crisis of faith for national cultural identity and helped mold efficacy for public memory and the proper way to commemorate historical memory (V. Gallagher and Zagacki 2005, 177–78, 195–96; V. J. Gallagher and Zagacki 2007, 114). While visual imagery has the rhetorical commemorative power to make visible the invisible, it also conceals what is not in the image (V. J. Gallagher and Zagacki 2007, 131). The police argued what was invisible to images of the murder of George Floyd was a criminal trying to illegally acquire goods for a counterfeit \$20 bill. Conversely, through the narratives of justice for George Floyd protests, what many were not seeing in the video was an everyday person just trying to live their life.

Both what is seen and not seen can be illuminated or obfuscated by a visual. Rodney H. Jones writes that “By the mid-20th century, photographs had come to take on a ‘truth value’ that exceeded human experience and memory (Sekula 1982), and the physical act of photographing someone materially instantiated the separation between the seer and the seen, mediated through the technology of the camera lens” (R. H. Jones 2020, 21). As part of our collective cultural public memory and national heritage, the Civil Rights movement is now widely celebrated and accepted, but what is not visible in the iconic visual imagery of the Civil Rights era, was the incessant reluctance of many people, namely in the era’s Jim Crow south, to embrace the activism of the 1960s, thus diminishing the exigent heroism depicted in the imagery. Sontag

argues that visual framing of heroic acts in the past, may intimidate those in the present and in the future, from be able to live up to the same level of heroism (Sontag 2002, 94). In addition, Sontag asserts that although a photo is easily remembered, it does not guarantee that the memory will carry with it all of the social semiotic messages that surrounded the moment captured in the photo. However, when it comes to iconic imagery, what makes the image iconic is all of the visual social semiotic narrative that is connoted in the image, thus making the image iconic. Ironically, both the justice for George Floyd protests and backlash movements, such as Blue Lives Matter, guaranteed that George Floyd was remembered and believed to have been murdered. In the case of backlash against the justice for George Floyd protests, there were many people who believed that George Floyd was extrajudicially murdered. However, there were also many people on the alt-right who claimed to believe that Derek Chauvin's actions were legally and morally justified and that he was wrongfully convicted of murder. As a result, it created a bifurcated public memory with a duality of meanings for a singular factual event.

During the Civil Rights era, the visual imagery captured by photojournalism of police brutality in the Jim Crow south reached the moral consciousness of non-southern Americans (Berger 2011, 60). Editorials in newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Philadelphia Inquirer* admonished southern police brutality as barbaric, disgraceful, compassionless, and disgraceful. The visual rhetorical strategy of violence to keep people of color in their place began to boomerang, and the southern police themselves had now become the best visual rhetors arguing the case for Black humanity. The visual photojournalism, accompanied by the context of moral and ethical journalism, on the national stage of the visual theater of Jim Crow southern police brutality, subsequently argued the case for Civil Rights (Berger 2011, 83). Northern intellectual whites were more prone to recognize Black humanity

and the loss of it in the visual imagery of the Civil Rights era and from the hearts and minds of the citizenry to the halls of Congress; the more Jim Crow southern brutality persisted, the more enactive people became for social justice and social change (62). Alt-right backlash to the justice for George Floyd protests, platformed in Fox News echo-chambers, tapped into the rhetorical collective memory of the Jim Crow south. George Floyd was blamed for his murder and thus a warning for people of color to know their place, never step out of line, and be sure to show deference when confronted by the extension of white authority—a police officer.

The social imaginary for many white southerners in visual imagery in general was that universal suffering could only be depicted through images of white bodies; a symbol not to be confused with the imagery of the racially-charged naturalized suffering of nonwhites (Berger 2011, 68). However, eventually even many Southerners began to wince at the racially specific police barbarianism inflicted upon Black bodies in the visual imagery of the Civil Rights era (64). White supremacy had become its own best rhetorical counterargument. The visual imagery of the Civil Rights era communicated the denoted literal meaning of the imagery, the connoted visual social semiotic meanings they drew about cultural narrative, and also communicated rhetorical messages to argue the case for Black humanity (Thornton 2013, 460). Catherine Lutz states that use of emotion in visual imagery can evoke a semiotic system of meaning amongst those who share a similar cultural narrative and identity (Lutz 1988, 10; Thornton 2013, 470). Thus, the same image can evoke contrasting meanings to those who share different cultural backgrounds and preexisting mindsets. The justice for George Floyd protests and visual digital activism helped rhetorically impact moral consciousness across all races, genders, identities, and nationalities, uniting a coalition of unified support for social justice and social change.

Visual Digital Activism and Iconic Imagery

Gordon Parks argues that an image is rhetorically powerful when it can move an audience from apathy to activism (Gallagher and Zagacki 2007, 116; Parks 2003, 7). For an image to be iconic, it must have the transformative power to make semiotic connections of meaning beyond what is literally denoted in the image, and interconnect with cultural narratives and histories, while simultaneously using the world of meaning to weave together a new rhetorical narrative that propels one to enact change. Erika Doss argues that *Life* magazine capitalized upon the affordances of visual culture to influence cultural narrative during the Civil Rights movement (Doss 2001, 11; Gallagher and Zagacki 2007, 118). Similarly, digital activists embedded within the network of online users advocating for justice for George Floyd, utilized the world of semiotic meaning that could be told visually through stills and video to offer George Floyd rhetorical embodiment and justice from the great beyond. An iconic image captured during the situational immediacy of the moment offers a crystalline autonomous narrative to the moment and its *kairos* [sociopolitical immediacy] in larger discourse. Grace Elizabeth Hale posits that iconic photos of the Civil Rights movement, from photojournalists like Gordon Parks, were a visual counterpublic to the rhetorical narrative of visual imagery of 1890-1940, that were strategically designed to reinforce segregation and white supremacy (Gallagher and Zagacki 2007, 121; Hale 1998, 7–8). The inclusion of iconic images in traditional mainstream media outlets, like *Life* magazine, helped African Americans give voice to their own historical memories and cultural narrative which helped to shape the Civil Rights movement (V. J. Gallagher and Zagacki 2007, 114) and empathetically influence public opinion through rhetorical embodiment.

The embodiment of George Floyd's Black humanity, through visual digital activism, achieved this same rhetorical status, as evidenced by millions of protestors globally. Just as the iconic visual imagery of the Civil Rights movement provided visual discourse for the public and counterpublic of Black humanity, in traditional mainstream media, so did the visual discourse and visual argument for the Black humanity of George Floyd, within digital activism on social media. Steven Kasher conceptualized the visual imagery of the Civil Rights movement as "...the deepest and broadest photographic documentation of any struggle in America" (Kasher 1996; in Gallagher and Zagacki 2007, 114).

Within the justice for George Floyd movement, visual activism offered a critical race counterstory, as an alternative to the traditional blame-the-victim narrative of the police, institutions, and normalized and naturalized cultural narrative of the hegemony. Hariman and Lucaites indicate that for an image to be iconic, the audience must be able to imagine themselves in the situation presented in the image (Gallagher and Zagacki 2007, 124–25; Hariman and Lucaites 2002, 364–65). In the case of the video of the murder of George Floyd, that would mean through rhetorical embodiment, large swaths of society either identified with George Floyd, who could not breathe, the bystanders begging Derek Chauvin to stop, or with Derek Chauvin himself, as someone who would have also been kneeling on George Floyd's neck, keeping him in his place. This hyper-activation of audience identification with the situation and exigence of the moment is what propels the semiotic significance of an image to iconic status. However by contrast, just as an iconic photo can take upon one strategic narrative, it can also be culturally appropriated, especially with social media, to take on new strategic cultural narratives based upon different ideologies and opinions (Gallagher and Zagacki 2007, 130; Hariman and Lucaites 2002, 365).

Media Framing and Schema, Visual Culture, and Audiovisual Activism

Media Framing and Schema

Media framing is a process in which a frame affects the attitudes and decisions of an audience about an issue, especially in the case when an audience lacks firsthand knowledge about the subject matter (Bush 2017, 13). Audiences utilize media frames to derive meaning and interpretation of highlighted details within a story (Blevins et al. 2019, 1641; Bush 2017, 5; Entman 1993, 52–53; Gamson 1989; Goffman 1974; Lind and Aravena 2019). A frame just does not highlight how to think about a topic, it offers salience by framing what topics should even be given thought (Bush 2017, 13; Gamson 1989, 157; Miller 2002, 275). “Keywords, metaphors, concepts, symbols, and visual images” all act as frames within a media narrative (Bush 2017, 13; Lind and Aravena 2019). By default, a frame greatly impacts how an audience will interpret an event or issue (Bush 2017, 14; Scheufele 1999, 106). Robert M. Entman characterized frames as providing a schema to “*define problems...diagnose causes...make moral judgements...[and] suggest causal remedies*” (Entman 1993, 52; Ofori-Parku and Moscato 2018, 2484).

Schemas utilize an audience’s preexisting mindset, beliefs, and knowledge they already possess about the underpinnings of a news story (D. Scheufele 1999, 105; D. A. Scheufele and Iyengar 2017, 8). Because media frames are processed by the audience through schemas (D. Scheufele 1999, 106), the frame acts as the intermediary between “larger social cultural realms and everyday understanding of social interaction” (Friedland and Mengbai 1996, 13). Erving Goffman argued that schemas were “primary frameworks” (Goffman 1974, 24) which effectively and efficiently assisted the audience in processing information (D. A. Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007, 11–12). A frame is meant to assist with the meaning, understanding, and interpretation of an object. However, the framer shapes the meaning, understanding, and interpretation that an

audience might have about the object. Looking at an object is not the same as seeing an object and fully comprehending the layers of possible meanings.

Furthermore, a frame shapes how an audience perceives and interprets evidence (Canevez, Karabelnik, and Winter 2022, 698; Goffman 1974, 2, 8, 10–11; Salet 2017, 130; Testa and Dietrich 2017, 28–29). Any news report, whether intentionally or unintentionally, favors the author’s own beliefs and biases (E. K. Jones 2018; Henderson et al. 2022, 26–27; Price, Tewksbury, and Powers 1997, 481) in their attempt to present their interpretation of “perceived reality” (Canevez, Karabelnik, and Winter 2022, 699; Entman 1993, 52; Goffman 1974). Thus, the media is a “framing institution” (Yazdiha 2020, 502–3) and a byproduct of the normative culture of the dominant ideology (Henderson et al. 2022, 26–27; Martine and De Maeyer 2019, 3). Although not intentional, news frames provide legitimization (Marsh 2018, 28; Rodriguez and Dimitrova 2011, 51) and a tacit endorsement of institutionalized racism, power imbalances, and police violence (Lane et al. 2020, 791, 793). Thus, “media frames evoke thoughts that have the potential for eroding or building racial comity” (Entman and Rojecki 2000, 49; Foucault Welles and Jackson 2019, 1701). In the age Trumpism, populism, nationalism, and otherism, what might have been ordinarily hegemonic stereotypical tropes framing the justice for George Floyd media coverage, also had influence from online counterpublic digital discourse, as well as a mainstream media who felt the need to provide some pushback against alt-right themed opinion. As a result, in some parts of the media, the justice for George Floyd protests got both positive, as well as intelligent, critical discourse.

The media had the ultimate control to set the agenda to determine whether the justice for George Floyd protests merited being on the agenda for national discourse, as well as maintained the ability to prime preexisting cultural schemas for reaction to the protests, as well as frame

both how the media and the audience should interpret the protests. Media frames on MSNBC of the justice for George Floyd protests, versus Fox News, are prime examples of polar opposites for frames—a battle for justice on one hand and random criminality in the other. Since media framing draws upon preexisting cultural schemas, memories, and mindsets, another way of looking at the media framing of the justice for George Floyd protests is that it opened a cognitive doorway to a belief system that the audience already embraced.

The hazards of hegemonic framing from institutions like the traditional news media are that history has shown us that with matters of race, news media frames tend to rely upon stereotypic tropes (Bush 2017, 6) that produce status-quo systemic inequalities (Henderson et al. 2022, 27). *Stereotyping* occurs when an individual is unable to cognitively recognize the traits of someone else perceived as ‘other’ as positive (Bush 2017, 6; Hall 1997, 238). “Central to the representation of racial indifference” (S. Hall 1997, 247), stereotyping functions as a schema that allows an individual to draw quick and broad sweeping generalizations about social groups other than their own (Bush 2017, 12, 16; Gorham 2019). The culture of the dominant ideology utilizes stereotyping as a cultural frame to maintain cultural and institutional power imbalances between dominant and marginalized groups (Bush 2017, 6–11; Satchel 2016). Visual social semiotics can be utilized by the news media to create a racial visual frame in a story when the text or dialogue does not immediately reference race or stereotypes (Henderson et al. 2022, 27). Linguistic frames use wordplay to downplay the nature of an event or issue (Henderson et al. 2022, 28; Hirschfield and Simon 2010, 163; Stone and Socia 2019, 338), such as referring to George Floyd as a “fatality” versus being “murdered.” News media visual frames tend to blame the victim, justify law enforcement’s use of deadly force, and portrays the victim as a miscreant well-deserving of being shot [targeted] and killed [murdered].

Conversely, the visual imagery of the Civil Rights era helped to create a ‘master frame’ for the visual power and narrative of social movement protest (Cowart, Blackstone, and Riley 2022, 678; Reed 2019). Visual frames are uniquely effective (Marsh 2018, 28) in the sense that “...the special qualities of visuals—their iconicity, their indexicality, and especially their syntactic implicitness—makes them very effective tools for framing and articulating ideological messages” (Messaris and Abraham 2001, 220). Visual frames more effectively engage and emotionally activate an audience (Brantner, Lobinger, and Wetzstein 2011, 525–26; Messaris and Abraham 2001, 29). Similar to the traditional news media, the affordances of hashtags on Twitter afford a social movement the ability to autonomously frame the narrative and meaning of a movement to a large audience (Bush 2017, 7–8; Canevez, Karabelnik, and Winter 2022, 700; C. Ryan, Carragee, and Meinhofer 2001, 176). The autonomous presentation of a social movement’s narrative, challenges hegemonic norms and presents counterpublic and counternarrative discursive publics, as enclaves to inform and enact cultural and institutional change (Bush 2017, 26–27). Social media offers prime space and place for social movement protest narratives (Cowart, Blackstone, and Riley 2022, 679) and a “symbolic construction of public space” (Gerbaudo 2012, 5).

Every second of the visual imagery in the video of the murder of George Floyd haunts. A particular image from the video that appeared through justice for George Floyd protests was a frame of Derek Chauvin kneeling on George Floyd’s neck, nonchalant with Derek’s hand in his own pocket, with a grimace on Derek’s face, and sheer agony and terror in the face of George Floyd, lain prostrate, powerless to defend himself or endure in his Black Humanity. This image works as a master frame for the metaphor of the authoritarian system kneeling both upon the metaphorical and physical necks of people of color. However, it also transcends color and

identity, functioning as a metaphor for authoritarianism, squashing all others who are not elite members of the hegemony. The visual imagery of the justice for George Floyd movement both resonated and activated many people to speak out and get out to protest, even amidst a global pandemic, during a time where the COVID-19 novel coronavirus had no cure or vaccine.

Social movements are able to move the public through framing injustice and making the case for collective action (Gamson 1988; Noakes and Johnston 2005, 8). An *injustice frame* (Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982) is what makes a *collective action frame* possible (Benford 1997, 415–16). A public sentiment of framed injustice must peak at a critical mass before people are activated to seek collective action against perceived injustice (Benford and Hunt 1992; Čapek 1993; Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982; McAdam 1982; Moore 1978; Piven and Cloward 1977; Turner 1969; (Turner and Killain 1972). Collective action frames provide the inspiration for a social movement (Benford 1997, 416), as well as “underscore and embellish the seriousness and injustice of a particular social condition or redefine as unjust and immoral what was previously seen as unfortunate but perhaps tolerable” (Benford and Snow 1992, 137). All of the visual imagery from the video of murder of George Floyd’s digital lynching stands out as iconic collective action frames. The justice for George Floyd protest online and in the streets created the collective public memory to enshrine this traumatic moment in history.

Social movements should perform holistically, as their own news distribution outlets, through all forms of media to both disseminate and control the narrative of the movement (Coward, Blackstone, and Riley 2022, 678; Richardson 2020, 7). The failure of a jury in 2013 to convict George Zimmerman of murdering Black teenager Trayvon Martin, created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, as a distributed networked counterpublic and counternarrative on Twitter for social justice and social change for people of color (Richardson 2020a, 40). In 2014, after the

extrajudicial murder of Michael Brown by police officer Darin Wilson in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson, Missouri, Twitter users collectively reframed the murder of Michael Brown through broader relatable narratives, as well as personalized stories (Blevins et al. 2019, 1636–37). Furthermore, users collectively shared their personal accounts by also coalescing around distributed networked counterpublic and counternarrative Twitter hashtag conceptual frames such as, “#IfTheyGunnedMDown” (1649). During the Ferguson protests, many Twitter users felt as though they were part of the on-the-ground protests, as they tweeted about events in real time and rallied users to participate in other online #Ferguson social movement campaigns (Bonilla and Rosa 2015, 7; Cowart, Blackstone, and Riley 2022, 381). Similar to the Civil Rights era, it is plausible that the screening of protest visuals in the traditional news media, as well as on social media, contributed to a 22-year low in support for the police (Cowart, Blackstone, and Riley 2022, 690; J. M. Jones 2015). During the peak of the George Floyd protests in July 2020, 65% of Americans supported the George Floyd protests and almost 60% of Americans felt there was a need for modern-day police reform (Crabtree 2020).

Visual Culture, the News Media, and Audiovisual Activism

The culture of the dominant ideology writes [his]story in his image, thus exemplifying what gets recorded as a cultural artifact and situating how that artifact is framed (Askanius 2013, 16). Especially in the case of counterpublics for marginalized groups, the culture of social media platforms like YouTube, afford the users the agency to provide creative narrative counterstories that offer authentic *autonomous epistemologies* [recognition of knowledge accumulated through the lived experiences of the individual] and public memory, versus the naturalized and normalized cultural hegemonic narrative. *Strategic rhetorical memory* [memory created for

public consumption designed to persuade towards a specific viewpoint] is embedded into the visual culture of digital activism, such as with the visual activism surrounding the justice for George Floyd social movement. Social media platforms allow digital activists to narrate history and public memory.

Through online grief culture, visual digital activism is able to transfer the *aura* [the intangible and ephemeral feeling elicited when experiencing something while being physically present] of a physical memorial to the extended endless embodiment of the commemoration online through a social media platform (Askanius 2013, 19). The intersection of East 38th Street and Chicago Avenue in Minneapolis, renamed George Floyd Square ([see image 19](#)), is a commemorative place and space to afford George Floyd's Black humanity agency through rhetorical embodiment. Traditionally, activists have moderated their planned protests and public-facing activism through the lens of how it might be framed and *exemplified* [exemplification is when the traditional news media determines which stories get told] within the traditional mainstream news media (15). Emerging technologies, like social media platforms, allow activists to offer their own version of cultural narrative of a social movement and communicate messaging alongside, or over and above, that of a traditional mainstream public.

Visual digital technology has enabled audiovisual activism from bystander video, to engaged activists, to document and share a twisted symphony of vigilantism and law enforcement extrajudicial violence and murder (Askanius 2013, 13). Tina Askanius argues that audiovisual activism on YouTube provides an archive of rhetorical archivist memory, commemoration in places of grief, and visual space to challenge extrajudicial violence (14). A common visual theme amongst audiovisual activism protest narratives is to capture the moment at the balance of life and death encounters with the police (17). The entire video of the murder of

George Floyd is a document of the moment between life and death for George Floyd. Virtually any frame that activists show from the video of the murder of George Floyd is a rhetorical argument for Floyd's Black humanity and George Floyd's loss of it.

Audiovisual activism in the space of police violence is embodied by the concept of *sousveillance*—surveilling the surveillers (13). As with the case with the video of the murder of George Floyd, Darnella Frazier's [the 17-year-old Black girl who shot the video of the murder of George Floyd] video reverberated and resonated on social and traditional mainstream media with the embodied rhetorical narrative of George Floyd's, "I can't breathe," as counterstory to the original police narrative, which could not be seen in the unedited video. The police initially relied upon their usual rhetorical trickery, that the most important information was what we could not see, what we could not hear, and what the eyewitnesses did not communicate; thus, juries should only focus upon police officer testimony and expert witnesses. Audiovisual activism challenges hegemonic narrative and threatens the continued existence of the unnatural order of things. Audiovisual activism, in concert with hashtag activism, empowers counternarrative and counterpublics to usurp hegemonic narrative, when imagery from activism is picked up and circulated by traditional mainstream media. Where extrajudicial murder is at the forefront, audiovisual activism puts vigilantism and law enforcement on trial in the court of public opinion and social media, with the camera as the technological eyewitness (20).

A Rhetorical-Semiotic-Technocultural Analysis of George Floyd Protests Imagery

Building upon the review of literature from lynching and rhetorical-cultural memory to audiovisual activism, through the transdisciplinary RSTA research methodology, I further explore *RQ1*, *RQ2*, and *RQ3* through an analysis of visual themes in the visual imagery of the

justice for George Floyd movement protests, as well as a close reading a select piece of imagery from the George Floyd protests.

RQ1: How were cultural narratives in the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd social movement rhetorically framed in different media outlets and in social media discourse?

RQ2: What role did rhetorical counterstory play in the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd social movement?

RQ3: What is the relationship between rhetorical counterstory and rhetorical-cultural memory with digital activism and how people responded to the visual imagery of the justice for George Floyd social movement?

I examine the cultural and contextual perspectives of the visual narratives of the George Floyd protests. In my analysis, I offer an angle, frame, and focus (Kirk 2019) of the imagery from the rhetorical perspective of my positionality as a social justice and social change digital activism researcher. Visual social semiotic analysis explains how an audience understands an image (Pennington 2017; Rose 2016). An image's semiotic representation may connote cultural and contextual meaning that extends beyond the direct denotation of the image (Barthes 2009). I argue that through a cultural and contextual close reading and visual social semiotic analysis of emerging imagery from the justice for George Floyd protests, it may allow us to better understand different perceptions of the George Floyd protests through different cultural and contextual lenses, collective public memory, and mediums. I also offer a narrative information visualization of the visual imagery of the George Floyd protests versus the Capitol Riot ([see image 20](#)). analyzed. Major themes that emerged from my primary dataset of images from social media platforms and from center-to-left and center-to-right leaning news media websites for the

first ten images of Google image search for the term [“George Floyd” AND “Protests’] on the respective sites that I analyzed included: power relationships, authority, and the hegemony; police violence and show of force; protest art; peaceful protests; and massive support. However, there were also some other themes that emerged, as well as some outliers. A prime example of this would be how a raised fist for some, connotes Black power, while for others, it depicts a visual social semiotic symbol for solidarity within their own cultural beliefs.

George Floyd Protests Visual Imagery Themes

Power Relationships, Authority, and the Hegemony

Reuters.com (Middle): “Original Fact Reporting” (Otero 2021). The first ten images that appeared during the Google image search for the term [“George Floyd” AND “protests”] for Reuters.com all depicted peaceful protestors in support of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement, except for a singular outlier. The exception was a photo of Donald Trump which could be described as almost walking down a Soul Train dance line of armed cops, many with riot shields, as Trump raises his fist to chest level, presumably as a show of strength [and ironically a symbol of Black Power] ([see image 8](#)).



Image 8. Brenner, Tom. “President Donald Trump pumps his fist toward police as he walks between lines of riot police in Lafayette Park across from the White House while walking to St John’s Church for a photo opportunity during ongoing protests over racial inequality in the wake of the death of George Floyd while in Minneapolis police custody, at the White House in Washington. Via Alamy.” *Reuters*. June 1, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/news/picture/protests-outside-white-house-over-george-idUSRTS3A04J>.

Police Violence and Show of Force

Facebook.com. Only two photos directly linked to Facebook.com proper appeared in the Google image search for the term [“George Floyd” AND “protests”]. The first image is of a silhouette of a man peering out of barred windows with text that read, “SHOULD ALL FOUR OFFICERS BE CHARGED IN THE DEATH OF GEORGE FLOYD?” The second image is of

riot cops with pepper ball guns pointed at short range directly at the heads of presumably peaceful protestors.⁵

There were ten images found amongst the first ten images of Google image searches that prominently featured some display of police presence and or force ([see image 9](#)).



Image 9. Ciaglo, Michael. “George Floyd Death Protests: Protests against the death of an unarmed man in Minneapolis continued around the Colorado State Capitol for a third night on Saturday. Via Getty Images.” *Facebook*. May 30, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/CBSColorado/posts/george-floyd-death-protests-protests-against-the-death-of-an-unarmed-man-in-minn/10157915735888300/>.

5. ABC10. “GEORGE FLOYD | Protests over the death of George Floyd, a black man in Minneapolis who was killed by a police officer this week, erupted across the country on Wednesday, including in Sacramento where a small crowd briefly blocked traffic.” *Facebook*. May 28, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/ABC10tv/photos/george-floyd-protests-over-the-death-of-george-floyd-a-black-man-in-minneapolis-/10157619383800000/>.

Protest Art

Dailywire.com (+Hyper-Partisan Right): “Intersection of Opinion or High Variation in Reliability & Selective, Incomplete, Unfair Persuasion, Propaganda, or Other Issues” (Otero 2021). Given that Dailywire.com is rated as a +Hyper-Partisan Right site by Ad Fontes Media, the first ten images that appeared in a Google search for the term [“George Floyd” AND “protests”] were quite visually fascinating. Taking into consideration that the same image in or out of context connotes different semiotic meaning in different cultural spheres of influences, the denoted visuals in the first ten images included five images that depicted artwork made of the likeness of George Floyd somewhere within the frame ([see image 10](#)).⁶

6. Black, Ira L. “Use-Of-Force Expert, State Witness Throws Wrench In Prosecution’s Knee-On-Neck Narrative. Via, Corbis, Getty Images.” *Daily Wire*. April 8, 2021. <https://www.dailywire.com/news/use-of-force-expert-state-witness-throws-wrench-in-prosecutions-knee-on-neck-narrative>; Smith, Bryan R. “George Floyd Memorial Now A ‘Police-Free’ Autonomous Zone. Via AFP, Getty Images.” *Daily Wire*. March 11, 2021. <https://www.dailywire.com/news/george-floyd-memorial-now-a-police-free-autonomous-zone>; Keith, Stephanie. “The Things People Are Afraid To Say About George Floyd And The Derek Chauvin Trial. Via Getty Images.” *Daily Wire*. April 7, 2021. <https://www.dailywire.com/news/the-things-people-are-afraid-to-say-about-george-floyd-and-the-derek-chauvin-trial>; Nickelsberg, Robert. “Medical Examiner Concluded George Floyd Likely Died Of Fentanyl Overdose, Court Docs Reveal. Via Getty Images.” *Daily Wire*. August 26, 2020. <https://www.dailywire.com/news/medical-examiner-concluded-george-floyd-likely-died-of-fentanyl-overdose-court-docs-reveal>.



Image 10. Dunand, Emmanuel. “Ben Shapiro: Media ‘Paving The Way For Riots’ With Skewed Coverage Of Chauvin Trial. AFP via Getty Images.” *Daily Wire*. April 8, 2021. <https://www.dailywire.com/news/ben-shapiro-media-paving-the-way-for-riots-with-skewed-coverage-of-chauvin-trial>.

Only a singular image out of the first ten images had a visual that could be construed as thematically menacing. That visual depicted a silhouette of two people talking at nighttime while a building burns in the background ([see image 11](#)). Depictions of fire during the George Floyd protests were found five times during the first ten image searches. Four of those instances were sites found on the left. Only DailyWire.com had a depiction of fire and protestors found within the first ten images of Google image search.



Image 11. Maturen, Stephen. “One Killed in Violent Protests Over George Death of George Floyd. Via Getty Images.” *Daily Wire*. May 28, 2020. <https://www.dailywire.com/news/disturbing-video-one-killed-in-violent-protests-over-death-of-george-floyd-police-investigating-reports-victim-was-looter-shop-owner-shot-him>.

Peaceful Protests

APNews.com (Middle): “Original Fact Reporting” (Otero 2021). Seven of the first ten images from APNews.com for the Google image search depicted peaceful George Floyd protestors. The three outliers were a physical altercation between a riot cop and protestors, a silhouette of a protestor amidst the glow of a burning fire reflecting on a wall at night, and protestors in the street at night while a small bonfire in the street burns behind them ([see image 12](#)).



Image 12. Stewart, Mike. “Police officers and protesters clash near CNN Center, Friday, May 29, 2020, in Atlanta, in response to George Floyd’s death in police custody in Minneapolis on Memorial Day. The protest started peacefully earlier in the day before demonstrators clashed with police. Via AP Photo.” *Associated Press*. May 29, 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/baf3b29612527b8e9a841cb34f6f5789>.

DailyKos.com (+Hyper-Partisan Left): “Selective, Incomplete, Unfair Persuasion, Propaganda, or Other Issues” (Otero 2021)

Six of the first ten images in the DailyKos.com Google image search for [“George Floyd” AND “protests”] depicted large numbers of people non-violently protesting in support of George Floyd. However, these four additional images stood out: 1) an image of protestors, one with two fist raised above their head, defiantly standing in front of a police line; 2) an artistic night time silhouette of a police line illuminated by the red glow of police siren lights; 3) a menacing photo of legions of police in riot gear and national guardspersons with automatic rifles; and 4) a

compare and contrast photo of unarmed George Floyd supporters with their hands up and paramilitary dressed Blue Lives Matters supporters with automatic rifles.⁷

FoxNews.com (Hyper-Partisan Right): “Analysis or High Variation in Reliability” (Otero 2021). Quite interestingly, the first ten images in Google search for the term [“George Floyd” AND “protests”] for FoxNews.com all depicted peaceful protestors, except for one photo that was an outlier. Although imagery can denote one thing, the cultural connotation and the accompanying article can often present a different context for the visual. The singular outlier amongst the FoxNews.com images shows some sort of incident with a protestor and the police in which is it demonstrably unclear if the police are attempting to apprehend the protestor or providing some sort of aid ([see image 13](#)).

7. Staff. “Use of tear gas at protest over Black man's death contrasts with treatment of anti-lockdown protest. Composite, via Getty Images.” *Daily Kos*. May 26, 2020. <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2020/5/27/1947929/-Tear-gas-riot-gear-at-protest-over-George-Floyd-s-death-draws-comparison-to-anti-lockdown-protests>.

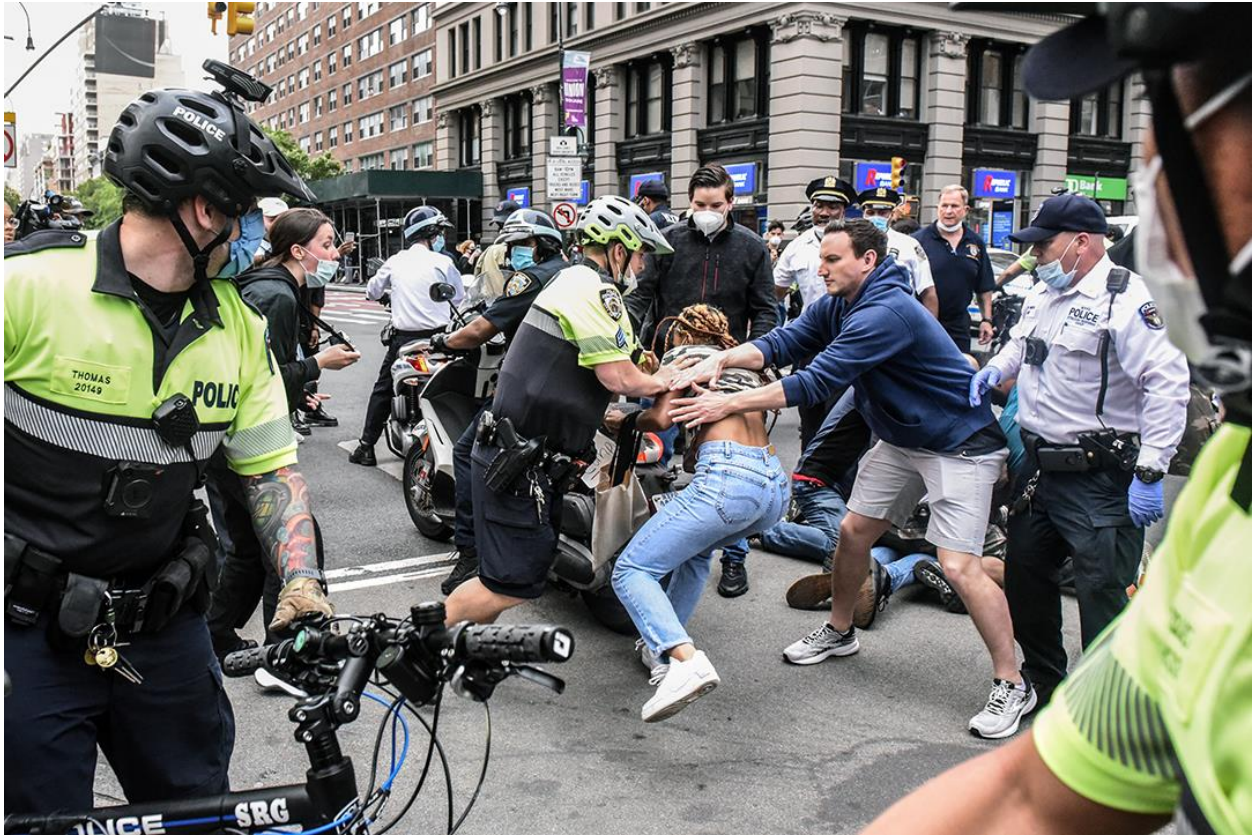


Image 13. Keith, Stephanie. “George Floyd Protests in NYC turn violent: Officers punched, pelted, more than 40 people arrested. Via Getty Images.” *Fox News*. May 28, 2020. <https://www.foxnews.com/us/george-floyd-protests-nyc-turn-violent-several-arrested>.

A stunning photo of a woman holding a sign that reads, “SILENCE IS VIOLENCE” in front of an endless crowd in Cologne Germany with a gothic cathedral in the background appears within the first ten images of the FoxNews.com and Reddit.com Google image searches for [“George Floyd” AND “protests”] ([see image 14](#)).



Image 14. Meissner, Martin. “Thousands of people demonstrate in Cologne, Germany, Saturday June 6, 2020, to protest against racism and the recent killing of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis, USA. His death has led to Black Lives Matter protests in many countries and across the US. A US police officer has been charged with the death of George Floyd. Via AP Photo.” *Fox News*. June 6, 2020. <https://www.foxnews.com/world/george-floyd-blm-protests-take-place-on-3-continents>.

Massive Support

CNN.com (Skews Left): “Intersection of Fact Reporting & Mostly Analysis or Mix of Fact Reporting and Analysis” (Otero 2021). Eight of the first ten images that appeared in a Google image search for the term [“George Floyd” AND “protests”] depicted a massive presence in support of George Floyd. The two outliers were hauntingly menacing photos of Minneapolis

burning in the background of fist-raised protestors and a photo depicting 6 six cities burning, presumably, from George Floyd protests ([see image 15](#)).⁸



Image 15. Minchillo, John. “Protestors demonstrate outside a burning fast food restaurant in Minneapolis on May 29, 2020. Photo via AP.” *CNN*. May 29, 2020. https://www.cnn.com/us/live-news/george-floyd-protest-updates-05-28-20/h_e04cb48586e847146dddc94fd58ff62d.

YouTube.com. The YouTube thumbnails that appeared in the first ten images of a Google image search for the term [“George Floyd” AND “protests”] all depicted masses of peaceful protestors demonstrating in support of George Floyd except a singular outlier. In this

8. “Protests rage for a fifth night across America. Composite.” *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2020/05/31/protests-saturday-polo-sandoval-pkg-vpx.cnn>.

outlier, two police officers attempt to grab a protestor while another protestor holds on to them.⁹ A title on the thumbnail reads, “Police Escalate Violence at George Floyd Protests.”

Twitter.com. The first ten images that appeared in a Google image search for the term [“George Floyd” AND “protests”] on Twitter.com revealed mostly photos depicting people en masse protesting peacefully for justice for George Floyd. Two images stood out amongst this group. The first was an NBC News map of the United States depicting what cities as of May 30, 2020 that were having George Floyd protests.¹⁰ The second was an image of a Donald Trump tweet about George Floyd which Twitter had flagged as in violation of Twitter’s terms of service but decided to leave on Twitter for public interest.¹¹

Reddit.com. Only seven images were found during a Google image search crawling Reddit.com proper for the search term [“George Floyd” AND “protests”]. All seven images appeared to be of protestors in support of George Floyd. There were no inclusions of menacing photos, looting, or violence. Most notably, among that set of images was a visualization that

9. NowThis News. “Police Escalate Violence at George Floyd Protests Across the U.S. | NowThis.” *YouTube* video, 3:05. June 2, 2020. <https://youtu.be/UQIOXuwh9vo>.

10. TODAYshow. “Protests over George Floyd's death erupted nationwide overnight.” *Twitter*. May 30, 2020. <https://twitter.com/todayshow/status/1266688361311412225>.

11. NickAtNews retweeting realDonaldTrump. “Twitter has added a notice to @realDonaldTrump’s tweet about #Minneapolis George Floyd protests, saying the tweet violates its rules but that keeping it available may be in the public's interest.” *Twitter*. May 29, 2020. <https://twitter.com/nickatnews/status/1266270444358778881>.

depicted the “Number of cities in Europe which held a George Floyd/BLM protest with more than one hundred people” as of Friday, June 12, 2020.¹²

Instagram.com. I attempted to do a Google image search for [“George Floyd” AND “protests”] on Instagram.com, but the query provided no direct results leading directly back to Instagram.com.

Close Reading of a Select George Floyd protests Image—“BLM Cologne, Germany”



Image 16. Meissner, Martin. “Thousands of people demonstrate in Cologne, Germany.” <https://www.foxnews.com/world/george-floyd-blm-protests-take-place-on-3-continents>.

12. PacheProtopopescu. “George Floyd Protests across Europe. Via Wikipedia.” *Reddit*. June 12, 2020. https://www.reddit.com/r/europe/comments/h7f3gz/george_floyd_protests_across_europe.

Rhetorical Counterstory

The “BLM Cologne, Germany” appeared frequently throughout the entire ideological spectrum of news media sites ([see image 16](#)). Although people rely upon schemas and framing to interpret the image, this image works very well as rhetorical counterstory against backlash rhetoric that the justice for George Floyd protests were filled with criminality, looting, and violence. This image depicts a very wide shot of a dense and massive crowd that appears to be very peaceful. In the sea of demonstrators, many are looking down, some presumably at their cell phones. Nothing about the posture or body language of the protestors suggests any form of violence or aggression. The serenity of the crowd is accented by the protestor in the foreground who holds up a sign that reads, “SILENCE IS VIOLENCE BLM.” The peaceful crowd is both the physical embodiment of silence while at the same time the antithesis of violence. Although the photo is literally silent in the physical world, this exemplified visual selection of this protest moment depicts serenity. More importantly, when FoxNews.com used this image on their website, it was used in-context without any extraneous framing that tried to culturally contextualize the image in another way. Media sites all across the ideological spectrum used this exemplified photo of serenity as an exemplification of the overall tone of this protest in Germany.

Critical Race Counterstory. In a vacuum, the “BLM Cologne, Germany” image works as a rhetorical argument both for and against systemic racism, injustice, and critical race counterstory. The image depicts a very diverse crowd of presumably many ethnicities, genders, and identities. They are all getting along fine and peacefully, assembled for one purpose: justice for George Floyd, because Black lives do matter. We witness a modern society where many can get along and agree upon common ground for greater universal morals. The protestor in the

foreground could pass for someone of mixed ethnic heritage, which is the literal materialized embodiment of races getting along and working with one another. However, in this universal visual moment of people gathered in moral agreement for justice for George Floyd, the greater social context of how this massive crowd was able to convene for one purpose was because of the murder of George Floyd and the denial of his Black humanity. The conflicting messages of racial harmony and systemic injustice, coexisting as narratives within the same image, offer a perfect metaphor for how the justice for George Floyd movement embodies a tipping point for modern day systemic injustice, social justice, and social change.

Narrative Rhetorical Agency. The visual narrative of the “BLM Cologne, Germany” image is broadly diverse and suggests very broad support for justice for George Floyd amongst many demographics. The image is key in utilizing visual narrative rhetorical agency as a strategic tactic in the justice for George Floyd movement and protests. It plays upon the participatory nature of the diverse crowd. In addition, the ambiguity of the ethnicity and identity of the person prominently featured in the foreground, as well as the relative panoply of identities depicted in the crowd, work effectively as an argument for social change. This image depicts a moment in time where everyone can get along. Thus, the notion of transcontinental solidarity of justice for George Floyd helps to rhetorically further demonize the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer, who denied George Floyd the most in the most basic of human rights—humanity.

As previously stated, I broadly define the general moral fiber and national identity of the United States as having the ideal to “be something greater.” We don’t always get it right, as a nation, but we are always striving to be something greater, which is what ultimately guides us to get things right on an issue over broad stretches of time, such as freeing the slaves and providing

voting rights to women. A greater universal moment of diversity to stand up for racial justice and basic human rights, makes the murder of George Floyd more of an offense to humanity and brings legitimacy to the racial dynamics of systemic injustice embedded within the visual social semiotic narrative of the murder of George Floyd. The “BLM Cologne, Germany” image expands the concept of greater universal morality on one accord because this demonstration is transnational and transcontinental. People of diverse backgrounds are gathering with the same mind and body for an event that neither occurred in that country, nor that continent. This speaks greatly to the agentic reach and impact of the justice for George Floyd movement and how it resonated on a greater universal level. At the time this photo was taken, the justice for George Floyd movement lacked a significant ‘hand-on-the-scale’[to render an advantage] assistance from formal counter-institution leadership and organization. This image is a perfect example of the social semiotic conceptual agentic power of a hashtag and further embodies the justice for George Floyd movement as a viral epidemic moment that seems to emerge in one fell swoop.

Rhetorical Embodiment: Embodied Êthe, Métis, and Rhetorical Listening. Métis resists the culture of the dominant ideology. Aside from the diverse massive crowd, what is so ominous about the photo is the castle or cathedral-like structure in the background, with boats that could pass for yachts. The image depicts a gathering of common people, physically divided by a river, from the symbolic imagery of hegemonic authority, institutions, and wealth who have convened to argue against the amoral abuses of the representative of the hegemony upon George Floyd. From the diverse identities in the crowd of the foreground of the image, to the hegemonic symbols in the background of the image, it speaks to the embodied êthe of all the intersectional identities represented in the photo. The protestor in the foreground represents her biology, gender, and identity, presumably symbolizing multiracial heritage.

All the protestors also represent the ēthe of their multiple identities from gender, biology, ethnicity, and most importantly, nationality, whereas the image is from a transnational and transcontinental protest for a crime against humanity that occurred far outside their borders. Collectively, the ēthe of all these identities combined are representative of the rhetorical extended embodiment and extended ēthe of George Floyd's posthumous cries for the acknowledgement of his Black humanity. George Floyd's identities extend far beyond being Black, a man, and American, but also include being a human being, worthy of humanity—an identity we all share regardless of borders. Rhetorical listening comes into play when the viewer is able to view and digest the multiple identities and messages embedded within the imagery and be willing to come to the same conclusion as the assembly of protestors, that George Floyd was indeed worthy of justice.

Rhetorical-Cultural Analysis

Rhetorical-Cultural Narrative. *Context.* The immediate context of the photo is a George Floyd and Black Lives Matter protest. The larger context for the moment extends to the narrative of the murder of George Floyd. After being accused of intentionally using a fake \$20 bill at a local grocery store, George Floyd was taken into custody by police and died after former Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin, knelt on George Floyd's neck for nine minutes and twenty nine seconds (Levenson 2021), while George Floyd was prostrate on the ground with his hands cuffed behind his back, until George Floyd died of restricted airflow. In the larger contextual view, this happened during the tail end of the Trump administration which was perceived by a great many not to be a friend of people of color. A third layer of contextualization ratchets up the tension in the air higher as the COVID-19 coronavirus global pandemic was

spreading and civil liberties were beginning to be restricted, as a health care measure. Amidst all that contextualization, still people felt ‘impelled’ [compel means by force while impel means to force through moral pressure] worldwide to protest the murder of George Floyd.

Themes. The most predominate theme I label as “we are many.” That theme is directedly tied into the theme that George Floyd’s life mattered and the overarching theme that Black lives do matter. When many unite as one, we visually experience the awesome power of unification. The protestor in the foreground holding the sign represents one of many, speaking as one voice, for George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement. A tertiary hegemonic theme exists in the distance which is visually depicted by the cathedral-like structure and yachts in the far background, divided from the protest by the river. The hegemony is depicted as physically disconnected from the masses and aloof to matters of life and death.

Cultural Narrative. The George Floyd protest “BLM Cologne, Germany” is uniform in cultural narratives that the George Floyd protests were massive, diverse, and global. Cultural narratives across the ideological spectrum do not deny that George Floyd protests occurred or were in attendance by massive groups of supporters. However, the larger cultural narrative at-larger in alt-right opinion is that Justice for George Floyd and Black Lives Matter are primarily violent terrorist movements. For an individual believing a terrorist narrative of the George Floyd protests, even though this photo depicts no violence, it is not necessarily in conflict with the narrative of violence. Aside from police violence, which was usually first initiated during the daytime upon peaceful protest, most of the criminal activities, looting, and rioting connected to George Floyd protests usually occurred after dark in the late-night hours. By that token, this photo does not significantly challenge the alt-right cultural narrative of the George Floyd movement as being primarily violent during the late night hours.

Rhetorical-Cultural Memory. In our hyper-visual smartphone camera technology fusion with social media platforms, a visual appearing on social media is often the memory a person has of major current events and happenings of critical discourse. The memories are not necessarily actual memories of participation in the event, but rather a memory of how the event was framed at a moment to be remembered by future generations. The “BLM Cologne, Germany” image works well as a symbol of the effectiveness of rhetorical-cultural memory in weaving the counternarrative of a social movement to the narrative of hegemonic authority, as well as influence the narrative, official public memory, and official policies of formal institutions.

The “BLM Cologne, Germany” image frames the justice for George Floyd protests as a cultural memory that was a massive tipping point for systemic racial injustice where people of myriad backgrounds and identities across the world were able to come together in agreement, after the erasure of George Floyd’s Black humanity, and demand George Floyd’s posthumous justice, as well as systemic change. Ultimately, within this climatic universal moral moment where many, not all, were able to come to agreement on universal human values, the official decree of the hegemonic systems of authority did find former Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin, guilty of the murder of George Floyd. Although representatives of the hegemonic authority, specifically the police, had not yet been found guilty of crimes. It is a rarity when police officers are found guilty of committing crimes on the job against ordinary citizens, particular against people of color, especially Black men, or even charged with a crime.

The rhetorical-cultural memory of the justice for George Floyd movement provided the narrative and the memory that ultimately became in alignment with the official hegemonic narrative. It speaks volumes to the agentic power of cultural memory to influence meaningful

change. Although a global protest is a high bar to achieve to find justice for one Black man, it still offers hope, because there was a metaphorical line of demarcation of systematic injustice to be crossed before people would erupt in global mass protests against the abuses of power. The power of the hegemonic authority is not all-encompassing, unlimited, and can be checked by the power of solidarity. The agentic cries for justice for George Floyd all began with the visual public memory created and shared by a 17-year-old girl, which ultimately went to shake up public discourse in the entire world; anyone can indeed make a difference.

Critical Technological Discourse Analysis. *Critical Theory.* The George Floyd protests “BLM Cologne, Germany” image is squarely centered in critical theory with political interests. The protestor in the foreground holding the sign that reads “SILENCE IS VIOLENCE BLM” is clearly communicating a political message at a massive gathering of individuals with political interests in the concept that Black lives do matter. The protestor holding the sign visually appears to be a person of color. The protestor’s gaze in the direction of the cathedral and yachts in the background situates the image in the discourse surrounding postcolonial theory and the power relationship between marginalized groups.

Discourse Analysis. The “BLM Cologne, Germany” image that appeared in the Reddit.com Google image search for [“George Floyd” AND “protests”] adds to the mysticism of the Google algorithm. What is and is not discoverable through a Google search is never fixed in stone. The algorithm is always being continuously modified, thus continuously influencing Google search results. The thread on which the “BLM Cologne, Germany” photo appears on Reddit.com only has three comments (u/OliverMarkusMalloy 2020). One of those comments is a compliment on the protestor in the foreground’s hair and another recognizing the George Floyd protests as a worthy cause, but a bad time in reference to coronavirus. Links on the Reddit.com

post for utilizing the “BLM Cologne, Germany” image take you to other places where the image is used and there is additional discourse. Of particular interest is that the user posted this image in a Reddit.com thread for “Trumpvirus” which has over fifty thousand members. The connection to the Trumpvirus thread is a likely clue to how this image ‘ranked’ [to appear as 1 of the first ten results in an internet search] in Google image search.

The +hyper-partisan right ideological FoxNews.com surprises once again with a highly accurate framing of the George Floyd protests. In the opening paragraph of an article with the headline, “George Floyd, BLM protests take place on 3 continents,” it describes the protests as demanding justice for George Floyd, police reform, and the end of racism. The article refers to tens of thousands of people protesting globally. Multiple images of protests in London, Paris, Cologne, and Seoul are included in the article. For the purposes of the study, I did not include an analysis of the video included in the article, as the video was composed of visual imagery and discourse on the FoxNews.com cable broadcast channel. However, for the text portion of the article, there is no framing or spin of the George Floyd protests beyond what actually happened. It is also worth noting that this article was written by a FoxNews.com correspondent and not a direct reprint from a newswire service. The article prominently features issues facing marginalized groups and without the FoxNews.com banner, would be imperceptible from popular left-wing opinions, beliefs, and ideologies.

Visual Social Semiotic Analysis. *Representational Meaning.* The “BLM, Cologne Germany” image greatly represents the +50% tenure of imagery found amongst the first ten images of the Google image search for [“George Floyd” AND “protests”], amongst all the news media websites and social media platforms that I analyzed. It was used on FoxNews.com and also found in a Reddit.com post. It depicts a George Floyd protest in Cologne, Germany. This is

why it is an excellent representation of all the imagery used across the ideological spectrum because it depicts a unified message that the George Floyd protests were massive, global, peaceful, and attended by people who believed in whatever they perceived the Black Lives Matter movement to mean. In the foreground stands a protestor of color who holds a sign that reads, “SILENCE IS VIOLENCE BLM.” This symbolizes that doing nothing makes you just as guilty as people who marginalize and murder people of color. The picture is from the rear of the protest crowd and many faces are obscured; however, the crowd appears to be diverse. The setting is of particular interest because in the background lay a gothic cathedral symbolizing the culture of the dominant ideology through both religion and colonization. A river separates the protest and the cathedral. Along the river in front of the cathedral appear to be yachts, symbolizes the rich and powerful and the literal divide from the masses and people of color by way of the river; a divide that is constantly always flowing.

Interactive Meaning. The distance from the viewer and the protestor in the foreground is relatively close. However, the distance of the vast crowd seems to stretch far beyond the eye’s field of vision. The distance of the viewer to the cathedral structure and the yachts seems far and almost unreachable for a person who is not of means, by the great chasm of the river. The protestor in the foreground keeps us engaged with the photo and her serious expression juxtaposed with her protest sign tells us who we should feel and be engaged with the overall event being depicted in the image.

Compositional Meaning. The protestor in the foreground is framed at the far edge of the right vertical third of the frame, providing what is called extremely large leading room and negative space, as the protestor gazes directly to the left side of the frame. This amount of leading room and negative space is considered advanced visual composition amongst

photographers and cinematographers. In the background, the cathedral and yachts are framed to far edge of the left side of the frame. A bridge from the protest side of the river, to the cathedral side of the river, divides the frame horizontally in half. The bridge almost connects the eyeline of the protestor's gaze to the cathedral and the yachts. The leading room for the protestor in the foreground is symbolic of the protestor leading us to how we should feel about the protest, George Floyd, and the Black Lives Matter movement. The bridge to the cathedral and the yachts symbolizes that they are speaking directly to power and the authority. The primary focal point of the frame is in the upper right-hand corner of the frame where the "SILENCE IS VIOLENCE BLM" sign is presented. This primary focal point tells the viewer how they should be perceiving the rest of the information in the frame. The secondary focal point is the protestor holding the sign, leading us how to perceive, and looking directly at the tertiary focal point in the frame which is the cathedral and the yachts representing the hegemony. The final focal point is the bridge that both divides and connects the people from the hegemony. The overall salience of the picture is the awesome massiveness of the size of the protest which is seemingly endless, and which is literally global.

Social Movements, Backlash, the Capitol Riot, and George Floyd

Social Movements and Backlash

Norris and Inglehart's *cultural backlash theory* argues that the silent revolution for progressive change—gains for immigration, diversity, and economic equality—triggers reactionary backlash from social conservatives who in turn embrace authoritarian populism and politics (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 32–64). This 'us-versus-them' culture clash between progressivism and social conservatism leads to a tipping point at the ballot box. The winning side

is whomever is able to motivate the majority of the electorate to install political representatives to enact progressive or social conservatism legislation.

George Floyd was murdered on May 25, 2020 and by June 6th, an estimated half-million people took to the streets, according to the *New York Times*. Austin McCoy's words could not more accurately mirror my own thoughts at that moment; "Something *was* happening" (McCoy 2022). Prior to the justice for George Floyd movement, I just could not wrap my head around the social media inspired #BlackLivesMatter movement. They seemed to lack the organization, sophistication, and leadership of the counter-institutions of the Civil Rights Era which brought many of the rights that I am now able to enjoy today. Prior to the murder of George Floyd, I had not taken BLM seriously and did not consider it a legitimate social movement, based upon my preconceived notions of what makes a social movement. However, Austin McCoy was right. Something was happening. Justice for George Floyd and BLM has suddenly gone global. Could this be the tipping point? By July 2020, the *New York Times* asserted that Black Lives Matter could possibly be the largest social movement to occur in U.S. history.

In June of 2020, activists in Minneapolis put forth cries to "defund the police," dubbing it the next wave of BLM and the city council voted to replace the existing police department with a reimagined public safety system (McCoy 2022). From corporations to Congress, public statements and policy changes were in the flux, including the George Floyd Policing Act which passed in the House of Representatives. However, with the fever pitch of BLM change in the air, the perceived fear of change unleashed an upswell of backlash. Trumpeting social conservative sentiment, the Trump administration invoked the spirit of authoritarian rule and vowed to deploy the military into cities who did not crackdown on protests. In addition, the Trump administration utilized personnel from the Customs and Border Protection agency, as well as the Department of

Homeland Security, in some cities to detain protestors. The administration's backlash war on BLM was to deny the existence of structural racism, condemn Nikole Hannah-Jones's 1619 Project, and launch a full assault against the concept of critical race theory.

Antifeminist backlash asserts that gains that women have obtained in society are causing women to feel unhappy with life (Faludi 2006, 9). Needless to say, this is a fallacy and a complete and utter myth. Advances for equality are not destroying women's lives. From Trumpism to the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, a resurgence of anti-women's rights can be interpreted as backlash to feminism (9–10). Backlash does not surge when a social movement has made its greatest accomplishment, but rather intensifies at a moment of perceived progress before the moment of great change can actually occur. In the 1970's, backlash was limited to the evangelical right. However, in the 1980's, feminist backlash gained political and social and social acceptance, thus spreading into popular culture. Just as the feminist movement seemed to be at its zenith with the passing of the Equal Rights Amendment, in both chambers of Congress, coupled with popularized feminist backlash, in 1982 the bill expired when it was unable to be ratified by 38 states. At the perceived moment of women accomplishing true equality, the fear of change thwarted a distinct moment of triumph (10–11). In a dose of classic irony, the 1947 film *Backlash* is the story of a husband who frames his wife for a murder that the husband has committed. Antifeminist backlash works exactly in the same way as the plot of the movie (13). It accuses feminists of the societal and cultural crimes actually being committed by the antifeminist backlash.

There are lessons to be learned from antifeminist cultural backlash. Perception of change, real or not, feeds fear and brews populist backlash. Similarly, with the perceived gains in identity and race [post President Barack Obama administration], particularly through the #GeorgeFloyd,

#BlackLivesMatter, and #MeToo social movements, alt-right social conservatism backlash grew from the fuel and de facto legitimization of the Trump administration. The backlash erupted into a moment which challenged the integrity of our elections, strength of the Constitution, and legitimacy of our democratic processes, in the form of the Capitol Riot.

The Capitol Riot [Insurrection]



Image 17. Mogelson, Luke and The New Yorker. “A Reporter’s Footage from Inside the Capitol Siege | The New Yorker.” *YouTube* video, 12:32. January 17, 2021. Reproduced without permission. <https://youtu.be/270F8s5TEKY>.

At approximately 2:30 AM in the morning of November 4, 2020, President Donald Trump announced that he had won the presidential election before most of the votes had been counted (Wilkie 2020). After all the votes had been counted in a tight race that lasted for several days thereafter, Donald Trump had in fact lost the election by nearly eight million votes and

seventy-four electoral votes. President Trump challenged the election results in several states through several recounts and sixty-two lawsuits, sixty-one of which he lost (Cummings, Garrison, and Sergent 2021). With no legal recourse, Trump said he had been cheated out of his election victory and began to inform his 74 million supporters that voted for him that the election was rigged and that they should come to the Capitol on January 6, 2021, to protest the official ceremonious counting of the electoral college votes. When January 6th arrived, Trump spoke at a rally in the Capitol to protest the election results and asked his supporters to join him, as they walked to the Capitol Building to protest the counting of the votes...but Trump changed his mind, and instead of walking with the supporters to the Capitol Building, he went back to the White House (Petras et al. 2021). His supporters, infuriated by the misbelief that a presidential election in the United States of America had been stolen, eventually overran the Capitol Police, stormed the Capitol Building, and in a protest gone wrong, some turned to domestic terrorism, which left 5 people dead ([see image 17](#)).

George Floyd and Backlash



Image 18. Minchillo, John. “In this Jan. 6, 2021, file photo violent insurrectionists loyal to President Donald Trump supporters try to break through a police barrier at the Capitol in Washington. A month ago, the U.S. Capitol was besieged by Trump supporters angry about the former president's loss. While lawmakers inside voted to affirm President Joe Biden's win, they marched to the building and broke inside. Via AP.” *Fox News*. January 6, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/biden-inauguration-joe-biden-capitol-siege-donald-trump-riots-ca7c5b62a333ea9967a413eb2841eb92>.

Reality is a mixed bag. Although what happens in reality is a finite constant, reality is perceived through infinite interpretations. Even what some might label as the unobjective hard scientific truth, is one of the infinite interpretations of reality. Perception is real for the perceiver. Reality is a singular prism that refracts the light of infinite perceptions or interpretations of reality. Whether you are bending reality to justify abuses of the authority, or twisting reality to hold onto or capture power, obfuscating any kind of general consensus on reality can have dire

consequences. Power is an intangible made tangible by physical forces in the physical world that choose to comply with the intangibility of power. Power is made tangible by the physical forces of institutions, the rule of law, and the acts carried out, via extensions of power through power's representatives. Like democracy, the perception of reality is fluid and fragile. Clouding a consensus on the interpretation of reality erodes the illusion of tangible power. It causes people not to cooperate with any sort of implied social contract necessary for order. Thus, was the case for the Capitol Riot ([see image 18](#)).

Just as protestors argued that crimes against humanity were inflicted upon George Floyd through his murder, the growing support for George Floyd and Black Lives Matter caused others to feel, or persuade others to believe, that equality and equity is a code word for someone with a piece of the pie now, getting a smaller piece later—white lives. On the most simplistic level, assuming resources are finite, and that non-white others have truly been given less, one might casually assume that in order for others to get more, it must mean that I will get less. It sounds simple, but giving people equal rights, does not mean giving someone else less rights, unless of course someone is arguing that they will lose the ability to treat others without fairness or basic human decency, which is not really a right; it's a crime. Humans are emotional beings who can easily react from fear and perceived loss. The Capitol Riot is the materialized embodiment of the willful grotesque manipulation of the perception and interpretation of reality into an unrecognizable deviation of the truth. What is someone's role and level of accountability when there is no consensus upon the objectifiable truth?

As a result of numerous factors brewing over the years from cognitive bias, ideologies, and cultural beliefs within our own spheres of influence, perception is now reality. A consensus no longer exists over fact or fiction. Through arbiters of alternative facts, like Donald Trump,

science is presented as though it was fake news or manipulated statistics. Lee McIntyre argues that we are now living in an era of “post-truth.” People believe in the opinion that resonates with them most emotionally over truth (McIntyre 2018, 14). A con artist, short for confidence artist, gains your trust by telling you what you want to hear. Because you want to hear it, you are more motivated to likely to believe it (McIntyre 2018, 54). As McIntyre illuminates, social media and modern-day opinion programs, masquerading as news programs (McIntyre 2018, 78), do play a role in post-truth, but I disagree with McIntyre that social media and the decay of the traditional print news media is squarely to blame. Technology, alone, is not the boogeyman. People are the boogey people. Breaking the concept of reality has opened doors to a sacrilegious reconceptualization of equity, whereby equity means giving equal time and weight to fact and fiction. That’s not equity; that’s false equivalence (McIntyre 2018, 139). Rhetors like Fox News helped fuel the post-truth fire that social movements of equality and equity, particularly those centered upon race and identity, had gone too far and the natural unalienable rights of white lives had been infringed upon and were the true victims of society and culture.

History has shown us that no country or culture is immune to right wing populist nationalism, stoking fear of others, as the source of all problems. Blaming others is an easy target. Any social movement of substance, particularly those rooted in social justice and social change, are all subject to an upswell of social movement backlash at perceived, not even fully realized, moments of real change. The Capitol Riot, by direct route of justice foe George Floyd and Black Lives Matter, is the result of how quickly and powerfully confrontation to change, and the rhetorical inflammation of fear and otherism, can turn into the physical destruction and the erosion of society, culture, and systemic institutions. Democracy is taken for granted as a given in America. However, in many places in the world, democracy can, and has, collapsed at any

given moment when the general consensus upon reality no longer chooses to cooperate with a universal belief in the systems and institutions of order. Groups of people coordinated to disrupt the general consensus of order in America that our free and fair elections, on January 6, 2020, were actually free or fair. Although any meaningful challenges to the results of the election were discredited and unproven in our government institutions and legal systems, the obfuscation of the perception of reality led thousands of people, and many more in their hearts at home, metaphorically and physically to descend upon the Capitol because they were no longer voluntarily cooperating with the general consensus of power and order.

A general consensus in our institutions and systems of order ultimately prevailed, but it is never a guarantee. If a majority of people believe in a singular perception and interpretation of reality, true or false, that simple majority is enough for that belief to prevail and be made physical, for all people to live with the material consequences of the beliefs and actions of the perception and interpretation of reality. Culture, narrative, perception, memory, and history are intangibles, like power, that can influence, impact, and transform the physical world. A social movement that makes gains, or even ultimately succeeds at its ultimate goal of affecting society, culture, and institutions, still does not eradicate dissenting beliefs. Over time, it might diminish dissenting beliefs but never truly eradicates them. Protecting the aims of social movements, as well as society, culture, and institutional change, is interconnected to protecting the collective cultural public narratives, memories, and histories in a clear, impactful, and informed manner so that future generations, in the long-term, can use them to understand themselves and evolve.

At the core of the transcontinental justice for George Floyd movement was a greater universal moral understanding that there is no justice when justice is for “just us;” not others. The rhetorical narratives offered in social media through the justice for George Floyd movement

transcended identity and allowed many people to see themselves in George Floyd. If there's no justice for one of us, then there's no justice for any of us. Solidarity is the backbone of strength and the crux of intangible power made tangible. It requires people to be of one mind and one voice. With solidarity, no institution, government, or authority may stand if no one stands for the authority and everyone stands against the authority. Although it is through the solidarity of counterpublic enclaves, counter-institutions, and grassroots organizing and participatory protest where most of the work for change happens, even one voice is enough to inspire and motivate collective action to build a narrative that challenges power and authority and its abuse. In the justice for George Floyd movement, that one voice was 17-year-old Darnella Frazier, who made the split-second decision to record a video and upload it to social media. In your everyday life, you must be that voice and be that change. Interject the voice of reason on that social media post in your feed that flirts with hate. Tell that police officer to stop when you see them abuse power. Show up to demonstrate at protests and show up to vote on election day. Be a technological eyewitness. Take out your cell phone and document abuses of power and of human rights and share them on social media. Make a difference. Every action and intention counts.

CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION—WHEN ACADEMIA BECOMES ART AND ACTIVISM

Overview

As examined through the justice for George Floyd protests, my dissertation research offers a critique, consultation, creation, and contribution towards the visual imagery emerging from the digital activism of social movements. This chapter will conclude my dissertation research by summarizing key findings in relationship to the research questions; offer broad conclusions and implications; discuss combatting social movement backlash; offer propositions for building artistic, activist, academic, and archival resources for social movements; and provide closing remarks. Building upon a foundation of counterpublics, critical race counterstory, counternarratives, the Black public sphere, rhetorical-cultural narrative, rhetorical-cultural memory, visual social semiotics, hashtag activism, and media framing and schemas, my dissertation research offers a rhetorical-semiotic-technocultural analysis of the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd protests. My dissertation research is influenced by my worldview and positionality as a visual specialist artist, activist, academic, and advisor for social movements, engaged in social justice and social change. Within an atmosphere of extrajudicial police and vigilante killings circulating on social media, the visual social semiotic critical race counterstory and counternarratives of the justice for George Floyd protest, as elements of a counterpublic and social movement, contributed to a kairotic tipping point. I argue that culture, as moderator, provided the prism-like myriad interpretations of reality, through preexisting mindsets and schemas, that motivated global citizens to protest for justice for George Floyd and demand social justice and social change, particularly for people of color.

Review of Findings

To analyze the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd social movement, I constructed a research methodology called *rhetorical-semiotic-technocultural analysis* (RSTA). It is composed of two primary methods—rhetorical counterstory and rhetorical-cultural analysis.

Cultural Narrative, Rhetoric, and Visual Imagery

My dissertation research aimed to investigate how cultural narratives within the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd social movement were rhetorically framed in different media outlets and in social media discourse. Using RSTA, this was explored through critical technocultural discourse analysis and visual social semiotic analysis. The agency of the justice for George Floyd protests was greatly empowered through the emerging technologies of hashtag activism on social media platforms, such as Twitter, as well as the usage of cameras built into smartphone technology, which enabled the social movement to take their message global. The equal opportunity for anyone to use the #GeorgeFloyd hashtag amplified the power of participatory protest, promoted personalized movement in-group cultural narrative, and extended the distributed networked counterpublic discourse. Through rhetorical-cultural narrative, rhetorical-cultural memory, visual social semiotic meaning, and narrative rhetorical agency, the social media platforms were able to afford agency to visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd social movement. Visuality was a key rhetorical tactic in the digital activism of the justice for George Floyd social movement that significantly contributed to building a cultural imprint of the movement in public discourse. The greater rhetorical-cultural narrative of the hashtag #GeorgeFloyd, transcended literal justice for George Floyd, and became a metaphor for

the fight to end global institutionalized systemic racism, racial inequality, police violence, and a rallying cry for the implementation of social justice and social change—a tipping point.

In his *New York Times* Best Seller, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, author Malcolm Gladwell describes a tipping point as a viral epidemic; it's contagious, a little thing that can have a big effect, and instead of gradual change, it happens in singular dramatic swoop (Gladwell 2000, 7, 9). Within 5 months after the murder of George Floyd, George Floyd protests occurred in over 70 countries (Kishi and Jones 2020; Moody-Ramirez, Tait, and Bland 2021, 374), with approximately 15-26 million protestors in the United States alone (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020; Cowart, Blackstone, and Riley 2022, 677). In both the online and real-world spaces, George Floyd's extended embodiment and cries of "I can't breathe" were being globally strategically amplified to posthumously argue the case both for George Floyd's Black humanity and for all marginalized groups, particularly people of color. The combined presentation of the video of the murder of George Floyd, first recorded and uploaded by then 17-year-old Darnella Frazier, as well as additional cell phone video, police bodycam, and security video footage, universally depicted a modern-day digital lynching recorded in real time. The visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd protests, both on an offline, helped shape the rhetorical-cultural narrative of George Floyd's murder and its contextual significance, interpretation, and media framing depiction, as a cultural artifact and its positionality within the larger story of centuries of systemic racism and systemic injustice.

In the absence of empathy, and as social movement backlash, a portion of society watched the imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd protests with disdain, in effect becoming a modern-day *digital lynch mob* on social media, offering support for Derek Chauvin over compassion for George Floyd. Media framing that relied upon preexisting cultural schemas,

memories, and mindsets, opened a cognitive gateway to belief systems that people already embraced, which played a major factor in whether or not people supported justice for George Floyd. Social movement backlash to justice for George Floyd protests were personified by repurposing visual imagery of George Floyd alongside content and context that attacked George Floyd's character and played to preexisting alt-right mindsets and schemas of marginalizing stereotypical tropes of African Americans. Whether in favor of or against the social movement, the collective visual narrative of the justice for George Floyd protests universally depicts a struggle between the ordinary masses with the armed confrontation of authoritarian hegemonic rule in the form of heavy police presence. As a form of systemic backlash, the Minneapolis Police Department attempted to take control of the rhetorical-cultural narrative of the murder of George Floyd by releasing additional police bodycam and security camera footage. However, this tactic backfired, thus, reinforcing the rhetorical-cultural narrative of George Floyd's denial of Black humanity. The additional imagery further supported a rhetorical-cultural narrative that depicted the police as a tyrannical authority terrorizing a very traumatized, confused, scared, and claustrophobic George Floyd, before his amoral extrajudicial murder.

In an arguably post-racial world, Darnella Frazier's original video of the murder of George Floyd provided visual evidence of the American social imaginary—equality. Just as Mamie Till Bradley's choice to share the visual imagery of the mutilated corpse of her abducted, tortured, and lynched teenage son, Emmett Till, made visible the horrors of the denial of Black humanity, so too did the visceral imagery of the digital lynching of George Floyd, recorded in real time, reverberate this same basic denial of human life. In both online and public space and place, the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd protests helped circulate a rhetorical-cultural narrative that demanded universal justice. The juxtaposition of George Floyd

lying face down, helpless, with Derek Chauvin's knee on his neck, gasping, "I can't breathe," offered two distinct rhetorical-cultural messages: one of oppression and subjugation and the other with an agentic cry for the recognition of Black humanity. The imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd protests helped build a transcontinental coalition across all races, genders, identities, and nationalities to impact moral consciousness and demand meaningful change. Visual social semiotics embedded within the imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd protest helped access a rhetorical-cultural narrative that impelled protestors to recognize and advocate for unequivocal equality.

Upon an analysis of specific imagery emerging from the George Floyd protests and applying a close reading of a select piece of imagery, which I call "BLM Cologne, Germany," across the ideological news media and social media sites spectrum, most of the imagery universally depicted the rhetorical-cultural narrative of the George Floyd protests as massive and highly diverse. The "BLM Cologne, Germany" image appeared in +50% of the images on the news media sites that I analyzed across the entire ideological spectrum. As a member of the human race, the rhetorical-cultural narrative of the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd protests was that George Floyd's life mattered. The visuality of the diversity, collective ēthe of identities, and transcontinental nature of the protest, offered a social semiotic rhetorical-cultural argument for universal norms for morality and basic human compassion. Many were able to gather on one accord that humanity is a fundamental right that should be offered to every human. There is strength in numbers. The global upswell of support for justice for George Floyd helped set the tone and the atmosphere for which Derek Chauvin was ultimately found guilty of the murder of George Floyd.

The perception of meaningful change realized or not, feeds fear and fuels social movement backlash. The calls for equity and equality became dog whistles in alt-right enclaves interpreting this goal, as a denial of rights for white Americans. After a turbulent year of protest and momentous diverse global support for justice for George Floyd, ergo Black Lives Matter, the Capitol Riot was counter-social movement backlash in direct response to a world coalescing around justice for George Floyd and the equal inclusion of others—non-whites. Change doesn't happen overnight, and when change does occur, there will be people who will still fight to wind the clock back to a time where they perceived white rights as substantially greater and the inclusion of others [non-whites] as lesser. The parable of the protests of George Floyd is the physical manifestation of the notion that there is no justice if it is only for “just us.”

Rhetorical Counterstory and Visual Imagery

My dissertation research aimed to investigate the role rhetorical counterstory played in the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd social movement. Using RSTA, this was explored through visual social semiotic analysis and rhetorical embodiment as a tactic of critical race counterstory. Critical race counterstory was key in sharing both the posthumous embodied *ēthe* of George Floyd, as well as the participatory protest personal stories in social media which offered context and commentary for justice for George Floyd. The traditional hegemonic and national narrative and race relations in the United States are steeped in a mired past, clouded with systemic racism and injustice embedded both in, and before, the origination of the constitution and our national identity. As counterpublic, critical race counterstory, and counternarrative, the imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd protests harnessed visual social semiotics to rhetorically reframe a voyeuristic modern-day digital lynching from an

authoritarian metaphor to know your place, to a universal transcontinental rhetorical-cultural demand for social justice and social change. Through the distributed networked public on social media platforms, such as Twitter, hashtag activism was utilized as an agency amplification tool through visual social semiotics to spread and reinforce a rhetorical-cultural narrative that accurately portrayed Derek Chauvin as the perpetrator, encroaching upon George Floyd's human rights, and George Floyd as an equal human being worthy of justice.

Specifically, the rhetorical critical race counterstory offered by the justice for George Floyd protests was in direct contrast with the official narrative of the Minneapolis Police department which initially sought to describe the murder of George Floyd as a routine police encounter and death by medical incident. Without the video from Daniella Frazier, as well as a host of other audiovisual evidence that emerged, one cannot be certain that Derek Chauvin would have ever been found guilty, indicted, or even charged. Derek Chauvin's nonchalant demeanor during the digital lynching of George Floyd; in front of public witnesses and a minor, was a distant echo of the collective public memory of lynchings past, that contributed to the situational exigence to recognize the murder of George Floyd, as a universal metaphor for abuses of the state against the people. The critical race counterstory of the justice for George Floyd protests, as a social movement, altered the internal optics of systemic racism, injustice, and police violence, thus causing institutions to look inward and reexamine their real-world cultural practices. Black humanity suddenly became an institutional cultural priority. A pivot from prioritizing white, male, heteronormative dominance, frightened populists and stirred up the alt-right white grievances of those who perceived progress as a punitive diminishment of white power. Like the rhetorical-cultural visual social semiotics and critical race counterstory of the corpse of Emmett Till, which reversed the rhetorical-cultural messaging of lynching for white

power to an argument for Black humanity, so did the rhetorical-cultural messaging of visual social semiotics of the video of the murder of George Floyd. As rhetorical counterstory leveraged through digital activism, Derek Chauvin's wanton indifference to human life weakened the rhetoric-cultural support for white dominance, and emboldened, enacted, and empowered equity and equality.

The indexicality of hashtags, such as #GeorgeFloyd and #JusticeForGeorgeFloyd, created digital space and place for an enclave counterpublic to form and breathe life into both visual social semiotic and textual discourse for rhetorical counterstory and rhetorical-cultural narrative that supported justice for George Floyd. In terms of numerical outreach, the sphere of social media, such as Black Twitter, now occupies a space comparable to that once held by the Black church and the Black press for information, impact, and influence. The publicity aspects of counterpublic discourse create a perfect marriage with digital activism for rhetorical counterstory to be amplified on the distributed networks of social media platforms. Counterpublics engaged in the discourse of marginalized groups do not have to be comprised solely of members of a marginalized group but can be comprised of any advocate or supporter of the counterpublic discourse. The broad spectrum of diverse identities participating in justice for George Floyd protests, in both the digital and physical world, brought not only personalized context from marginalized groups, but also personalized advocate context and contribution to the rhetorical counterstories. The critical contribution of participatory protest from both people of color, and not of color, contributed to the explosive virality of the justice for George Floyd protests which took the movement global, both on and offline.

The rhetorical counterstory of the justice for George Floyd protests transcended the tale of a Black man versus the Minneapolis Police Department; it resonated amongst many cultures,

with the story of oppressed Black Americans, as metaphor for ‘the people’ versus the abuses of power by the hegemonic authority. It is a story for which many can relate and find common moral ground. Moving from observer to protagonist, people were able to see themselves in the George Floyd counternarrative, battling a system who wishes to subjugate its subjects. The iconic visual imagery of the Civil Rights era provided the rhetorical counterstory moral catapult to make visible the invisible stench of racism in the Jim Crow south. In the same manner, the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd protests thrust moral consciousness into the harsh reality that the abuse of police power still persists, particularly in interactions with people of color.

In the age of Trumpism, populism, nationalism, and otherism, Donald Trump, who held the highest office in the land, trumpeted heavy-handed rhetorical-cultural rhetoric against non-whites in America. Alt-right social movement backlash against justice for George Floyd protests was literally trumpeted from the Trump bully pulpit of the Oval Office—the highest office in the land. Authoritarian Trumpism created the need for counterpublic and counterstory pushback from marginalized groups. The digital lynching of George Floyd occurred in the center of these dark days of a rhetorical-cultural perfect storm. Amidst the literal roadblock of possible death-by-coronavirus, people still globally took to the streets to rally behind #GeorgeFloyd, which was the metaphoric rhetorical counterstory to protest against a growing global overreach of authoritarian rhetoric and rule. Most poetically, it was the split-second reaction of a 17-year-old girl, Darnella Frazier, which ignited a global moral revolution. It starts with just one person, and that any *one*, can make a difference.

Rhetorical Counterstory, Rhetorical-Cultural Memory, and Visual Imagery

My dissertation research aimed to investigate the relationship between rhetorical counterstory and rhetorical-cultural memory emerging from digital activism and how people responded to the visual imagery of the justice for George Floyd social movement. Using RSTA, this was explored through rhetorical-cultural memory, rhetorical counterstory, and visual social semiotic analysis. The rhetorical-cultural memory of the African American community has been able to retain the collective public memory of the traumatic histories of racism, systemic injustice, and abuses of power from representatives of the authority. Through visual social semiotics, the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd protest was able to capture these rhetorical-cultural memories, as well as leverage them in the form of visual rhetorical counterstory, as anti-racist and anti-systemic injustice rhetoric. The visual social semiotic rhetorical-cultural collective trauma and public memory of lynchings past and digital lynchings present, offer agency and inspiration for future generations to continue to add their own voice in the form of personal rhetorical counterstory narratives to social movements, in order to continue the fight for justice and equality for all.

Today, George Floyd Square, the corner of 38th and Chicago ([see image 19](#)), embodies both a virtual and physical visual and social semiotic place and space of memorial and commemoration of the rhetorical-cultural narrative of George Floyd. It is place of national cultural identity, signifying a collective unification of the human struggle for equity and equality. The circulation of visual imagery throughout the George Floyd protests in digital space builds both living and future archives of the collective rhetorical-cultural public memory. The commemoration in both the physical and online space and place of George Floyd Square contributes to the preservation of critical collective public memory and national cultural heritage.

Specifically, sharing and circulating digital visual social semiotic participatory protest counterstories within the justice for George Floyd protests, as social movement, strategically functioned as rhetorical-cultural tactics. Vernacular memory, remembrance, and commemoration were utilized as rhetoric to advance the aims of justice for George Floyd protests, as well as preserve the collective cultural memory narrative for future generations. If one person has no justice, then no person has justice.

The rhetorical-cultural narrative of the justice for George Floyd protests functioned as a counter-memory narrative in direct opposition to the traditional hegemonic memory narrative of the Minneapolis Police Department, functioning as an extension of the authority in society. Similar to an audience's ability to identify with the protagonist in a movie, digital collective public memory, as a counterpublic in digital space, was able to transcend transcontinental space and place to offer a broader coalition for racial justice and personal memory assemblage to interpret the rhetorical-cultural narrative of George Floyd. It should be noted, however, that alt-right backlash to the Justice for George Floyd movement was unable to find universal moral common ground. George Floyd's extended embodiment continues to exist through the collective cultural memory and critical race counterstory that was rhetorically argued by justice for George Floyd activists and that Black lives do matter. Emerging smartphone camera technology, in concert with the indexicality of digital activism on social media, for visual and textual counterpublic discourse, contributed to the expedience of explosive virality of #GeorgeFloyd, as a transcontinental social movement, cementing a place in the global collective cultural memories of world citizens, as rhetorical-cultural memory of shared cultural phenomenon. As a media framing freeze frame of collective trauma and collective public memory, the imagery emerging

from the justice for George Floyd protests in digital space offered commemoration, remembrance, and the preservation of shared histories as a living archive.

With great irony, both the justice for George Floyd protests and requisite alt-right social movement backlash accomplished the same thing—collective cultural public memory and remembrance of George Floyd. The visual imagery from the video of the murder of George Floyd functions as iconic imagery collective action frames for the rhetorical-cultural memory and rhetorical counterstory of a modern-day digital lynching. The collective cultural memory rhetorically framed as counterstory in the “BLM Cologne, Germany” image frames the justice for George Floyd protests, as a diverse transcontinental tipping point for moral consciousness ([see image 16](#)). Despite massive intercultural support for justice for George Floyd, not all wanted, nor believed George Floyd should have justice. Populism, otherism, and fear of perceived change are an unfortunate counterreaction to social movements. Digital activism is not a magical solution, but a tool for a lower barrier of entry to affect change, influence collective cultural narratives, and preserve rhetorical-cultural memory narratives for future generations. Not all change is possible in our present, but social movement momentum can be preserved through collective public memory to make change possible for future generations.

Broad Conclusions and Implications

My dissertation research aimed to investigate the implication of digitality as a rhetorical social semiotic tactic in the visual imagery of the justice for George Floyd social movement. Using RSTA, through visual social semiotic analysis and critical technocultural discourse analysis, I now offer my final conclusions. In addition to this written presentation, my dissertation research has created the following additional research outputs: 1) a documentary

short film, based upon the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd protests that addresses *ten strategic activist propositions for the preservation of the cultural narrative, history, and memory of social movements* ([see image 23](#)); 2) a visual analysis relating the justice for George Floyd protests to the Capitol Riot ([see image 21](#)); 3) a “Still I Rise” JavaScript interactive poetry remix ([see image 22](#)); and 4) a social justice and social change interactive experience ([see figures 3-4](#)).

In different media outlets and social media discourse, the cultural narratives in the visual imagery emerging from the justice for George Floyd protest were rhetorically framed as massive and transcontinental, regardless of additional context and commentary. The massive size of the protests demanded rhetorical cultural response for the traditional news media, formal institutions, the collective general public, and alt-right countercultural social movement backlash. Although niche commentary had some divergence, the protest was universally depicted as massive. Rhetorical counterstory within the visual imagery the justice for George Floyd protests played the role of controlling the autonomous narrative of the social movement from the inside. Visual participatory protest offered personal counterstories, as context which helped rhetorically shape the narrative of the murder of George Floyd, as the story of the abuse of power which translated universally throughout many cultures.

The rhetorical counterstory which helped the visual imagery of the justice for George Floyd protests to achieve expedient digital virality on social medium platforms, through the indexicality of hashtags and keywords, such as #GeorgeFloyd, #JusticeForGeorgeFloyd, #BlackLivesMatter, and #DefundThePolice, accessed the previous visual social semiotic public memory narratives of collective trauma, as well as established new rhetorical-cultural memories to inform and inspire future generations of activists, rooted in social justice and social change,

particularly in matters involving people of color. The study of visual imagery does exist but does not have the same size canon of literature as other disciplines. In addition, by definition, emerging technologies are always emerging, thus robust research into these technologies always takes time. The visual imagery emerging from the digital activism of social movements needs further exploration through academic research and scholarship. The visuality of digital technologies has brought us to a paradigm shift in the agency of social movements, as exhibited through social movements propelled through social media networks, such as the Arab Spring and Justice for George Floyd. My dissertation research contributes to the gap in research of the visual imagery of social movements, especially those fueled and empowered by rhetorical-cultural visual social semiotic digital activism. My dissertation research also contributes to the gap in research in the study of the visual imagery in social movements emerging from digital activism through the creation of my rhetorical-semiotic-technocultural analysis.

RSTA adapts the research methodologies of 1) critical race counterstory; through rhetorical-cultural analysis, RSTA also adapts 2) rhetorical-cultural memory, 3) critical technocultural discourse analysis, and 4) visual social semiotic analysis. By utilizing RSTA, my dissertation embraces transdisciplinary scholarship, rooted in the digital humanities, that engages and expands the theories of counterpublics, critical race counterstory, counternarratives, rhetorical-cultural narratives, rhetorical-cultural memory, the Black public sphere, visual social semiotics, hashtag activism, and media framing and schemas, into the study of the visual imagery of social movements, emerging from digital activism. Through my *ten strategic activist propositions for the preservation of the cultural narrative, history, and memory of social movements*, which are introduced in my short film documentary, I offer real world applications

based upon my research into the visual imagery emerging from the digital activism of social movements ([see image 23](#)).

Digitality, Rhetorical Tactics, and Social Movements

Digitality, living in a world influenced by digital culture, has become near ubiquitous (Giannini and Bowen 2022, 192, 208) whereas emerging technologies can inform, influence, and impact almost any person, place, or process in the physical world. Jeffrey Juris argues that “Digitality, or the way social, cultural, and political life is increasingly organized through digital networks, is a critical feature of the contemporary globalization” (Juris 2012, 438). Like writing, digitality is nearing the point where it will no longer come to top of mind to the general public, as a technology, but rather as a given feature of modernity (Hess 2017, 6–7). The question of what it means to be human and undergo the human experience is rapidly transforming (Giannini and Bowen 2022, 203). Jason Luger and Loretta Lees argue in a ‘post-2020’ universe that “digitality and virtuality...offer real alternative and even fabricated worlds which demand new definitions, understanding, and conceptions of what an urban public space looks like, feels like, makes possible” (Luger and Lees 2022, 799). Digitality in the modern world likens itself to technological embodiment. Emerging technologies are able to offer agency and extend both our cognition and embodiment. Digitality has impacted rhetorical tactics and strategies in an algorithm driven technology space and place to transform into new strategic configurations (Hess 2017, 5). The digitality of public space and place is what allowed the justice for George Floyd movement to develop expanding networked counterpublics to engage in movement discourse and offer collective cultural counternarratives to the official hegemonic narrative of the Minneapolis Police Department.

The digitality of memory in the heritage and cultural space affords “the potential of creating ever greater immediacy and ‘memorial truth’” (Erl and Rigney 2009, 9). The digitality of memory, especially through the sharing of visual media on social media platforms, affords another layer of mnemonic and new meanings to memory that transcends time and space (Merrill, Keightley, and Daphi 2020, 9). The digitality of memory has now become seamless with the social remembrance of social movements, as well as the greater cultural narratives, memories, and histories (Eyerman 2016, 83; Reading 2020, 11). In their attempt to define the official public memory interpretation of the video of the murder of George Floyd, the Minneapolis Police Department’s release of additional bodycam and security camera footage of their interaction with George Floyd before the murder, expanded the universe and the meaning of the moments of George Floyd’s murder, beyond the original video shot by Darnella Frazier. The additional footage provided a virtual representation of events, before the murder of George Floyd, which were previously inaccessible to the public. On social media, this virtual space provided an expanded experience, through the nature of digitality, of a much larger space and place. This digitalized expansion failed to wholly support the police narrative and in turn arguably supported the counternarratives of systemic racism, abuse of power, and police violence.

For archival preservation, digitality affords a social movement the indefinite ephemerality of messaging and memory through emerging technologies designed to endure for the ages (Chun 2008, 171; Clarke 2016, 19). The George Floyd protests helped maintain justice for George Floyd, systemic racism, and police violence, as a continuous critical cultural pressure point, until former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin’s arrest, indictment, conviction, and sentencing. The digitality of the movement, in concert with real world protest, moved the

media to frame and set the agenda of what was considered important national public discourse surrounding institutionalized systemic racism and police violence. Even backlash counter-movements of contrarian opinion still kept systemic racism and police violence on the docket for public discourse, whether they believed it to be fact or fallacy.

Proponents of digitality laud its connective, information-processing, and sensory prowess. However, naysayers of digitality argue that we are analog creatures and that digitality detaches us from nature, reality, and the physical world (Hassan 2020, 198). It would require magical thinking to believe that if we removed the interconnectivities and information-gathering from digitality, that it would be equally replaced with lesser analog options, simply because the more advanced technological options do not exist. Hassan's anti-digitality argument also commands that digitality is limited to corporate commodity-driven techno-capitalism and serves no other organic purpose (Hassan 2020, 208). Bill McKibben suggests that the unlimited information available through digitality yields information overload, beyond human comprehension, creating confusion instead of clarity (Hassan 2020, 202; McKibben 1992, 9). There is some merit to that argument when it comes to obfuscation of truth on the internet and social media platforms. However, post-truth and misinformation is not a new invention. Technology does not only amplify negative messaging; it amplifies all messaging. I will agree with Hassan that there is value in the analog world of nature, but it is not entirely lost at the expense of the extended and digital embodiment of digitality. The digitality of the circulation of visual imagery of the murder of George Floyd solidified the murder of George Floyd as an undeniable event that transpired. However, the meaning, interpretation, and significance, of the murder of George Floyd was hotly debated, but now a matter of settled law; Derek Chauvin was convicted of murder.

Digitality has transformed the meaning and materiality of visual imagery in a digital universe (Thompson 2010, 351). Imagery in the digital multiverse, such as social media platforms, versus the old analog physical world, extend the boundaries of visual social semiotic meaning through various amalgamations, such as memes and social media network site sharing, which can connote new meanings, contrary to the original meaning of a digital image, or invoke an entirely new meaning, when inserted into a new context. Iconic images are metaphors that draw upon greater visual social semiotic connoted narratives (Thompson 2010, 352). However, in digital space and place, an icon can transmogrify into new connoted meanings, depending on how the iconic image is used and in what contexts. Thompson argues that “once an icon enters the digital realm...the icon evolves into an entity, an existential phenomenon posited permanently in digitality...it becomes iconic” (Thompson 2010, 354). Digitality offers an archival opportunity for an iconic image to project its aura and power into the distant future (Thompson 2010, 359). However, that archived digital memory of meaning is only but a version of meaning because the icon that must compete against additional digital meanings of the icon which will also be projected into the future. Digitality can preserve a version of meaning from an iconic image from a social movement but cannot, with utmost certainty, preserve the icon’s aura in the distant future. In the case of the iconic imagery circulating from both the justice for George Floyd and backlash movements, multiple meanings of the iconic imagery may still subsist in different cultural enclaves. However, with the conviction of Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd, the official public memory, history, and cultural narrative of the story of George Floyd is that he was in fact murdered.

Combatting Social Movement Backlash

Backlash to social movements, based upon identity and culture, and particularly those focused upon African Americans, have misappropriated the term “woke” to symbolize a fanatical negative state of consciousness. However, the term “stay woke,” in its original form, is attributed to Bluesman, Huddie “Lead Belly” Leadbetter (Romano 2020). In his 1938 live recording of “Scottsboro Boys,” a protest song for nine African American teens in Scottsboro, Alabama, who were wrongly convicted of raping two white women and sentenced to death in 1931. However, in 1932, the Supreme Court overturned their convictions, via Powell versus the State of Alabama. Having had the opportunity to meet the Scottsboro Boys, at the conclusion of Lead Belly’s live recording, he mentioned that he told the boys, “...so I advise everybody, be a little careful when they go along through there—best stay woke, keep their eyes open.” When Lead Belly says “there,” he is literally referring to Alabama. However, Alabama carries with it the greater social semiotic meaning of anywhere in the Jim Crow south, or where racism and white supremacy runs rampant. In Lead Belly’s own words, staying woke is staying aware and explicitly being careful. Woke means to be aware and to be careful in situations and locations that are known to be dangerous, especially for African Americans. Lead Belly’s charge to stay aware is the first “A” in my five “A’s” for activists to strategically utilize true power: 1) gain awareness, 2) plan an approach, 3) get access, 4) recruit allies, and 5) take action (Odom 2019). Backlash specifically attacks the things that social movements need to accomplish to fully realize the aims of the movement. Staying work, or staying aware and careful, is exactly what backlash movements do not want activists to achieve.

The digitality of emerging technologies emboldens the rhetorical agency of social movements, while at the same time adding fuel to the fire of backlash, against those very same

movements (Cowan 2021, 184). In July 2020, President Donald Trump described New York City's painting of the words "Black Lives Matter" on Fifth Avenue, as a "symbol of hate" (M. Cohen 2020; Moody-Ramirez, Tait, and Bland 2021, 380). By September 2020, backlash against Black Lives Matter had presumably contributed to support for the movement dropping from 67% in June to 55%, among all adults in the United States, but had risen to 86% with African Americans (Moody-Ramirez, Tait, and Bland 2021, 380; Thomas and Horowitz 2020). Susan Faludi encourages everyone from artists to academics to stay informed about "reactionary backlash" to social movements (Faludi et al. 2020, 337). Faludi recommends that intellectuals should make their language accessible to mass media audiences. Donald Trump's incessant humiliation tactics of strong women is a prime example of modern-day backlash to the feminist social movement.

Although not entirely the same, some parallels may be drawn between the backlash of the feminist movement and any social movement based upon race or identity, such as the Black Lives Matter movement. As women have made more advances, some men have become less secure, believing that for women to gain more equality, means that men must lose something (339). Faludi defines the best defense against backlash as busting myths (341–42). Combat backlash opinions and personal feelings with factual data and statistics. Build bridges across all genders, identities, races, and cultures. Do not just ask for support, also provide support for other groups. Norris and Inglehart stress learning to understand populist movements in order to combat social movement backlash (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 461–65). Take action. Protest, challenge laws in court, lobby Congress, utilize social media, and show up in full force for elections. Reduce economic inequality in all demographics which will cut fuel to the fire of backlash. Stay

conscious of cultural anxieties to progressive change and set policies that embody an all-encompassing spirit of balance and fairness.

Within a landscape of BLM backlash, the George Floyd Policing Act never passed in the Senate. Furthermore, President Joe Biden's budget pledged to increase funding for the police by an additional \$13 billion to hire more police officers (McCoy 2022). Backlash strikes back hardest, not at the pinnacle of change, but rather through the phobia of the perception of progressive change. Counter-institutions don't create mass uprisings, but they do offer the support, organization, and leadership for those on the ground. Counter-institutions and grassroots organizations need to seize the day in moments of social uprisings and take the reins to guide the social movement to achieve clear, distinct, and meaningful impact, change, and policy implementation. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor and Marry Frances Berry argue that social movements should be able to survive beyond key moments of social unrest (in McCoy 2022). The organization and leadership that emerges from protests should be used to expand social movement networks and maintain social movement rhetorical-cultural narrative, rhetorical-cultural memory, and history to withstand the test of time. The fusion of participatory protest democracy at the grassroots level, with organized counter-institutions, must work in concert for long-term transformative impact that can overcome social movement backlash.

Digital Cultural Memory

Living and Cultural Memory

A living archive is a broad concept that can be loosely characterized as a fluid and flexible curated collection of cultural materials of contemporary memories from key contributors and participants, while the events and memories are still in flux and being actively contested and created (Antoun 2012; Rhodes 2013, 2–5; Rollason-Cass and Reed 2015, 243). Stuart Hall argued that “Archives are not inert historical collections. They always stand in an active, dialogic, relation to the questions which the present puts to the past” (Chidgey 2020, 227–28; Hall 2001, 92). The first-person account of the autobiographical memory of a person or protestor is still subject to the cultural and greater social semiotic meanings of that person’s lived experiences, thus making a personal living memory a mediated memory (A. Assmann 2011, 6; Chidgey 2020, 227). Both living memory and cultural memory are mediated. Cultural memory spans the collections of media, monuments, memorials, texts, practices, archives, etcetera. Crownshaw extends Assmann’s take on cultural memory to “cultures of memory...embedded in social networks” instead of limiting memory institutions, people, places, or objects (Crownshaw 2011, 1–2; Meehan 2022, 430). Transcultural memory traverses cultures and affects both the sender and receiver of a memory. The digitization of collective memory has offered expansive new affordances to collective memory, especially through the internet (J. Assmann 1995; Yasseri, Gildersleve, and David 2022, 10). Digital museum objects offer a place where people and culture can both engage with the object and interact with other people and cultures about the meaning of the object.

Web Archives

“Memory institutions,” such as museums and libraries, are designed for the long-term preservation cultural memory, history, and narrative for future generations (De Kosnik 2016, 26; (Holcomb 2000); Pessach 2008, 73). Digital museum objects are already commonplace within the cultural sector (Meehan 2022, 417). However, with the advent of emerging technologies, albeit “professional preservationists” or “amateur cultural producers,” (De Kosnik 2016, 26) “a whole new economy of social memory has emerged” (Paschalidis 2008, 4). In regards to mass media cultural preservation, Abigail De Kosnik defines digital cultural memory, as both “actual and metaphorical archives” (De Kosnik 2016, 21). It may include memory-making outside of formal institutions, such as appropriations, remixes, and transformative work,” as well as archives maintained by ordinary citizens (De Kosnik 2016, 11). Hence, the preservation of cultural memory is not limited to a rote retelling of events; it can be artistic and performative in nature (De Kosnik 2016, 60). This style of the preservation of digital cultural memory De Kosnik regards as *rogue archives*.

In 1996, a non-profit group called Internet Archive, created a web archive—aka the *Wayback Machine*—with a mission to preserve digital cultural memory (Chun 2008, 168–69; De Kosnik 2016, 48–49). The Wayback Machine’s technology works similar to the algorithm spiders and robots of search engines that crawl the internet, like Google search, in order to create a backup of most web pages. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram became the de facto cultural archives of the Justice for George Floyd social movement. However, as the movement grew at exponential pace and size, riots began to emerge, and police began to target protest leaders for retribution, many social media platforms scrubbed some of the posts related to George Floyd out of fear. This speaks to importance of social

movements being able to control both the technology and the narrative for the preservation of the digital cultural memory of a social movement. In similar fashion to the Wayback Machine, and somewhat in response to the loss of public access to historical posts on social media platforms, in February of 2023, the Library of Congress (Zongker 2023) created a web archive partial collection of websites that documents the historical narrative of events and cultural significance of national events happening at the time of the Justice for George Floyd social movement from June 29, 2020 through August 7, 2020 (“Protests Against Racism Web Archive” 2023).¹³

In a post-truth world, it is essential for social movements to take charge of the preservation of their own rhetorical-cultural narrative, rhetorical-cultural memory, and form strategies, such as creating digital cultural memory, through web archiving (Schafer and Winters 2021, 130). Without social movement participation, there’s no guarantee that hegemonic memory institutions will retain the social movements core values or include them in the cultural transmission of history for future generations, at all. For example, in November of 2013, the Conservative party in the UK deleted over 10 years of speeches from their website and blocked access to the Internet Archive Wayback Machine. Social movements must participate in the preservation of their own digital cultural memory, in order to ensure the good governance of the movement’s rhetorical-cultural narrative, rhetorical-cultural memory, and history. In 2009, the United Nations released a document, in regard to the 8 guiding principles for “good governance,” as institutional literature, which may be applied to concept of web archiving and digital cultural

13. “Protests Against Racism Web Archive.” *Library of Congress*. June 29 – August 7, 2023. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/protests-against-racism-web-archive/about-this-collection/>.

memory. Good governance must be: 1) participatory, 2) consensus oriented, 3) accountable, 4) transparent, 5) responsive, 6) effective and efficient, 7) equitable and inclusive, and 8) follow the rule of law (Schafer and Winters 2021, 135; UN.ESCAP 2009, 1).

The rogue archive approach to digital cultural memory can be extended to social movements and participatory democracy. At the grassroots level, individual protestors and participants in a social movement can contribute to the preservation of social movement rhetorical-cultural narrative, rhetorical-cultural memory, and history in a similar fashion by utilizing emerging digital media technologies to preserve the digital cultural memory, narrative, and history of a social movement. The strength of a movement's digital cultural memory, narrative, and history directly influences the long-term power, impact, and ability to influence political change (Eubanks 2011, 83). Langdon Winner argues that technological artifacts wield power and influence for the resolution of power struggles and political questions (Winner 1977, 19). Ultimately, an informative, influential, and impactful archive is never complete. It is always growing. Specifically, Jacques Derrida wrote, "The archive is never closed. It opens out to the future" (De Kosnik 2016, 35; Derrida and Prenowitz 1995, 45). Without long-lasting digital cultural memory, phenomena is in danger of disappearing from the cultural narrative, memory, and historical record, before society has had the opportunity to fully understand these moments in time (De Kosnik 2016, 30; Lovink 2011, 8). Cultural memory is essential to the cultivation and preservation of a "society's self-image" (J. Assmann 1995, 132).

Moral Remembrance

Centered upon human rights and an established set of protocols for remembrance, *moral remembrance* has become a growing global trend (David 2020; Yasseri, Gildersleve, and David

2022, 7). The ultimate goal of moral remembrance is for nations to confront and take accountability for human rights abuses (Yasseri, Gildersleve, and David 2022, 8). Rooted in the guiding principles of human rights, moral remembrance centers itself in justice by encouraging people to engage with the past out of a sense of civic responsibility. Moral remembrance also seeks to get established institutions to implement formal policies and procedures for remembrance with the goal of preventing future human rights abuses, by educating the public and policy makers, through the ethics of remembrance (David 2017). With a hegemonic emphasis on “the proper way to remember,” this technocratic authoritarian standardization leaves much to be desired, especially in terms of the autonomous cultural narrative, memory, and history of a social movement. The preservation of a social movement’s history, memory, and narrative should not be left to the hands of government or formal memory institutions, but must rather be platformed, through autonomous memory-making by the people, through the guidance of formal protest leadership.

The global human rights moral remembrance agenda is centered upon three pillars (Mutua 2001, 1–3): “1) the necessity to collectively face a troubled past, 2) a collective duty to remember human rights abuses, and 3) a victim-centered approach that puts victims at the hearts of memorialization efforts” (Yasseri, Gildersleve, and David 2022, 7). Execution of effort is more important than the intent of ideas, which is why it is important that social movements take control of the movement’s preservation of memory. The use of the internet in moral remembrance and the preservation of cultural memory, overall has been regarded as a fifth wave of memory history (Novick 2000, 267–68; Yasseri, Gildersleve, and David 2022, 9), although naysayers challenge whether virtual remembrance can match the collective community making of face-to-face interactions. The authentic cultural narrative, memory, and history of justice for

George Floyd protests, resulted in both online and physical world collective memory communities and civic action which swept the world globally and contributed to hegemonic accountability and a legal conviction of former Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin, for the murder of George Floyd. Social media platforms and the rhetorical agency of hashtag activism on Twitter, has opened the gateway for participatory mnemonic collective memory communities, a form of collective memory agency once reserved for the institutionalized elite (Yasseri, Gildersleve, and David 2022, 9).

Virtual Heritage Sites

The virtual recreation of cultural artifacts and heritage sites (Ferreira 2012, 69) is a form digital cultural memory. Heritage sites provide an ordered and mediated form of collective remembrance (Johnson 2002, 294). These *lieux de memoire* [sites of memory] become cultural and historical landmarks for places of remembrance (Nora 1989, 7; Yasseri, Gildersleve, and David 2022, 10). Heritage [sites] offer a cultural tool to understand events from the past, in the present, through engagement and remembrance (Smith 2006, 44). Whereas the culture of the dominant ideology typically shapes what is or isn't a site of memory (Ferreira 2012, 69), it becomes even more critical for a social movement to define its own cultural narrative, memory, and sites of remembrances and their meaning, as cultural artifacts. George Floyd Square ([see image 19](#)) in Minneapolis, the location where Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd, is an example of a hegemonic institution—the city of Minneapolis—engaging in social responsibility, thus labeling the site of the George Floyd's murder as a place of remembrance, both in the physical world in a virtual heritage online site.



Image 19. Bell, Brandon. “StoryMap of George Floyd’s Square at 38th and Chicago. Background image via Getty Images.” *Minneapolis.org*. 2022. <https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/9097f40cf1334874b7c8a04129a08352/gfs-storymap-mpnews/index.html>.

Virtual Reality Experiences

In his TED Talk, developer Chris Milk foresaw the power of virtual reality (VR) to become the “ultimate empathy machine” (Maraffi 2022, 15; Milk 2015). Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed utilizes empathy as a tool to build a connection between the spectator and the protagonist of a theatrical performance (Boal 1985, 181). Based upon Aristotelian tragedy, Boal flipped the script, and through his Forum Theater system, and the power of participatory theater, he used spectators as “spec-actor” protagonists in live performances. With this method, the spectator could embody the experience of the protagonist as character, requiring a higher level of

empathy, than as passive audience member could experience (Maraffi 2022, 19–20). Through this embodiment, the spec-actor could build “an emotional connection to the ‘ethos’ or struggles of their character (Maraffi 2022, 20). Similarly, VR embodiment, allows the user to “see through another’s eyes” (Wiederhold 2020, 725) and engage in embodied “perspective-taking” (Thériault et al. 2021, 2057). Through embodiment, studies have shown that VR players with a non-stereotypical Black avatar, working in cooperation with other Black non-playable characters (NPC), have reduced racial bias (Patané et al. 2020, 10) and can be influenced in the real world—the *Proteus effect*—by their VR embodiment of their Black character (Bertrand et al. 2018, 11).

Derek Ham’s Oculus Rift VR interactive experience, *I Am A Man*, puts VR embodiment for social movements into practice by pairing it with iconic moments from the Civil Rights movement (Ham 2018, 23–24) ([see image 20](#)). Ham’s VR embodiment interactive experience pairs historical photographs and film with voiceover narration from actual Civil Rights protestors.



Image 20. Ham, Derek. "I Am A Man VR Experience." *Vimeo* video, 1:35. January 17, 2018. <https://vimeo.com/251514352>.

The experience begins with the user as spec-actor, embodying the role of a Black Memphis, Tennessee sanitation worker, during a labor strike in 1968 (Maraffi 2022, 23). With narration from an actual 1968 Memphis sanitation worker, the user experiences a series of VR locations and historical events, leading up to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. The game situates the user in the parking lot of the Lorraine Motel, as King stands on the balcony. It fades to black, as the fatal shot rings out. After the assassination, the VR experience allows the user to experience the motel room where King was assassinated, as it looks today at the National Civil Rights Museum, but allows the user to pick up objects in the exhibit, which would not be possible in the real world. The I Am a Man VR interactive experience preserves not just select cultural narratives, memories, and histories for the

Civil Rights movement, but it also preserves part of the physical museum itself, through the extension of digital cultural memory, through the emerging technology of virtual reality.

Blockchain, Non-Fungible Tokens, and Digital Preservation

Blockchain is the decentralized technology used for the framework of the Bitcoin cryptocurrency (Woodall and Ringel 2020, 2201). Blockchain records and verifies blocks of data, then chains together, via a unique identifier, across a distributed network of computers (Woodall and Ringel 2020, 2202). However, when it comes to the preservation of digital cultural memory, it is time to ‘think outside the block’. Although the technology was originally designed as a decentralized ledger for financial transactions, untethered to any financial institution or nation, it does not mean that blockchain usage must be limited to financial transactions. The *social construction of technology* theory argues that social forces are what drives the emergence of new technology (Bijker et al. 2012; Bijker and Law 1992, 78; Klein and Kleinman 2002, 28; Suchman 2007; Winner 2007). Social groups construct and define their own meaning of technology and digital artifacts (Pinch and Bijker 1984, 414). The decentralization of data in blockchain makes it an independent platform, free of any gatekeeper or hegemonic authority, thus providing an egalitarian open market of information (Dodd 2018, 50; Karlstrøm 2014, 26; Woodall and Ringel 2020, 2203) ripe for social vision (Gillespie 2010; Plantin et al. 2018, 302).

The last decade has enjoyed an expansion of blockchain technology for purposes far beyond electronic cryptocurrency (Sanghi 2022). Most notably, blockchain platforms, like Ethereum, have been used to spring forth myriad new decentralized applications, whose purpose is not cryptocurrency. One of the most important new applications, seated upon Ethereum blockchain applications, are *non-fungible tokens* (NFTs). Blockchain code provides a certificate

of ownership for any type digital asset, which could be music, art, film, a game, etc. An NFT offers a blank space for creativity and media, with its own limitation being human imagination. NFT creators are expansively exploring both cultural and economic concepts of meaning and value for an NFT. Fintech consultant Rahul Sanghi argues that, “NFTs are the cultural building blocks of the next iteration of the internet...” (Sanghi 2022).

In April of 2022, Terrence Floyd, the brother of George Floyd, announced that 9,000 digital art NFTs were being created to memorialize George Floyd and to create “initiatives to help communities deal with mental health issues, poverty and social injustice” (Franklin 2022). Proceeds of these NFTs go directly to three charities: the Breonna Taylor Foundation, the John and Lillian Miles Lewis Foundation, and We Are Floyd. The NFTs are being produced in conjunction with Confront Art to inspire the co-creation of other social justice and social change activist artwork, built upon blockchain technology. Non-fungible tokens expand and extend the meaning and configuration of collective cultural meaning and a web archive of digital cultural memory (Sanghi 2022). Through digital artifacts, NFTs extend cultural memory, by offering a canonical cultural truth, in a decentralized distributed-network permanent record. Absent the cultural memory chokehold of hegemonic institutions, the underlying decentralized blockchain technology of Non-fungible tokens extend the possibilities of social movements to preserve the cultural narrative, memory, and history of a movement, in addition to providing optional potential fundraising opportunities.

Interactive Experiences

Academic research strives to create new knowledge. In the digital humanities, the creation of knowledge is frequently targeted at issues of social justice and social change.

However, academics do not have to limit creation to traditional research papers. Through generative artistic scholarship, the academic can merge the creation of knowledge and scholarship through the creation of art, whether it be through code-based poetry, interactive experiences, or a traditional audiovisual journalistic documentary. The interactive portion of my dissertation research, like the documentary, is an enacted extension of examples of generative artistic, activist, academic scholarship for social movements. The interactive experiences include: 1) a StoryMap visualization of an analysis of the online media representation of the visual imagery of the Capitol Riot versus the George Floyd protests ([see image 21](#)); 2) an interactive poetry remix of Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise,” commemorating victims of police violence ([see image 22](#)); and 3) a “Social Justice and Social Change” curatorial-code interactive museum experience for Black Lives Matter versus Blue Lives Matter ([see figures 3-4](#)).

The StoryMap visualization of the analysis of the visual imagery emerging from online social media platforms and new media sites of the Capitol Riot versus the George Floyd protest presents a more pedestrian presentation of research findings that is geared toward academics. It engages with the narrative of the Capitol Riot versus the George Floyd protest and utilizes visual imagery to illuminate findings. The “Still I Rise” JavaScript Interactive Poetry Remix relies upon sight, sound, and touch [clicking and moving the mouse] to interact with the remix both inside and outside of the remix. The user engages with the hyperlinks to other relevant content for the context of racial social justice and social change. Hidden within the code of the remix is a 25-point plan to implement social justice and social change. In the Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter Interactive Experiences, I take the application of artistic generative scholarship and user interactivity to another level. Utilizing sight, sound, touch, and emotion, or the absence of emotion, both Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter interactive experiences are designed for

the user to experience both the emotional attachment and detachment of tragic circumstances of people of color through the perspective of Black and blue.

Visual Analysis of The Justice For George Floyd Protests Versus The Capitol Riot



Image 21. Maturen, Stephen. “Visual Analysis of the Capitol Riot & George Floyd Protests. Background via Getty Images on CNN.com. May 28, 2020.” *StoryMaps.ArcGIS.com*. April 21, 2021. <https://bit.ly/capitol-riot-george-floyd-protests-visual-analysis>.

My motivating curiosity for this visual analysis is defined by my researcher positionality, as one of social justice and social change, through digital activism. However, my goal with this visual analysis, is to provide a window into culture and context ([see image 21](#)). My rhetorical aim is to demonstrate that context creates concept. Through the narrative retelling of the events leading up to and through the Capitol Riot and George Floyd protests, I reveal the point-of-views

from polar opposite cultural viewpoints and how the cultural context changes the visual social semiotic meaning of the same imagery through the vantage point of an alternative concept. I do not believe that this visual analysis alone will change what people believe about the Capitol Riot and George Floyd protests, but it is my goal to use the narrative information visualization for this visual analysis, as a tool to broaden the audience's understanding (Kirk 2019) of why people believe what they believe about the Capitol Riot and George Floyd protests. Perception is reality and everyone's perceptions are unique; thus, peering into reality is no more distinct or precise than peering through a prism, to see what color is on the other side. Culture and context are the prism, and reality is the rainbow of refracted light on the other side.

For the purposes of the visual analysis, an interactive information visualization was created, comprised of two primary components—a timeline of the Capitol Riot and George Floyd protests, in addition to respective interactive maps. Two separate interactive chronological timelines detail the narrative events leading up to the day of the Capitol Riot and the events leading up to the commencement of the George Floyd Protests. Both timelines include key moments that interactively allow the user to examine imagery and the context surrounding the imagery. The interactive maps include key moments for both the Capitol Riot and George Floyd protests, with respective imagery and analysis. The imagery includes a combination of pictures, videos, maps, and other visuals that may have been created surrounding the Capitol Riot and George Floyd protests.

“Still I Rise” JavaScript Interactive Poetry Remix

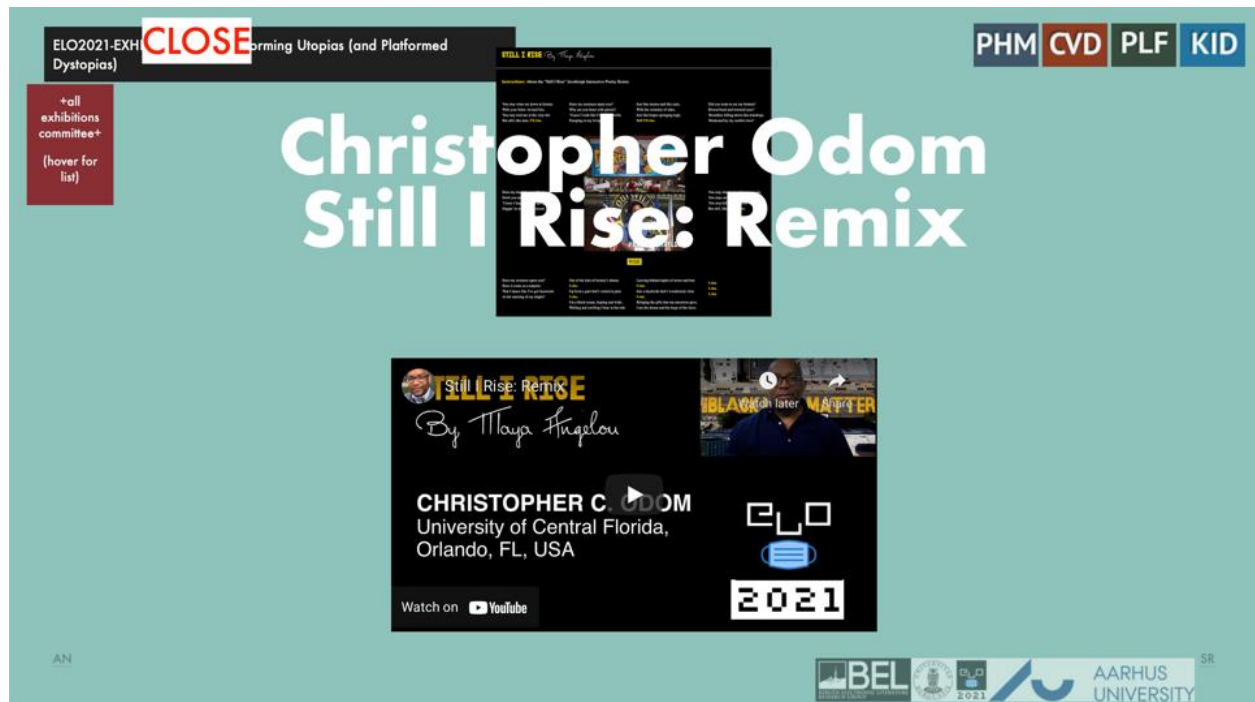


Image 22. Odom, Christopher C. “‘Still I Rise’ JavaScript Interactive Poetry Remix.” *ELO 2021, Platforming Utopias (and Platformed Dystopias)*. May, 2021.
<https://eliterature.org/elo2021/platform/>.

“Still I Rise” is a JavaScript interactive poetry machine remix the blends multiple digital mediums with cultural artifacts of the past and present to weave together a rhetorical and visual social semiotic interactive experience that enlightens society and uplifts the human spirit ([see image 22](#)). From the earliest cave paintings to fireside chats, a fluid representation of story evolved, as an artistic and rhetorical form of expression. Cultural narrative, social semiotics, and rhetoric in electronic literature, offer salient areas for scholarly research. Through multimodality and intertextuality, electronic literature engages other artistic forms of expression, such as video and visual art, and lends voice to exploit the full aesthetics of the digital experience. Code is described as a language, but without being immersed in the world of code, it may not feel like a

language. If code is in fact a language, then it is indeed possible to creatively wax poetic, both on and beneath the screen. Poetry is essentially a message. Whether written or spoken, orality and literacy are tools to convey that message. By that definition, programming, or any tool, is compatible with poetry. This COVID E-Lit interactive exhibition is a multimodal expression and declarative statement for #BlackLivesMatter which embodies the spirit of change, inclusion, and social justice. “The medium is the message.” Experience “Still I Rise: Remix.”

Social Justice & Social Change Interactive Experience

Black Lives Matter. The Black Lives Matter experience consists of four paths which include: (1) Hashtag Activism, (2) Still I Rise, (3) Systemic Racism, and (4) Suspicious Behavior.



Figure 3. Black Lives Matter Interactive Experiences.

Blue Lives Matter. The Blue Lives Matter experience consists of four paths which include: (1) Target and Neutralize, (2) Profiling, (3) Deference, and (4) Stop the Suspect.

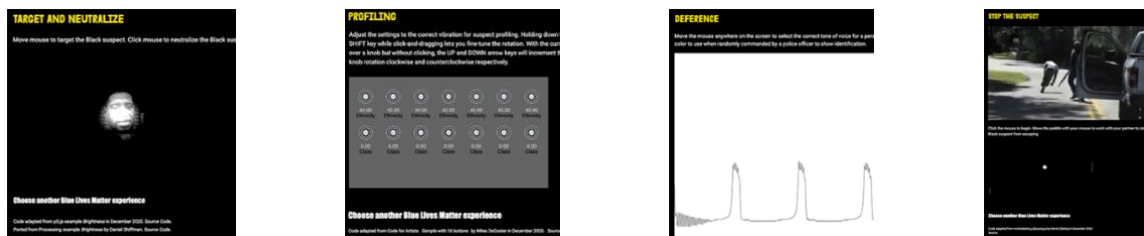


Figure 4. Blue Lives Matter Interactive Experiences.

This social justice and social change interactivity presentation is an interactive audiovisual rhetorical argument for #BlackLivesMatter that employs digital media elements of both *generative* (Kirschenbaum 2009) and *participatory culture* art (Dinkla 1996) ([see figures 3-4](#)). If only we could walk a single day in another person's shoes... We are all the sum of each of our own unique experiences and reality is a perception based upon one's vantage point within one's immediate *cultural narratives* (Nelson 2003, 126) and awareness of the context. Just because you may not have personally killed anyone, does not mean killers do not exist. By the same token, stereotypes, hegemonic marginalizing tropes, systemic racism, and systemic injustice exist, whether or not you are an active participant, unwilling beneficiary, or injustice-denier. Systemic racism and injustice are pervasive and permeate throughout society. This social justice and social change interactive experience is designed as an educational learning tool and a visual rhetorical argument for the #BlackLivesMatter social movement.

This social justice and social change interactivity presentation utilizes computational rhetoric to create a generative and participatory visual argument for the #BlackLivesMatter social movement. As an educational learning tool for digital activism, the interactivity relies upon rhetorical persuasive appeals, for the extended embodiment of the activist to inform, influence, and persuade an audience to digest the ideal of #BlackLivesMatter. By juxtaposing cultural artifacts from actual instances of police violence, upon people of color with mundane and trivial interactive experiences, it becomes a metaphor for the lack of empathy and disconnection that some people have towards police violence, upon people of color and the #BlackLivesMatter social movement. By changing the context that the audience may already have about these cultural artifacts, embedded within each interactive experience, the audience

can be influenced to adopt a new cultural narrative, in relationship to the #BlackLivesMatter movement and the cultural artifacts depicted in each interactive experience. Future work for social justice and social change through interactive experiential learning should be explored with emerging cultural artifacts.

Documentary: Ten Strategic Activist Propositions for the Preservation of the Cultural Narrative, History, and Memory of Social Movements



Image 23. Armond, Jason. “The makeshift memorial and mural outside Cup Foods where George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer on Sunday, May 31, 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Mural painted by Cadex Herrera, Xena Goldman, and Greta McClain. Via the Los Angeles Times and Getty Images.” *Vimeo*, 33:51. March 18, 2022.

<https://vimeo.com/christopherodom/justiceforgeorgefloyd>. PASSWORD: TandT2023.

Throughout the course of my dissertation research, from pragmatic, to innovative, and future-forward thought, strategies emerged to embolden and expand social movements. The preservation of a social movement’s history, memory, and narrative carries with it the same

weight of importance for the future, as it does for the present, while events unfold live in real-time, in both physical and virtual spaces and places. Academic research into counterpublics, counternarratives, and counter-institutions points to the configuration of intellectual thought to advance social justice and social change. More complex forms for rhetoric can be strategically utilized to impact the emotional opinion of those, both for and against a social movement. Every voice counts, as an individual voice, and empowered as the collective voice of the movement. Through emerging technologies, a social movement is limited only by the imaginations of the protestors promoting the movement's voice. Whether a person be an artist, activist, or everyday person, anyone has the ability to contribute to activism through what they do or by getting involved in other formal and informal organizations, whether it be grassroots activist groups, or as in a volunteer, paid, or elected role in local, state, or federal government. Based upon the summation of my research holistically, my documentary addresses some of my *ten strategic activist propositions for the preservation of the cultural narrative, history, and memory of social movements* ([see image 23](#)):

1. Organize online and offline enclaves for counterpublics, counternarratives, and counter-institutions, that may withstand the rhetorical velocity of backlash;
2. Create content for rhetorical listening and extended embodiment;
3. Craft visual stories about culture that provide impact;
4. Engage in citizen photojournalism, creating, and sharing iconic imagery;
5. Use digital technology with social movements to create agency;
6. Build living archives and maintain virtual spaces;
7. Expand archival growth into emerging technologies, like blockchain, by growing with future technologies;

8. Run for office within counter-institutions and hegemonic institutions: e.g. city council, county commissioner, police oversight board, etc.;
9. Empower social movements through participatory democracy via virtual and real-world protest; and
10. Engage social movements through artistic and academic activism.

Closing Remarks

Whether it be longform creative content in the form of documentaries and feature films, audiovisual broadcast news stories, or social media video, both written and audiovisual storytelling has been a constant in my career spanning 30 years in some form of media storytelling. Throughout the course of my dissertation research, I expanded upon my collection of rhetorical artistic tools for storytelling and added artistic generative code-based scholarship to my repertoire. *Texts and Technology* builds upon the scholarship of the past to look towards emerging technologies to solve the problems of the present and the future. As a student of the western storytelling paradigm—the three-act narrative—I embrace story as one of the most powerful forms of communication, persuasion, and enlightenment. Narrative is not limited to a good book, but can also be captured in a painting, poem, or any form of expression. Narrative has the possibility to make social semiotic connections to preexisting stories and mindsets that exist outside of what is immediately denoted in a narrative to what is connoted in the greater lexicon of culture.

Specifically, audiovisual social semiotics has the ability to achieve connections with greater concision and further cultural reach than the written word by itself. As scholars, how we communicate new knowledge, ideas, thoughts, and intellectual discourse does not have to be

limited to a singular form of communication. Intellectual discourse has no limitations in medium or message. The best there ever was, in the form of expression, is not the best there will ever be. Scholars and artists alike, for centuries, have taken advantage of whatever tools were available to them at the time of research, communication, creation, distribution, and discourse. Formulating my dissertation research, as a hybrid collection of a traditional paper, documentary short film ([see image 23](#)), and artistic code-based generative scholarship, presented itself as the perfect vessel to demonstrate and utilize both the impact and value of communication modes of the past, as well as emerging forms of expression of the present, and into the future.

A traditional paper has long-lasting value that stands the test of time. However, artistic expression communicates, resonates, and affects humans, both rationally and emotionally, in a way that a traditional paper usually does not. Artistic audiovisual communication affects people even more differently than written artistic forms of expression. Many written forms of traditional communication were created while some form of audio or visual artistic expression was likely present during their creation, providing some form of inspiration, either intentionally or unintentionally, to the written word. The key to using artistic narrative, as a form of expression and discourse, is to connect with the social semiotic stories that coexist with and beyond the artistic expression and culture-at-large.

Artistic generative scholarship should be included in the pantheon of tools available to academic researchers to utilize as intellectual rhetoric to introduce new knowledge and solutions. Objectifiable research is still rhetorically persuasive with objectivity being the primary persuasive tool. However, in objectivity, ideas that lack merit or morality are not entitled to equivocation of presentation and possibility. It is ethical to persuade and advocate on the behalf of morality and equality, whether it be through traditional literature, or art that can transcend the

essence of human resolve. As an artist, activist, academic, and adviser, on matters of social justice and social change, I will continue to infuse that essence into any type of work or creation that I put forth and hope that it inspires others to broaden their perspective about visual narrative and mediums in which social justice and social change can invoke intellectual discourse and offer and implement meaningful change.

**APPENDIX A: UCF IRB NOT HUMAN RESEARCH DETERMINATION
FOR DOCUMENTARY INTERVIEWS**



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UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

NOT HUMAN RESEARCH DETERMINATION

January 17, 2023

Dear [Christopher Odom](#):

On 1/17/2023, the IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Justice for George Floyd: The Tipping Point?
Investigator:	Christopher Odom
IRB ID:	STUDY00005030
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• HRP-250-FORM - Request for NHSR, Category: IRB Protocol;

The IRB determined that the proposed activity is not research involving human subjects as defined by DHHS and FDA regulations.

IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities are research involving human in which the organization is engaged, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination. You can create a modification by clicking **Create Modification / CR** within the study.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Harry Wingfield
 Designated Reviewer

APPENDIX B: DOCUMENTARY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

General Interviewee Questions

These documentary interview questions address the following research question from my hybrid dissertation research.

RQ5: Through the rhetoric of digital activism and the visual imagery of social movements, post ‘justice for George Floyd’, what other visually based counterstories could build upon this cultural shift in social justice, social change, and the overall improvement and advancement of society?

1. How did the visual imagery emerging from the Justice for George Floyd protests affect you personally, internally and externally?
2. In your own words, what does Justice for George Floyd mean to you and why?
3. Have you ever gotten involved with activism before, whether it was as simple as supportive social media posts, or physical world protest organizing and participation, and if so, what were the causes and/or social movements in which you participated, and how and why did you participate?
4. What formal or informal activist groups or organizations have you worked with either prior, during, and after the Justice for George protests? In what way were you involved? What was your experience, if so, working with those groups and organizations? What was the final outcome of your participation efforts?
5. Tell me about what your goal was when you _____ .

6. Describe the major actions you took in order to accomplish _____ .
7. Were you able to make connections to George Floyd’s story in the experiences of your own life, or the lives of other people that you know, and if so, how and why did you use and implement these personal stories when attempting to _____ .
8. What challenges and obstacles did you endure when trying to accomplish _____ and how you did, or did you not, overcome them _____ and why?
9. As a result of attempting to _____ did you experience any sort of social movement backlash? If so, why do think that happened, and please describe how you dealt with it and how it may have impacted any actions you took moving forward?
10. For someone else tackling a similar situation, what best advice would you offer to them and why?
11. If you could do _____ all over again, would you honestly make the same decisions and take the same actions—why or why not?
12. What impact do you believe that the visual imagery emerging from the Justice for George Floyd protests, as a social movement, had upon culture, society, formal institutions, and the government?
13. Post Justice for George Floyd, do you see yourself taking an active or passive role in future activism and social movements, and if so, in what capacity—please describe how, why, or why not?

14. What are your thoughts about visual imagery that centers personal narratives, especially with social movements regarding race, gender, and identity, and how they can be used by activists to advance the aims of a social movement and society and culture overall?
15. What advice would you provide to ordinary citizens who may be interested in utilizing visual imagery and personal narrative to advance the aims of a social movement?
16. What impact do you believe that digital technology had upon the Justice for George Floyd protests as a social movement and why?
17. Not everyone was supportive of the Justice for George Floyd protests, yet some with preexisting mindsets, that might not have been very supportive of social movements centered upon race, still found themselves supportive of George Floyd, either in the beginning, or at the end once Derek Chauvin was ultimately convicted and sentenced for the murder of George Floyd. Why do you believe that this may have been the case in either scenario? What role do you believe that visual imagery, with or without associated personal narratives, played in people's mindsets?
18. What advice would you offer to activists and community organizers who wish to utilize visual imagery and personal stories as a tool to make people who are already unsympathetic to issues regarding race, gender, and identity, more digestible and universally relatable to any audience?
19. Why do you believe that the Justice for George Floyd protests went global?

20. How would you recommend that visual imagery be utilized by activists and citizens for the preservation of a social movement's own narrative for future generations?
21. Have you ever considered running for a local, state, or federal office, i.e. city council, county commissioner, police oversight board, etc., why or why not? What advice would you offer for anyone considering that journey, and how holding office at the local level might impact the aims of a social movement?
22. What are some not so obvious ways that people may be unaware of to contribute as an activist to a social movement, such as through graffiti, stand-up comedy, or academic scholarship?
23. Are there any issues, causes, organizations, and/or social movements that you would like us to be aware of right now and why?
24. What's next for you and what can we expect to see from you in the near and distant future?

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 Territory: United States
 Industry: Education
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Price
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'I Can't Breathe' Protest Held After Man Dies In Police Custody In Minneapolis

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 Distribution: Web
 Start date: April 10, 2023
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 Territory: United States
 Industry: Education
 Duration: Up to 3 months

Price
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Protesters Gather In New York City To Denounce Police Killing Of Minneapolis Man George Floyd

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Protests Continue At Capitol In Denver In Aftermath To Death Of George Floyd

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The makeshift memorial outside Cup Foods where George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer

Image #:	1216644292	Price
License type:	Rights-Managed	\$ USD
Photographer:	Jason Armond	
Collection:	Los Angeles Times	
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Anti-Racism Protest Continues Despite Ban in Paris

Image #:	1217198540	Price
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Photographer:	Anadolu Agency	
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Start date:	April 10, 2023	
End date:	July 10, 2023	
Territory:	United States	
Industry:	Education	
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 <p>View from roof on Fulton street painted huge Black Lives...</p>	Image #:	1219982359	Price
	License type:	Rights-Managed	\$ USD
	Photographer:	Pacific Press	
	Collection:	LightRocket	
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	Distribution:	Web	
	Start date:	April 10, 2023	
	End date:	July 10, 2023	
	Territory:	United States	
Industry:	Education		
Duration:	Up to 3 months		

 <p>Fate Of George Floyd Square Hotly Debated In Minneapolis</p>	Image #:	1228087060	Price
	License type:	Rights-Managed	\$ USD
	Photographer:	Brandon Bell	
	Collection:	Getty Images News	
	Delivery method:	Download by customer	
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	Distribution:	Web	
	Start date:	April 10, 2023	
	End date:	July 10, 2023	
	Territory:	United States	
Industry:	Education		
Duration:	Up to 3 months		

 <p>PALESTINIAN-ISRAEL-US-RACISM-POLICE-TRIAL-FLOYD</p>	Image #:	1232039092	Price
	License type:	Rights-Managed	\$ USD
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	Collection:	AFP	
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Industry:	Education		
Duration:	Up to 3 months		



Protests Continue After The Death Of George Floyd, In Minneapolis

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Collection:	The Washington Post	
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Start date:	April 10, 2023	
End date:	July 10, 2023	
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Industry:	Education	
Duration:	Up to 3 months	



Staten Island Man Dies after cops chokehold him

Image #:	452351250	Price
License type:	Rights-Managed	\$ USD
Photographer:	New York Daily News	
Collection:	New York Daily News	
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Thank you.

Tuesday, April 11, 2023 at 18:35:20 Eastern Daylight Time

Subject: Re: Capitol Riot Cell Phone Video Still Frame Image Release Request

Date: Tuesday, April 11, 2023 at 1:31:33 PM Eastern Daylight Time

From: Luke Mogelson

To: Christopher Odom

Hi Chris,

Thanks for reaching out. Feel free to use the screenshot in your dissertation, which sounds very interesting. I'm on assignment in Ukraine right now, without access to a printer, but perhaps this email can serve as written permission? If not, I'll try to get the licensing agreement to you when I get home.

Best of luck with your research.

Luke

Le dim. 9 avr. 2023 à 07:13, Christopher Odom <christopher.odom@knights.ucf.edu> a écrit :

Luke,

I recently successfully defended my PhD dissertation, "Justice for George Floyd: The Tipping Point?" My research is about the visual imagery emerging within social media from the Justice for George Floyd Protests, as a social movement. Within Chapter 2 of my dissertation, I compare and contrast the visual imagery of the Capitol Riot [Insurrection] to the visual imagery of the Justice for George Floyd Protests. I provide a link to your cell phone video coverage of the Capitol Riot on the New Yorker's YouTube page. Your footage is as revealing as it is stunning.

I would greatly appreciate it, if you would grant me permission to use the attached screenshot from your footage in my dissertation, which will be made freely available as a PDF online through the University of Central Florida STARS Electronic Thesis and Dissertation database.

I've attached a simple Image Release for your convenience.

Chris

Christopher C. Odom, MFA, PhD
Pronouns: He/Him/His ([Why?](#))

Texts & Technology, Digital Media
University of Central Florida

Page 1 of 2

Image Release

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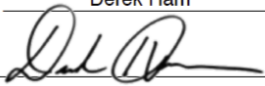
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